

Amnesty International

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Iranian human rights lawyer and prisoner of conscience Nasrin Sotoudeh.

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A prominent Iranian human rights lawyer was returned to prison on Monday, unexpectedly curtailing a three-day temporary leave to visit her family, which was expected to be extended.

Nasrin Sotoudeh, who has been serving a six-year prison sentence since September 2010, was granted her first furlough from Tehran’s Evin Prison on 17 January on production of a hefty bail.

Amnesty International has long campaigned for her unconditional release as a prisoner of conscience, as she was jailed solely for her peaceful work as a human rights lawyer.

Sotoudeh has denied all the charges against her, which include “spreading propaganda against the system” and belonging to an “illegal” organization, the Centre for Human Rights Defenders.

“Nasrin Sotoudeh, whose human rights work has been recognized internationally, including when she was awarded the EU’s Sakharov Prize last year, is a prisoner of conscience who must be released immediately, unconditionally and for good,” said Ann Harrison, Deputy Director of Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa Programme.

“Nasrin Sotoudeh’s three-day release was merely a cruel charade and illustrates how little respect the Iranian authorities have for their international human rights obligations.

Impact on Sotoudeh’s family

Vaguely worded charges like those against Sotoudeh do not amount to recognizably criminal offences, but they commonly lead to the imprisonment of prisoners of conscience.

“It is becoming increasingly common for the Iranian authorities to use the denial of access to family visits as a form of punishment for imprisoned human rights defenders. Children of prisoners are often deeply affected by the absence of a parent and denial of family visits only compounds their distress,” said Harrison.

Before her recent three-day release – which is provided for under Iranian law – Sotoudeh had been regularly prevented from having face-to-face meetings with her husband Reza Khandan and their two young children since her imprisonment in 2010. She was also frequently prevented from speaking with her family.

In the meantime, the Iranian authorities have otherwise harassed or taken punitive measures against her family members.

On one occasion her husband was detained overnight for his peaceful advocacy to secure his wife’s release.

The authorities also placed an illegal travel ban on their 13-year-old daughter, which prompted Sotoudeh to stage a 49-day hunger strike in prison late last year.

Khandan, along with several Iranian women’s rights activists, met with parliamentarians to raise concern about her case, which assisted in getting the travel restriction lifted, prompting Sotoudeh to end her hunger strike on 4 December 2012.

A spokeswoman for the Security Committee of the Iranian Parliament’s National Security and Foreign Policy Commission said that a number of its members took part in an inspection of Evin Prison on 21 January. Shortly after they left, Sotoudeh was summoned back to prison.

Khandan told Amnesty International that her prompt return had come as a surprise, and he plans on writing to parliamentarians to raise concerns that her release may simply have been a pretext for ensuring she was absent when the inspection took place.

“The authorities had indicated to us that her release would be more than three days. It was totally unexpected [that she would return so soon]...and when we took her back to Evin Prison, outside the gate, the children wept – it was so hard on both of them,” said Khandan.

Others temporarily released

In the past week, several other imprisoned activists and journalists – all prisoners of conscience – have been granted temporary conditional leave from Evin and other Iranian prisons.

Among them was **Bahareh Hedayat**, whose furlough also began on 17 January, the same day as Sotoudeh’s release.

A student and women's rights activist serving a 10-year prison sentence following her arrest on 31 December 2009, Hedayat has been convicted of "insulting the president", "insulting the Leader", "gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security", and "spreading propaganda against the system".

On Tuesday 22 January, four imprisoned journalists were granted temporary releases from Evin Prison and Raja'i Shahr Prison in Karaj, north-west of Tehran.

Among them were **Mahsa Amrabadi** and her husband, **Masoud Bastani**. Held at different prisons, both have been convicted of security-related charges including "propaganda against the state" for articles they wrote regarding the disputed 2009 presidential election.

Bahman Ahmadi-Amoui (Ahmadi Amou'i), a journalist who received the Hellman-Hammett Award in 2011, was also released temporarily. He is serving a five-year sentence in Raja'i Shahr Prison on charges that include "spreading propaganda against the system" and "insulting the president", while his wife, Zhila Bani-Yaghoub, who is also an award-winning journalist, remains in Evin Prison where she is serving a one-year sentence.

The fourth journalist released on furlough on Tuesday was **Ahmad Zeidabadi**, who is also the spokesperson of the Graduates' Association. He was sentenced in November 2009 to six years' imprisonment, five years in internal exile, and a lifetime ban on all social and political activities after appearing in sessions of a mass "show trial" in August 2009.

On 10 January, Iranian human rights defender and lawyer, **Mohammad Ali Dadkhah**, was also released on furlough. He began serving a nine-year prison sentence in September 2012 after being convicted a year earlier on charges including "membership of an association [the Centre for Human Rights Defenders] seeking the soft overthrow of the government" and "spreading propaganda against the system through interviews with foreign media".

"Any release, albeit temporary, of these prisoners of conscience is welcome news for them and their families, but they must not be returned to prison and their sentences must be overturned. The Iranian authorities must also immediately and unconditionally release all other prisoners of conscience currently in Iran's jails," said Harrison.