

Doctor Hanged for Heresy in Iran for Insulting the Prophet Jonah

A former psychologist has been executed for heresy in Iran after eight years in detention, human-rights groups said, in the latest example of what activists say is a worrying rise in the use of death penalty by the Islamic Republic.

Mohsen Amir Aslani was hanged in a prison near the city of Karaj west of Tehran on Sept. 24, according to the Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), which is based outside Iran, for "corruption on earth and heresy in religion."

Iranian opposition news websites have said Aslani, 37, had given religious classes where he propagated a new interpretation of the Quran. He was also accused by the authorities of insulting the Prophet Jonah.

The Iran Wire website reported that in one of his classes he told his audience that Jonah could not have emerged from the whale's belly, and it was this statement that led to his charge of insulting the Prophet Jonah.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has expressed alarm at a reported increase in executions in Iran. Iran has one of the highest levels of executions in the world, second to China, according to Amnesty.

Some human rights activists and others fear that hardliners who oppose pragmatic President Hassan Rouhani and his negotiations with Western powers over the country's nuclear program are pushing the executions to weaken him.

Iran officially executed 373 people in 2013. But according to Cornell University's database, there were between 624 and 727

last year, up from an estimated 314 to 580 in 2012.

The Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre puts the total number of executions at 531 for this year.

On Thursday, in an open letter to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, 18 physics Nobel laureates called for the "immediate and unconditional" release of Iranian physicist and prisoner of conscience, Omid Kokabee, according to a statement by the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran.

He is suffering serious health problems, according to the campaign.

Kokabee, who was arrested while on a visit to Iran from the United States in 2011 where he was studying, was charged with "communicating with a hostile government," and receiving "illegitimate funds."

In an open letter from Evin prison, in April 2013, Kokabee wrote that his imprisonment was the result of his refusal to heed pressure by Iranian intelligence agents to collaborate on a military research project.

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