

UN's Iran Rights Rapporteur Says Sanctions Could Worsen Situation

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The United Nations special rapporteur for human rights in Iran, Ahmed Shaheed, says his work has had a positive impact on the rights situation in the Islamic republic. Shaheed, who earlier this week presented his latest report to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, told RFE/RL in an interview that the lives of several Iranians who were sentenced to death were spared because of his efforts. The UN is set to vote later this month on the renewal of Shaheed's mandate. He spoke to RFE/RL correspondent Golnaz Esfandiari.

RFE/RL: Professor Shaheed, what has been the impact of your mandate so far? Have your reports led to any improvements in the human rights situation in Iran?

Ahmed Shaheed: Well, I think the fact [that I have been] monitoring and reporting on Iran has made some changes in that there have been cases when, I think, people have felt that certain say, capital-punishment sentences have not been carried out, or that there have been occasions when the government may have investigated further issues they may otherwise not have. So I think a pair of eyes on Iran does promote on the part of the government more vigilance in terms of responding to issues and also, I think, a greater care that they do things better. I recall last year this time we were concerned about the imminent execution of Pastor Yousef Naderkhani -- in the debate in the [Security] Council that was a major issue -- and subsequently he had been released. Now today, the Iran delegation on the issue of [blogger and Facebook activist [Sattar](#)] [Beheshti](#) conceded

that he was killed in prison, and acknowledged the need to investigate the matter properly.

So I think even if it not so visibly clear, the fact that people do report on the suffering in Iran does make a difference. I believe it's very important that the spotlight on Iran continues, because I think Iran is a country which cares about what is being said about the country because it sees itself as a leader in the global [sphere], for example. So it's very important that countries keep a spotlight on Iran and be vigilant about what is happening so people feel a degree of protection in terms of being documented as to what's happening to them.

RFE/RL: Yet despite the greater attention on human rights violations in Iran, you said in your latest report that the human rights situation has deteriorated.

Shaheed: Yes, that it correct. But it is not linked to the reporting per se, it's just that there have been certain internal issues in Iran that have contributed to this. It is a trend that you can observe from the last election process. And we are now approaching a new election timeline and therefore those issues are now sort of coming into sharper relief; and this relates to the space for media freedom, the treatment of journalists, the treatment of human rights defenders, and the whole sphere of political freedom. That is still continuing.

RFE/RL: In a relatively short time it appears that you have turned into Iran's "Enemy No. 1." You've been accused of taking bribes, working with terrorists, and had your role characterized as that of an opposition activist. Why do you think Iran is leveling so many accusations against you?

Shaheed: I think it's in the nature of certain governments that criticism is not taken lightly. So my reports do amount to criticism of government practices. Therefore, there is

a degree of resentment that comes with that. I think the kind of media comments that have been made in recent days are perhaps designed to create a smokescreen on the delegations and perhaps not to engage on the issues at hand. But that hasn't worked; a number of countries, even those who would traditionally oppose country mandates, have called on Iran to cooperate with the mandate.

RFE/RL: Iran has dismissed your reports as false. Have Iranian officials ever pointed to any potential factual mistakes in your reports? Has Tehran been able to dismiss any part of your reports based on facts?

Shaheed: No, they have not been in fact able to point out that my information is false. Of course they disagree on certain points of facts. But they have not been able to refute any allegations that I have made. I have been very careful in what I say, I ensure that anything I say is verified by at least two credible independent sources. So I am not blindly spraying allegations.

RFE/RL: Can you effectively monitor the human rights situation in Iran without being allowed into the country?

Shaheed: I am being effective, but of course going to the country is important. It will add value to what I'm doing but I cannot do without using the kind of methods I'm using now. What I mean is, if I went into the country I have no guarantee that people in Iran will be able to meet me freely or without fear. I think people are far more reluctant to come to see me in broad daylight or in a physical place because the fear of being exposed talking to me is very high and [because] there is often reprisal.

But the way I operate now, through electronic means, I'm able to reach out to hundreds of people in the country without them being detected. I am not Marco Polo; I don't have to be in the place to report about what's happening there, although I add that if I can visit

prisons, if I can speak to judiciary members, if I can visit courts, if I can visit government institutions, I'll have a fuller picture about what's happening than reporting without going to the country.

RFE/RL: You've expressed concern over the potentially negative humanitarian effects of economic sanctions. Do you think sanctions could lead to the worsening of the human rights situation in Iran by hurting civil society?

Shaheed: Absolutely. I think in the long run sanctions can have a very negative impact on civil society; and the longer they continue, the greater the chance that civil society would be adversely affected by this. If sanctions are causing massive currency devaluations, it's simple logic that people will be hurt in their ability to realize their basic economic and social needs. If sanctions are causing trade difficulties resulting in disruption to medical supplies or to basic food supplies, then the most vulnerable people suffer immediately, and over the long term there is wider suffering caused.

So there is no doubt that long-term sanctions, which undermine the trading ability [and] undermine the capacity for basic foodstuffs, will have a negative impact. For the moment I am not able to detect that scale of impact, but that's partly because I have not been given access to information by the government of Iran; and it is that government which has the information that is relevant to this. And I'm calling on them to become more transparent on this subject because, like I point out, in the long run it can be very hurtful to the people.