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Iran: Release women jailed for protesting against compulsory wearing of veil, say UN rights experts

GENEVA (16 August 2019) – UN human rights experts* have condemned lengthy prison sentences against three Iranian women who are being arbitrarily detained for publicly protesting against the compulsory wearing of veils.

“We are alarmed that the arrest and lengthy sentences handed to these women are directly related to the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and assembly in the pursuit of gender equality in Iran,” the experts said.

“We call upon the Iranian authorities to quash these convictions and immediately release all human rights defenders who have been arbitrarily detained for their work in advocating women’s rights, and to ensure full respect for the rights of women to freedom of opinion and expression, peaceful assembly and non-discrimination.” The experts recalled that respect and support for the activities of women human rights defenders are essential to the overall enjoyment of human rights.

Ms Mojgan Keshavarz was sentenced to 23 years and six months’ imprisonment while Ms Yasaman Aryani and Ms Monireh Arabshahi were each sentenced to 16 years’ imprisonment.

All three were convicted of assembly and collusion in acts against national security, propaganda against the state and “encouraging and providing for [moral] corruption and prostitution”. Ms Keshavarz was also convicted on a charge of “insulting the sacred”.

The charges were brought after an online video showed the three women handing out flowers on the Tehran metro on 8 March 2019, International Women’s Day. The human rights defenders, who themselves were not wearing the hijab, peacefully protested against Iran’s compulsory veiling laws and advocated for a woman’s right to choose whether or not to wear the hijab.

After the video surfaced, the women were detained in April 2019 and were forcibly “disappeared” for between 9 and 14 days. They were denied access to lawyers during the initial investigation stage. Their legal representatives were also reportedly prohibited from representing them at their trial. The experts expressed particular concern over this apparent contravention of the women’s right to a fair trial.

“We remind the Iranian authorities that women human rights defenders challenging the imposition of a compulsory dress code on women are acting in defence of universally guaranteed human rights. The use of repressive legislation to criminalise the exercise of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly is incompatible with Iran’s obligations under international human rights law,” the experts said.

The women are among a number of Iranian human rights defenders who have been detained and convicted on national security-related charges for promoting women’s rights. According to reports, since January 2018, at least 32 people have been arrested and at least 10 imprisoned for protesting against the mandatory wearing of the hijab.

Arrests of women’s rights activists have reportedly increased in recent weeks, and an official has given a warning that other people protesting against the compulsory wearing of the veil may be charged with national security offences.

The UN experts earlier notified the Government of Iran about their concerns. The Government’s reply noted that the three women had been arrested on charges relating to morality and national security offences.

ENDS

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