

Human Rights Watch

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(New York) - Iranian authorities should promptly investigate the death of Amir Hossein Heshmat Saran, a 49-year-old prisoner at Gohardasht prison, and provide full disclosure about his medical care while in custody, Human Rights Watch said today. Saran died at the Rajayi Shahr public hospital in Karaj on March 6, 2009, after five years in detention. His is the third known death of a political prisoner at Gohardasht in the last three years.

"The government of Iran needs to conduct an impartial investigation into the suspicious death of Amir Hossein Heshmat Saran," said Joe Stork, deputy director of Human Rights Watch's Middle East division. "It should include his relatives in the process, make the results public, and hold accountable anyone found responsible for any mistreatment or medical negligence."

Saran's wife, Elaheh, told Human Rights Watch that on the morning of March 5, one of Saran's four cellmates in Section 2, cell 5 of Gohardasht prison called her, using a prison calling-card telephone, to say that Saran had taken ill the previous night and was taken to the prison health center. When she contacted the prison health center, she was told he had been transferred to nearby Rajayi Shahr Hospital's intensive care unit (ICU). She was able to visit him at the ICU for about 15 minutes. She said that he appeared to be in a coma "with just one eye open," his hands and feet shackled to the ICU bed. The whiteboard above his bed indicated that he was being hospitalized for "neurological illness."

The next morning, March 6, Elaheh Saran again went to the ICU to visit her husband. When she arrived, hospital personnel informed her that he had died. "The medical specialist who treated him told me he had brain hemorrhaging, and a lung infection which had spread throughout his body, that he should have been brought in sooner" she told Human Rights Watch. "They took him there when he was practically dead."

During a visit 10 days prior to his death, his wife said, his body appeared to be swollen, which he again attributed to lack of physical activity. He had fallen into a brief coma previously on February 26. After the first coma, the prison doctor took the unusual step of requiring a signature from Saran himself in order to administer an unidentified medicine in powder form.

Saran's lawyer, Mohammad Reza Faghihi, told Human Rights Watch that he and Saran's family immediately filed an official complaint with Branch 21 of the Karaj Appellate Court calling for an investigation into the suspicious nature of his death.

Authorities arrested Saran in 2004, and the Tehran Revolutionary Court sentenced him to 16 years in prison for his political activities, including participation in Iran Students' Day demonstrations, and for setting up a group called the National United Front (jebhe-yeh etehaad-e melli) which advocated for a more democratic Iran.

At the beginning of his detention, Saran wrote extensively about the prison conditions and, with the help of members of the National United Front, distributed this information to Iranian satellite channels in the United States as well as to websites.

Saran's wife said that he and his cellmates, Afshin Baymani, Behrooz Javidtehrani, and Karami Kheyraadi, who were also political prisoners, had been attacked in prison, once by other prisoners and then "many times" later by prison guards, and had announced on the day before he was taken to the hospital that they would go on a hunger strike to protest bad prison conditions - including sanitary and health issues, lack of physical activity, and lack of proper lighting. "I heard from his friends that they were attacked by 30 prison guards that night in order to prevent them from going on hunger strike," she told Human Rights Watch.

Elaheh Saran told Human Rights Watch that throughout her husband's detention, she had been able to visit him every 15 days for 20 minutes and he never seemed ill until two months ago, when he complained that he had pain in his leg from a lack of physical activity. According to his lawyer, he did have a history of heart problems, though, which, coupled with information his family had received about

the assaults he had suffered in prison, had led them to make repeated requests for medical leave for him over the years. Prison officials denied the requests.

Following Saran's death, his family received permission to take possession of his body for burial. They intended to bury him at a cemetery in their home town of Shahriar. At 6:30 a.m. on March 8, an ambulance driver from the mortuary where Saran's body was being held came to the Saran family home and said that the Ministry of Intelligence in Tehran had ordered that the body be moved to another mortuary some distance away.

"Three men from the Ministry of Intelligence later came to our home and told us that they would not give us his body because we made Saran's death too public on the internet and other places," Elaheh Saran told Human Rights Watch. "They said they could either bury him on their own anywhere or we could bury him ourselves, but we must tell all his political friends who have been visiting us not to come to the funeral." Eventually, the Saran family held a private funeral with immediate family members only and buried him in the Sakineh cemetery, where the body had been moved, a 40-minute drive from their hometown.

During Saran's five-year detention, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security repeatedly refused his family's requests for outside medical care, with the exception of a 15-day medical leave in September 2006. During Saran's absence, another political prisoner, Valiollah Faiz-Mahdavi, a former member of the Mojaheddin-e Khalgh organization (MKO) and Saran's cellmate, died after a nine-day hunger strike without medical attention (<https://www.hrw.org/en/news/2006/09/06/iran-new-death-political-prisoner-custody>). In October 2008, Abdolreza Rajabi, another political prisoner and former member of the MKO at Gohardasht, died unexpectedly, one day after being transferred from Tehran's Evin prison.

"There is clearly an alarming pattern of political prisoners dying in detention at Gohardasht prison," Stork said. "The Iranian government has an obligation to investigate these deaths and take measures to ensure that prisoners are not mistreated or denied medical attention."

A blogger being held in Evin prison, Omid Reza Mirsayafi, died on March 18 after lack of proper medical treatment, raising additional concerns about the treatment and medical access of political prisoners in Iran.

Under the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, prisoners who require outside medical treatment should be transferred to specialized institutions or to civil hospitals.

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