

Shirin Ebadi & Karim Lahidji:

Stop using means of suppression; pave the way for NGO aid to quake victims in Iran!

http://www.fidh.org/Stop-using-means-of-suppression?var_mode=calcul

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Shirin Ebadi, Nobel peace laureate, and **Karim Lahidji**, vice president of FIDH and president of LDDHI, said in a joint statement today: *"Two weeks since the earthquake in the Azerbaijan province of Iran, the authorities of the Islamic Republic are still pursuing a policy of silence and secrecy. They have not published the real figures of the casualties, the demolished villages and residential units or the financial damages. Furthermore, they have failed to provide adequate basic aid to the people. To make matters worse, by despatching the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) to the area, they have established a reign of fear and intimidation by arresting scores of civic activists and volunteer relief workers and trying to disrupt the work of the people who are endeavouring to help our quake-struck compatriots."*

Two weeks have passed since the earthquake in the north-western Azerbaijan province of Iran. Hundreds of people have lost their lives, scores of villages have been totally demolished and tens of others have been badly damaged. The authorities have refused to publish concrete figures of the casualties, reporting the figures in the range of 252-318. Unofficial sources, however, have mentioned estimates of 1500, 1600 and even several thousand casualties.

Ever since the earthquake, the authorities have tried to impose restrictions on popular and non-governmental aid to the victims and have failed to supply adequate aid to them. Furthermore, by deploying the IRGC and confiscating the privately collected supplies, they have tried to disrupt the flow of aid to the earthquake victims. The government has blocked bank accounts set up by non-governmental groups to aid the victims. Some groups of social workers specialised in helping children as well as psychologists who had travelled to the area to help the people have been forced to leave in the face of threats by the security and intelligence departments of the provincial capital Tabriz and the city of Ahar. The IRGC forces have been searching the trucks and other vehicles on the roads and partially confiscating private supplies donated by the people.

The earthquake victims are in pressing need for food, medicine, health, medical and psychiatric assistance. Shortage of medical staff and nurses has increased the likelihood of the spread of infectious diseases including cholera. People in the earthquake-struck regions have complained of improper distribution of food by the IRGC, which has reportedly been storing the aid received. Even representatives of the state Red Crescent Organisation have been facing impediments to their work caused by the IRGC. There have been reports of favouritism displayed by government agents in distributing aid to some families.

The pervasive corruption among the authorities and their failure to supply aid to the people and even pocketing international and NGO-supplied aid to the people in all similar cases in the past has caused widespread distrust among the people. The people have a vivid memory of the past. In other previous incidents such as the earthquakes in Rudbar (north; 1990), Ardebil (north-west; 1996), Bam (south; 2003) or even a bit further back in Tabas (east; 1978) and Bo'een Zahra (130 km west of Tehran; 1962), mostly patriotic groups, civic, social and political activists who enjoyed the people's trust rushed to their assistance.

It is no exception this time round. Civic activists and other compatriots have rushed to aid the earthquake victims. However, the authorities are trying to monopolise all contact with the victims and do not shy away from deploying security and military forces to achieve their goal. In the past few days, the IRGC has used force and anti-riot vehicles to detain scores of volunteer relief workers, civic and social activists who had gone to the area to help the people immediately after the earthquake. Although a number of the detainees were released on Friday, 24 August 2012, a large number of

others remain in detention. Some of them have been sentenced to long term imprisonment in the past for their peaceful social and human rights activities. Among them, Mr. **Navid Khanjani** (whose 12-year prison sentence has been upheld on appeal), Mr. **Vahed Kholousi** (sentenced to a five-year prison term), and Mr. **Esmail Salmanpour** (sentenced to a one-year prison term) are at risk of transfer to prison to serve prison sentences. Mr. **Hossein Ronaghi-Maleki**, a blogger serving a 15-year prison term, who was on sick leave from prison, has been transferred to Tabriz prison.

The authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran must:

- release immediately and unconditionally all the detained volunteer relief workers and civic and social activists;
- accept that they do not enjoy the people's trust in this case either and, by stopping the use of various means of pressure and suppression such as the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps, pave the way for the people, civic and social activists to aid the earthquake victims.

Shirin Ebadi, Nobel peace laureate

Karim Lahidji, vice president of the International Federation For Human Rights and president of the Iranian League for the Defence of Human Rights