

URGENT ACTION

SPIRITUAL TEACHER AT RISK OF DEATH PENALTY AGAIN
Iranian spiritual teacher Mohammad Ali Taheri is awaiting his second hearing due to take place in July. The authorities are prosecuting him for “spreading corruption on earth”. He has been held in solitary confinement for over six years in Tehran’s Evin prison. If convicted, he can be sentenced to death.

Prisoner of conscience **Mohammad Ali Taheri** is accused of “spreading corruption on earth” (*efsad-e fel arz*) through the establishment of the spiritual group *Erfan-e Halgheh* and its related teachings. His trial started on 6 March before Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran. During the court session, the judge gave him a number of written questions and asked that he provide his responses in writing by the next court session. His lawyer expects the session to take place before the end of July. The questions related to Mohammad Ali Taheri’s writings on *Erfan-e Halgheh*. Prison officials have not granted his request to access copies of his past writings in order to draft his responses, without which he cannot complete the questions.

A week before his court hearing in March, Iranian state television aired a programme called “Satan’s Ring”, which introduced Mohammad Ali Taheri as the leader of a “perverse sect”. The programme claimed that his teachings had led people to doubt their Islamic beliefs and practices, and made them experience anxiety, distress and poor mental health. At the end of the programme individuals who described themselves as “survivors” called for the execution of Mohammad Ali Taheri. Soon after, his followers faced a severe crackdown.

This is the third time that Mohammad Ali Taheri is standing trial on the charge of “spreading corruption on earth”. The first time was in 2011 when a Revolutionary Court in Tehran sentenced him to five years’ imprisonment for “insulting Islamic sanctities” but said further investigations were necessary before it could rule on the charge of “spreading corruption on earth”. For the next four years, the authorities kept him in solitary confinement in Section 2A of Evin prison, where he remains imprisoned, under the pretext of conducting investigations. This time counted toward his five-year sentence, which was deemed complete in February 2016. He was ultimately tried again on the charge of “spreading corruption on earth” in 2015 and sentenced to death, but he was acquitted in June 2016. Despite this, he was not released and in late 2016, the authorities charged him again with “spreading corruption on earth” based on the same activities that had formed the basis of his 2011 conviction.

Please write immediately in Persian, English or your own language:

- Urging the Iranian authorities to release Mohammad Ali Taheri immediately and unconditionally as he is a prisoner of conscience held solely for the peaceful exercise of his rights to freedom of expression and association;
- Reminding them that under international human rights law, the death penalty may only be used for “the most serious crimes”, which international bodies have interpreted as being limited to crimes involving intentional killings;
- Calling on them to order independent and impartial investigations into his prolonged solitary confinement, which violates the absolute prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment, and bring those responsible to justice.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 16 AUGUST 2017 TO:

Head of the Judiciary
 Ayatollah Sadegh Larijani
 c/o Public Relations Office
 Number 4, 2 Azizi Street intersection
 Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran
Salutation: Your Excellency

Prosecutor General of Tehran
 Abbas Ja’fari Dolat Abadi
 Office of the Prosecutor
 Corner (Nabsh-e) of 15 Khordad Square
 Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran
Salutation: Your Excellency

And copies to:
President of the Islamic Republic of Iran
 Hassan Rouhani
 Pasteur Street, Pasteur Square
 Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran
 Email: media@rouhani.ir

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country. H.E. Hamid Baeidinejad, Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 16 PRINCES GATE LONDON SW7 1PT, Tel: 02072254208 or 02072254209 Email: iranconsulate.lon@mfa.gov.ir

Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date. This is the sixth update of UA 212/14. Further information: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/5018/2016/en/>

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Mohammad Ali Taheri was first arrested in April 2010 and released after two months. He was re-arrested in May 2011 and charged with “spreading corruption on earth” and “insulting Islamic sanctities” through establishing the spiritual doctrine and group *Erfan-e Halgheh*. In October 2011, Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran sentenced him to five years’ imprisonment on the latter charge but said further investigations were necessary before it could rule on the former. This investigation was subsequently used as a pretext by the authorities not to transfer him to the general ward of Evin prison and keep extending his detention in solitary confinement in Section 2A of the prison, where he is still held.

The Revolutionary Guards completed their investigations into the charge of “spreading corruption on earth” in September 2014, and claimed, among other things, that Mohammad Ali Taheri had “spread corruption on earth” by promoting his “perverse sect” to about 50,000 people in the country. They also claimed that he had taken steps to advance “a soft overthrow of the holy establishment of the Islamic Republic” by creating doubts over religious beliefs in a widespread manner. Mohammad Ali Taheri subsequently stood trial before Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court in March and July 2015, at the end of which he was convicted and sentenced to death in August 2015. However, in December 2015, the Supreme Court quashed the death sentence after concluding that Mohammad Ali Taheri’s activities before his arrest in 2011 did not amount to “spreading corruption on earth”. His case was subsequently returned to Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court to rule on whether his other alleged activities, unrelated to his spiritual teachings, could support the charge. In June 2016, Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court issued its final ruling acquitting Mohammad Ali Taheri of “spreading corruption on earth”.

Mohammad Ali Taheri had completed his five-year sentence from the 2011 case in February 2016. However, the authorities refused to release him. Instead, they started a new round of interrogations, and in late 2016, they brought the same charge against him again. They also intensified their smear campaigns against him in state media, which referred to him as the leader of a “perverse sect” and openly called for his execution.

Erfan-e Halgheh (Interuniversalism) is a spiritual doctrine founded after Mohammad Ali Taheri received what he claims were “spiritual inspirations” that empowered him to connect with a larger “Cosmic Consciousness”. He practiced his newly found spiritual beliefs, along with his followers, in “healing sessions” apparently focused on alternative non-medicinal treatments. Over the course of his imprisonment, Mohammad Ali Taheri has undertaken a total of 16 hunger strikes and attempted suicide four times in protest at his prolonged solitary confinement, lack of access to his family and lawyer, and repeated death threats against him and his family. His most recent hunger strike began on 28 September 2016 and lasted 97 days.

According to the UN Human Rights Committee, which monitors the implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Iran is a party, prolonged solitary confinement may violate the absolute prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment. The UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules) prohibits the practice of prolonged solitary confinement, considered to be in excess of 15 consecutive days.

The prohibition against double jeopardy, also known as the principle of *ne bis in idem*, provides protection against being tried or punished again in the same jurisdiction for a criminal offence if individuals have been convicted or acquitted of that offence. Article 14(7) of the ICCPR states that, “No one shall be liable to be tried or punished again for an offence for which he has already been finally convicted or acquitted in accordance with the law and penal procedure of each country.”

Further information on UA: 212/14 Index: MDE 13/6643/2017 Issue Date: 5 July 2017