

IRAN'S BID TO BLOT OUT BLOGGERS

by Vicki Chan

These days, while Western media coverage about Iran is overwhelmingly focused on nuclear inspections, coverage of Iran's free speech movement seems to be an afterthought, despite the fact that, according to several authoritative sources, Iran is holding more journalists in its prisons than any other country in the Middle East.

With about 100 printed publications shut down by the hard-line Iranian judiciary since April 2000, the Internet has become a vital replacement for independent reporting. The increasing popularity of the Internet, especially among young Iranians, has caused the government to try to exert its control over this venue. Agence France Presse reports that on 11 October 2004, the head of the judiciary, Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahrudi declared new "cyber crimes" laws, stating "Anyone who disseminates information aimed at disturbing the public mind through computer systems or telecommunications... would be punished in accordance with the crime of disseminating lies."¹

The latest crackdown, which began in early September, has centered on silencing people who write weblogs and publish essays and other reportage online,

journalists such as Mahboubeh Abasgholizadeh, editor of the women's publication *Farzaneh*, and Fereshteh Ghazi, a writer for *Etemad*. The Iranian judiciary appears to be targeting the up-and-coming generation of journalists, as most of the detained are in their 20s.



Photo by Hossein Derakhshan - www.vagrantly.com

Two journalists who worked for *Emrooz*, an on-line news site which was officially shut down last year.

To date, at least eight on-line journalists have been detained in addition to technicians working on the Internet sites. They are being held in poor conditions and kept in solitary confinement, and their defense counsels have been unable to see or contact them. “[The hard-liners] see all these websites, including blogs, as newspapers they haven’t been able to crack down on yet,” Hossein Derakhshan, a Canada-based Iranian blogger (www.hoder.com) told the *Christian Science Monitor*.² Derakhshan is also the founder of the blog stop.censoring.us, which reports on journalist arrests and other news.

Human Rights Watch notes that the government is attacking mid-level activists for the first time rather than high-profile political leaders. Tareq Radwan of Human Rights Watch says that this tactic undermines the grassroots support for reform, as intimidation is easier at the grassroots level.

According to Mashallah Shamsolvaezin, spokesman for the Iranian Committee for the Defense of Freedom of the Press, formal charges have yet to be brought against the web journalists and technicians held since the crackdown. A judiciary spokesman, he said, made vague accusations that the detained journalists had acted against national interests and were guilty of violating public morals. Authorities are reportedly preparing adultery charges against Abasgholizadeh.

On 5 November 2004, Canada presented the United Nations General Assembly with a resolution expressing concern over the human rights situation in



Photo by Hossein Derakhshan - www.vagrantly.com

Newsroom of daily newspaper *Hayat-e No* in Tehran which was banned last year.

Iran, calling for the Iranian government to address human rights issues including arbitrary detentions, freedom of expression and freedom of the media. Relations between Canada and Iran have been strained since the beating death of Iranian-Canadian photographer Zahra Kazemi in July 2003 while she was in detention.

As of this publication, among the journalists currently

detained are the following:

- Mahboubeh Abasgholizadeh: wrote for on-line publications and editor of *Farzaneh*, a quarterly women's publication, arrested 2 November 2004.
- Fereshteh Ghazi: on-line journalist and journalist at *Etemad*, arrested 28 October 2004.
- Omid Memarian: on-line journalist, arrested 10 October 2004.
- Amir Mojiri: on-line journalist, arrested 8 September 2004.
- Shahram Rafihzadeh, cultural editor at *Etemad*, arrested 7 September 2004.

Vicki Chan is a graduate of the University of California at Berkeley (B.A., Political Science). While at the Bard Program on Globalization and International Affairs, she interned at the Overseas Press Club of America.

This article appears courtesy of the Overseas Press Club.

¹ "Iran cracks down on blog protests," BBC News World Edition: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3740336.stm. 13 October 2004.

² "Iran's hard-liners turn a censorious eye on Web journalists," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 28 October 2004.