

13 August 2020

Iran: Concern for the health of Esmail Abdi and Jafar Azimzadeh held in quarantine

On 12 August 2020, human rights defenders **Esmail Abdi** and **Jafar Azimzadeh** were informed by Evin prison authorities that their second COVID-19 test, conducted on 9 August, had reportedly tested negative. The defenders had initially been informed on 9 August 2020, that the tests they had taken on 4 August had returned positive, and so they, and 10 other prisoners were transferred to the clinic of Evin prison for quarantine. Despite their negative results, both defenders have been held in quarantine with the prisoners who are thought to have tested positive for the virus, without sufficient protection, despite both suffering from pre-existing medical conditions.

Esmail Abdi is a high school teacher and former Secretary General of Iran's Teachers' Trade Association (ITTA). As part of his trade union activities, he has been campaigning for labour rights through organizing peaceful demonstrations and participation in representing ITTA in international conferences. An affiliate of Education International, ITTA is a trade union of educators which concentrates on the union rights of teachers and students. Jafar Azimzadeh is the Secretary of the Board of Directors of the Free Union of Iranian Workers (FUIW), a group dedicated to defending labour rights and improving working conditions. The group has not been officially recognised by the Iranian authorities, and many of its leading members are frequently subject to harassment.

Esmail Abdi was serving a 5 year sentence on charges of "gathering information with the intention to disrupt national security" and "propaganda against the state" when was handed a new ten year sentence on mid May 2020 The defender had been granted furlough from prison in March 2020 in the context of COVID-19. With only a few months remaining on his previous five year sentence, Esmail Abdi was handed an additional 10 year sentence f based on an old file which had been announced closed, against which he is going to appeal. Jafar Azimzadeh, who was already serving a five year sentence for 'crimes of assembly and collusion against national security through organizing and operating an illegal group', was sentenced to an additional 13 months' imprisonment on 15 June 2020 on charges of 'propaganda against state' from Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court. Esmail Abdi suffers from asthma whilst Jafar Azimzadeh suffers from kidney, heart and blood circulation complications, rendering them both particularly vulnerable.

On 4 August 2020, 17 prisoners from Ward 8 of Evin prison were randomly tested for COVID-19, including Esmail Abdi and Jafar Azimzadeh. The results of this test were announced on 9 August, with 12 out of 17 prisoners allegedly testing positive. In response to these results, the 12 prisoners were then transferred to the prison's clinic to be quarantined, and were tested once again later that day.

On 12 August, the results of the second test from 9 August were announced to the 12 prisoners, with eight testing positive and four negative, Esmail Abdi and Jafar Azimzadeh amongst them. The two defenders, despite their negative test results, continue to be held in quarantine with five of the prisoners who tested positive, placing them both at heightened risk. Two were transferred out of the clinic for the severity of their condition and pre-existing conditions, and one was granted furlough.

Front Line Defenders is concerned regarding the way in which the authorities in Evin prison have responded to the high numbers of positive COVID-19 cases in Ward 8, where many imprisoned human rights defenders are held. In both recent instances of testing, on 4 August and 9 August, the

results of the tests were not released officially, and were merely announced to the prisoners or withheld from them, which has been the case for other [imprisoned human rights defenders](#) in Iran. This lack of transparency creates a sense of fear and uncertainty for the prisoners in question. On 10 August 2020, prisoners in Ward 8 of Evin prison began a sit-in demonstration to protest against the negligence of the prison authorities in response to COVID-19, and the negative impact of their inaction for the prisoners, in what they now consider to be a crisis.

Front Line Defenders is seriously concerned for the physical and psychological integrity of Esmail Abdi and Jafar Azimzadeh as they are currently at risk, and believes they are being detained as a result of their legitimate and peaceful human rights work in Iran. Front Line Defenders also reiterates its concern regarding the conditions of prisons in Iran in the context of COVID-19, such as overcrowding, the denial of access to medical care and disregard for the well-being of prisoners, as well as unhygienic conditions.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Iran to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally release Esmail Abdi and Jafar Azimzadeh and quash their convictions as Front Line Defenders believes that they have been targeted solely as a result of his legitimate human rights work;
2. Urgently transfer both defenders out of the current quarantine facility where they are being held with prisoners who have tested positive for the virus, and provide them with necessary medical treatment, should they require it;
3. Release the official results of the COVID-19 tests, in writing, to the detained human rights defenders and other prisoners who were tested, adhering to their fundamental and constitutional rights;
4. Ensure that the treatment of Esmail Abdi and Jafar Azimzadeh, while in detention, adheres to the conditions set out in the 'Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment', adopted by UN General Assembly resolution 43/173 of 9 December 1988;
5. Ensure protection and hygienic provisions for all detained human rights defenders, and grant non-discriminatory access to temporary release and furlough for prisoners during the pandemic;
6. Cease targeting all human rights defenders in Iran and guarantee in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.