

URGENT ACTION

PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE SENTENCED TO DEATH

On 27 August a Revolutionary Court in Tehran sentenced spiritual teacher Mohammad Ali Taheri to death for “spreading corruption on earth” for establishing the spiritual group Erfan-e Halgheh. He has been held in solitary confinement for over six years.

Prisoner of conscience **Mohammad Ali Taheri** was convicted and sentenced to death on 27 August 2017 by Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court of Tehran for “spreading corruption on earth” (*efsad-e fel arz*). The verdict states that the conviction is for establishing Erfan-e Halgheh and “corrupting the thoughts and beliefs of tens of thousands of Muslim citizens across the country” and cites as “evidence” Mohammad Ali Taheri’s books, writings and teachings. His lawyer has 20 days to appeal the decision to the Supreme Court. Mohammad Ali Taheri’s trial took place over two sessions: 6 March and 10 July. Prior to his first court hearing, Iranian state television aired *Satan’s Ring*, a programme which introduced him as the leader of a “perverse sect” and claimed his teachings had led people to doubt their Islamic beliefs. At the end of the programme, individuals who described themselves as “survivors” called for his execution. This programme was played during the 10 July trial session, along with videos of Mohammad Ali Taheri teaching at Erfan-e Halgheh classes prior to his 2011 arrest.

This is the third time the authorities had sought the death penalty against Mohammad Ali Taheri for the same activities. The first 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”. In the following years, the authorities kept him in solitary confinement in Section 2A of Evin prison, where he remains imprisoned, while they claimed to be carrying out investigations. He was ultimately convicted of “spreading corruption on earth” in 2015 and sentenced to death, but acquitted on appeal in 2016. However, he was not released and, in late 2016, was charged with “spreading corruption on earth” for the same activities that formed the basis of his 2011 conviction.

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

- Urging the Iranian authorities to quash Mohammad Ali Taheri’s conviction and death sentence and release him immediately and unconditionally, as he is a prisoner of conscience targeted solely for the peaceful exercise of his rights to freedoms of belief, 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, and that the charges brought against him do not meet this threshold;
- Calling on them to order an independent and impartial investigation into his prolonged solitary confinement, which violates the absolute prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment, and bring those responsible to justice;
- Expressing concern that, in violation of the legal prohibition of double jeopardy, he was tried three times in relation to the same peaceful activities.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 12 OCTOBER 2017 TO:

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

High Council for Human Rights
Mohammad Javad Larijani
Esfaniar Boulevard, Niayesh Intersection
Vali Asr Avenue
Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran
Email: larijani@ipm.ir
Salutation: Your Excellency

And copies to:
Deputy for Human Rights and
International Affairs, Ministry of Justice
Mahmoud Abbasi
Number 1638, Below Vali Asr Square
Vali Asr Avenue
Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran
1416783619
Email: dr.abbasi@sbmu.ac.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 seventh update of UA 212/14. Further information: www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/6643/2017/en/

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The criminal proceedings in Mohammad Ali Taheri's case constitute a serious violation of the prohibition against double jeopardy, which provides protection against individuals being tried or punished in the same jurisdiction for the same criminal offence they have already been convicted or acquitted of. Article 14(7) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Iran is a party, states: "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."

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 Erfan-e Halgheh (Interuniversalism), which is both a spiritual group and doctrine. In October 2011, Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran convicted and 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.

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 conviction and 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".

Despite the acquittal and even though Mohammad Ali Taheri had completed his five-year sentence from the 2011 case in February 2016, the authorities refused to release him. Instead, they started a new round of interrogations and, in late 2016, they charged him again with "spreading corruption on earth", leading to his 2017 trial, conviction and death sentence. The conviction related to the same activities that formed the basis of his 2011 conviction.

Mohammad Ali Taheri founded the Erfan-e Halgheh spiritual doctrine after receiving what he claims were "spiritual inspirations" that empowered him to connect with a larger "cosmic consciousness". He practised 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 ICCPR, 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.

Further information on UA: 212/14 Index: MDE 13/7024/2017 Issue Date: 31 August 2017