

Abdolfattah Soltani

Iranian lawyer and human rights activist

Abdolfattah Soltani was born on 2 November 1953. He is a member of the Defenders of Human Rights Centre founded some years ago by his colleague Shirin Ebadi, 2003 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate. In summer 2006 the Iranian Home Office declared Ebadi's Centre as illegal and said that all members would be prosecuted.

It would not be the first time for Soltani to be arrested. He was in prison two times because of his dedication to human rights. In 2004, he was arrested for four months after asserting that some of his clients – imprisoned opposition leaders – had been tortured in prison.

The last time Soltani had been in prison was one and a half years later. On 30 July 2005, he was arrested while holding a sit-in at the building of the lawyers' association in Tehran. He was protesting against a warrant for his arrest and a search warrant for his home. Soltani spent seven months in Tehran's Evin-prison, five of them in solitary confinement. His wife and mother were permitted to see him for the first time on 5 September 2005 and only in the presence of a prison guard. He looked physically weakened and said that he had not been informed about the authorities' intentions in his case. His wife and mother were allowed to visit him, but he had not seen his children during his arrest. After more than five months in prison he was allowed to talk to a lawyer as Soltani had been interrogated without the presence of a lawyer several times before.

The magistrate originally appointed to deal with his case was replaced by another judge in December 2005, apparently because he was considering Soltani's release on bail. On 3 December 2005, the new magistrate sentenced him to three more months in detention. On 6 March 2006, he was released after having deposited a bail of 100,000 Euro, which his family was only able to pay with the support of a solidarity movement. On 16 July 2006, he was sentenced to five years in prison for the alleged transfer of confidential information, but he appealed. On 26 May 2007, he declared that the court of appeal had acquitted him of all charges. At the same time he demanded that the persons who had been responsible for his arrest and imprisonment should be prosecuted, but without success.

Before being arrested Soltani pled the cases of a dozen people who were accused of spying on Iran's nuclear programme by order of intelligence services of the US and Israel. According to the statement made by a spokesperson of the Ministry of Justice on 31 July 2005, he was arrested in connection with these cases because of the "illegal divulgence of secret and confidential information" of one of his clients. However, Abdolfattah Soltani was also pleading the cases of political prisoner Akbar Ganji and of Zahra Kazemi. Ganji, an investigative journalist, discovered the involvement of different government officials in the murder of intellectuals and journalists in the 1990s, which became known as "serial killings" and have still not been atoned. Kazemi, an Iranian-Canadian journalist, died in custody in July 2003 in Evin-prison. After the acquittal of the intelligence service agent probably responsible for her death, her family appealed to get a new enquiry started about the case of her death. Their lawyer then was Abdolfattah Soltani.

Amnesty International then believed that the charges against Soltani had been politically motivated, designed to ban him from his profession and stop other human rights defenders from pursuing cases of impunity or other political cases.

Unimpressed by the harassment of the Iranian regime, Abdolfattah Soltani has continued to fight for human rights in his home country with admirable courage, and has been working actively with Shirin Ebadi's Defenders of Human Rights Centre.

Background information

Fundamental flaws in the justice system of Iran facilitate assaults on and harassment of human rights defenders and limit their scope to carry out their work. Part of this harassment are politically motivated charges that lead to the arresting and sentencing of human rights defenders. Nasser Zarafshan for example, a colleague of Soltani, served a five-year prison sentence for helping the families of two political activists who were killed in November 1998 during the so-called "serial killings" of oppositional intellectuals. He was released from prison on 14 March, 2007. Those connected with the cases of Akbar Ganji and Zahra Kazemi have become particular targets for harassment. Even Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Shirin Ebadi, who is also a member of the team of lawyers acting for Ganji's and Kazemi's family, became subject of threats by officials working for Tehran's senior prosecutor.

(as at November 2008 – Human Rights Office of the City of Nuremberg)