

Jailed Iranian researcher's health worsening rapidly

Academics call for the release of Ahmadreza Djalali, who has been imprisoned without trial since last April.

Michele Catanzaro

20 March 2017



Courtesy of Vida Mehrannia

Ahmadreza Djalali, a researcher in disaster medicine, was arrested in Tehran in April 2016.

An Iranian researcher jailed in Tehran for the last 11 months is in declining health after spending more than two months on hunger strike. This month, researchers around the world made urgent appeals for his release.

Ahmadreza Djalali, a researcher in disaster medicine and a resident of Sweden, was arrested on an academic visit to Tehran in April 2016. On 11 March he was brought to a prison hospital after he refused to eat in protest at being threatened with the death sentence and at being denied his choice of lawyer. Djalali, who still awaits trial, has experienced kidney and heart pain and for a week in late February refused to take liquids, says his wife, Vida Merhannia. He has lost 30% of his body weight since he entered prison.

Djalali, 45, works on improving hospitals' emergency responses to armed terrorism and radiological, chemical and biological threats. He has affiliations with Sweden's Karolinska Institute in Stockholm and Italy's University of Eastern Piedmont in Novara. But on 25 April 2016 he was arrested and accused of "collaboration with a hostile government". According to his wife, he was kept in solitary confinement for three months, and forced to sign a confession.

Djalali began a first hunger strike in late December in protest against what he has told his wife is a false accusation. In late January, a judge on Iran's revolutionary court threatened him with a death sentence. He stopped his strike on 15 February, but resumed it three days later after the judge ordered him to change his lawyer or choose a court-appointed one. His trial has not yet been scheduled.

Petition organized

On 9 March, Djalali's colleagues, together with the Committee of Concerned Scientists in New York and human-rights groups such as Amnesty International and Scholars at Risk, [wrote to the Iranian authorities](#) to ask that Djalali be given due legal process and released, unless charged with a "recognizable criminal offence".

Djalali's case has drawn particular attention in Italy, in part because of his Eastern Piedmont connections. Parliamentarians there have protested to the Iranian ambassador, and Elena Cattaneo, a senator and stem-cell researchers at the University of Milan, said she would refuse to attend a July conference on stem cells in Iran in protest.

It's unclear why the Iranian government has arrested Djalali, says his colleague Luca Ragazzoni, a health researcher at the University of Eastern Piedmont, who worked with him from 2012 to 2015. In a separate case, physicist Omid Kokabee — [released from a Tehran jail in August 2016 after five years imprisonment](#) — believes he himself was punished for refusing to help a covert nuclear-weapons programme. But Ragazzoni says that disaster health research is less controversial. "The data we work with are not sensitive, and we publish all our results: I don't see what else a government should be interested in," he says. He thinks the group's international collaborations may have raised suspicion.

Imprisoned scientists

The US–Iran nuclear deal in 2015 had sparked hopes of greater academic freedom in Iran. But since that agreement, other researchers besides Djalali have been imprisoned or sentenced. They include Homa Hoodfar, a Canadian–Iranian social anthropologist who was arrested in March 2016 and charged with "dabbling in feminism and security matters", before being released on "humanitarian grounds" 112 days later; and retired Iranian polymer scientist Mohammad Hossein Rafiee-Fanoodeh, who was sentenced to six years in prison in May 2015 for political activism, and was released on medical furlough last year.

Hamid Babaei, an Iranian mathematics student who was studying for a PhD in finance at the University of Liège in Belgium when he was arrested in August 2013, remains in prison on a six-year sentence for "spying and contact with enemy states". He says that he was imprisoned for refusing to be an informant in Belgium for Iran's intelligence ministry.

"Iranian scientists enjoy access to world institutions and the worldwide web of scientific information. But they do not enjoy freedom of political dissent. The nuclear deal has not changed this situation by an inch," says Eugene Chudnovsky, a physicist at the City University of New York who is co-chair of the Committee of Concerned Scientists.

Nature | doi:10.1038/nature.2017.21660