

PEN CANADA

for FREEDOM of EXPRESSION

Iranian journalist Akbar Ganji released from prison

Toronto, March 21, 2006 – PEN Canada welcomes the news that Iranian journalist **Akbar Ganji** has been released from jail.

Ganji, who is an Honorary Member of PEN Canada, was freed from Evin Prison on March 17, 2006. He was reportedly granted a conditional release for the Iranian New Year, which begins on March 21 and ends on April 2. Because his sentence is officially due to end on March 30, it seems unlikely that he will be returned to prison.

“We are delighted with the news about the release of this courageous writer,” said PEN Canada’s Writers in Prison Committee Chair Alan Cumyn. “Akbar Ganji is an exemplary individual who has put his life on the line in defence of freedom of expression and democratic ideals.”

The journalist’s wife and lawyer confirmed he was sent home on Friday night, with no other pending charges against him. The family says Ganji is not in good health: he has low blood pressure and they say he now weighs only 49 kg, after having first been on a hunger strike and then later, they allege, denied regular food by the jail authorities.

Ganji is not expected to give any interviews now because his wife says that might give the authorities an excuse to arrest him again.

Akbar Ganji, now aged 46, was arrested in April 2000, together with 17 other Iranian journalists and intellectuals who had taken part in a cultural conference in Berlin. He was sentenced to 10 years’ imprisonment, which was reduced on appeal to six months, for “taking part in an offence against national security” and “propaganda against the Islamic system”.

In July 2001 he was again brought to trial on charges of “collecting confidential state documents to jeopardize state security” and “spreading propaganda”, and was sentenced to six years’ imprisonment. The charges stem from a series of articles written in 2000 and later published as a book in which he implicated several high-ranking officials in the 1998 murders of several prominent writers and political activists, in what became known as the “serial murders” case.

Ganji was kept in solitary confinement for much of his prison term and went on hunger strike for several months in 2005.

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PEN Canada continues to be very concerned for its other Honorary Members in Iran, including **Amir Abbas Fakhraivar**, **Siamak Pourzand** and **Nasser Zarafshan**.

About PEN Canada:

PEN Canada is a centre of International PEN that campaigns on behalf of writers around the world persecuted for the expression of their thoughts. In Canada, it supports the right to free expression as enshrined in Section 2(b) of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

For more information, please contact David Cozac at PEN Canada, 416 703 8448 x24, dcozac@pencanada.ca.

www.pencanada.ca