

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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The death of a second prisoner held for political beliefs in five weeks shows that political prisoners health and safety is in grave danger, Human Rights Watch said today. The death of Valiollah Feyz Mahdavi, which was announced by the Iranian government yesterday, followed the death of Akbar Mohammadi on July 30. Both had been on hunger strike protesting prison conditions and their detention on dubious allegations.

The Iranian government should urgently appoint an independent commission of Iranian lawyers and doctors to investigate the recent deaths of prisoners under suspicious circumstances, Human Rights Watch said. The commission also needs to examine the conditions of prisoners held for their political beliefs.

Iranian prison officials have a track record of giving false information about the fate of political prisoners, said Joe Stork, deputy director of the Middle East and North Africa division at Human Rights Watch. After two deaths in just a few weeks, there must be accountability for what is going on inside Iran's prisons.

Mohammadi, 38, a student activist, [died on July 30](#). His family, who saw his body at the time of burial, told Human Rights Watch that they saw numerous markings on the body consistent with torture. The authorities forced Mohammad's parents to bury him immediately, ignoring their demand for an independent autopsy. Justice Minister Jamal Karimirad said on July 31 that the cause of his death was unknown and that results of an autopsy would be announced in a month. More than a month later, Iranian officials have yet to provide any further information on the cause of death.

On September 6, Iranian Labor News Agency reported Mahdavi's death, citing claims by government officials that he committed suicide. Mahdavi was a 28-year-old sympathizer of the outlawed opposition group Mojahedin Khalq Organization. He had been admitted to Tehran's Shariati Hospital on Saturday, September 2, following a nine-day hunger strike.

The director of Tehran's prisons, Sohrab Soleimani, on Sunday told the Iranian media that Mahdavi attempted to hang himself on Saturday night in Gohardasht prison in city of Karaj. Soleimani said prison officials transferred Mahdavi to Shariati Hospital and denied Mahdavi was on hunger strike.

Sources close to Mahdavi's family told Human Rights Watch that prisoners held in the same hall as Mahdavi informed them that on Saturday night Mahdavi's health deteriorated greatly after nine days on a hunger strike. They said prison officials repeatedly ignored Mahdavi's perilous health condition until it reached a critical stage, and that he was unconscious when prison officials ultimately transferred him to a hospital.

Iranian authorities arrested Mahdavi in 2001 and charged him with the crime of armed resistance against the state. Mahdavi was denied access to a lawyer, and the court sentenced him to death. On June 6, the Iranian Labor News Agency reported that the chief of the Judiciary, Ayatollah Mahmud Hashemi Shahroudi commuted Mahdavi's death sentence to life in prison.

Mahdavi's lawyer, Mohammad Sharif, told Human Rights Watch that Mahdavi told him over the phone that he started his hunger strike to demand that he be allowed to meet with his lawyers in person, and that he be moved out of Gohardasht prison, where he said his life was under threat from prisoners who were dangerous criminals. Mahdavi's family and his lawyer did not have any access to him after he was taken to the hospital.

Human Rights Watch also expressed serious concern for Ali Akbar Mousavi Khoini, a human rights defender and former member of the parliament, who has been under arbitrary detention since June 12. Mousavi is being held in solitary confinement in Tehran's notorious Evin prison without access to his lawyers and officials have yet to file any charges against him.

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