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Statement: Front Line Defenders condemns the intensified targeting of labour and trade union rights defenders in Iran

Since early April 2020, six Iranian labour and trade union rights defenders have been subjected to intensified harassment including court summons, new charges and denial of temporary release from prison despite the current COVID-19 crisis. The targeting of **Jafar Azimzadeh**, **Parvin Mohammadi**, **Nahid Khodajou**, **Shahpour Ehsanirad**, **Esmail Abdi** and **Mohammad Habibi** comes after recent criticism by labour rights defenders and organisations of the Iranian authorities' decision on 8 April 2020 to minimally increase minimum wage, without negotiating with representatives from labour rights groups.

[Jafar Azimzadeh](#) is the Secretary of the Board of Directors of the Free Workers Union of Iran. Parvin Mohammadi is the vice-president of the union and Nahid Khodajou is a member of its board of directors. The [Free Union Workers of Iran](#) is a group dedicated to defending labour rights and improving working conditions. It has not been officially recognised by the Iranian authorities and many of its leading members are subject to harassment. [Shahpour Ehsanirad](#) is one of the founding members of the Association of the Retired Workers of the Social Security Organisation and a member of the board of directors of the Free Union of Iranian Workers. [Esmail Abdi](#) is the Secretary General of Iran's Teachers' Trade Association (ITTA). [Mohammad Habibi](#) is an active member of the board of directors of the Teacher's Trade Union of Tehran.

On 12 April 2020, the family of labour rights defender Jafar Azimzadeh were notified via text message that a new charge had been brought against him in the Second Branch of Shahid Moqadas Amniat (Evin) Court. Neither Jafar Azimzadeh nor his family were informed of the nature of the new charges nor were they invited for a hearing on the charges. Jafar Azimzadeh is currently serving a sentence of 5 years imprisonment for "acting against national security by gathering and planning" and "spreading propaganda against the state", issued by Branch 15 of the Tehran Revolutionary Court. On 9 April 2020, the defender's family was informed that he has not been granted temporary release during the COVID-19 outbreak despite him suffering from heart and digestive diseases. The new charges brought against him remain unknown.

Jafar Azimzadeh has already completed two years and one month of his five-year sentence, which technically makes him eligible to benefit from the Iranian judicial system's new directive to furlough some prisoners during the COVID-19 pandemic. The directive allows prisoners with national security charges to be temporarily released if they have a "reasonable" bail, a prison sentence of less than 5 years and have served one third or more of their sentence already. However, the criteria for the directive have not been formalised and according to family members of imprisoned HRDs, decisions seem to be made on a case by case basis.

On 12 April 2020, human rights defender Shahpour Ehsanirad was summoned to Branch 1 of Evin Prison's Implementation of Verdicts Department to serve his six years prison sentence despite suffering from respiratory issues and the current situation regarding COVID-19. In September 2019, the Revolutionary Court of Tehran sentenced him to six years imprisonment for "assembly and collusion against national security" and "propaganda against the state", in connection with his peaceful labour rights advocacy.

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On 13 April 2020, judicial envoys informed woman human rights defender Parvin Mohammadi that her house would be auctioned as part of the bail used for her fellow defender Jafar Azimzadeh's temporary release from prison in September 2017 and December 2016. Parvin Mohammadi was arrested on 28 January 2019 and charged with "assembly and collusion against national security" by Branch 1 of Karaj Revolutionary Court. She began serving her one year sentence on 7 December 2019. On 26 March 2020, she was granted temporary release from prison due to COVID-19. However, she is expected to return to prison to complete her sentence, despite seemingly fulfilling the criteria of an informal government amnesty that judicial authorities have reportedly granted to some prisoners who have been temporarily released during COVID-19. She is suffering from severe migraines and has developed spinal disc herniation during her time in prison.

On 16 April 2020, women's and labour rights defender Nahid Khodajou was verbally informed that the appeals court had held a hearing of her appeal without the presence of her lawyer or the defender herself, and had upheld the initial verdict. Nahid Khodajou was arrested during Labour Day demonstrations in front of the parliament in Tehran on 1 May 2019 and was released on bail on 3 June 2019. However, on 10 October 2019, the Revolutionary Court of Tehran sentenced her to six years in prison and 74 lashes for "acting against national security by gathering and planning" and "offence against public order", in connection with her participation in Labour Day demonstrations.

On 20 April 2020 Esmail Abdi appeared before the Evin prison court to extend his temporary release from prison during COVID-19, which had started on 8 March 2020. His request was denied and he was returned to prison. The labour rights defender was imprisoned on 9 November 2016, following the Tehran Appeals Court's decision to uphold his six years prison sentence on charges related to his peaceful trade union activities. On 10 April 2020, Esmail Abdi, Jafar Azimzadeh and two other human rights defenders published a statement warning against the danger of the government's negligence around COVID-19, the poor health and hygiene protection in prisons, and criticising the selective approach of prison authorities in depriving prisoners of conscience of temporary leave during the pandemic. Front Line Defenders believes that the publication of this statement, along with criticism by human rights defenders of the recent government's decision on minimum wage, may be the reasons for the increased harassment experienced by labour rights defenders.

On 22 April 2020, human rights defender Mohammad Habibi was issued a letter of termination from the Iranian Ministry of Education, effectively ending his career as a teacher after eighteen years. Front Line Defenders believes that this is a consequence of his arbitrary detention since 4 August 2018. The defender has not been granted temporary release during COVID-19, despite suffering from a chronic lung infection. On 4 August 2018, Mohammad Habibi was sentenced to seven and a half years imprisonment for "collusion against national security", 18 months imprisonment for "propaganda against the regime" and 18 months imprisonment for "disrupting public order". He also received a two year travel ban, along with a ban from participating in any political or union activity for the same amount of time.

Front Line Defenders is seriously concerned about the intensified harassment of Iranian labour and trade union rights defenders, including through the use of court summons, new charges, and arbitrary denial of temporary release during the COVID-19 pandemic. Front Line Defenders believes that the targeting of Jafar Azimzadeh, Parvin Mohammadi, Nahid Khodajou, Shahpour Ehsanirad, Esmail Abdi and Mohammad Habibi is linked to criticism of the recent government's decision to minimally increase minimum wage following negotiations which excluded interested groups who work peacefully for the rights of workers and employers. The targeting of imprisoned labour rights defenders also comes at a time when they have been critical of the government's handling of COVID-19 with regard to prison conditions and the temporary release of prisoners.

Front Line Defenders further believes that increased harassment of labour rights defenders may be aimed at silencing them so as to prevent protests on the upcoming Labour Day.

Front Line Defenders calls on the Iranian authorities to immediately cease the harassment of labour and trade union rights defenders, drop the charges against them and unconditionally release those who remain imprisoned, as it is believed that they have been targeted solely as a result of their legitimate human rights activities. It further calls on the authorities to ensure protection and hygienic provisions for the detained human rights defenders, and grant non-discriminatory access to temporary release and furlough during the pandemic according to Iranian judicial system's COVID-19 directive.

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