

RAN #4/2008 February 1

AFGHANISTAN: Journalist Sayed Parwez Kambakhsh sentenced to death for blasphemy

BACKGROUND: Sayed Parwez Kambakhsh, a 23-year-old journalism student and reporter for a local daily newspaper, *Jahan-e-Naw*, was arrested on October 27, 2007 in Mazar-i-Sharif, Balkh province, northern Afghanistan, for distributing allegedly anti-Islamic literature—an article stating that the Prophet Mohammed ignored women’s rights. Kambakhsh admits to circulating the article, but he was not its author and he denies the accusations of blasphemy. On 22 January 2008, he was sentenced to death. The trial was reportedly held behind closed doors, and he had no legal representation. It is feared Kambakhsh has been targeted because of his brother, the prominent journalist Sayed Yaqub Ibrahim, who works for the Institute of War and Peace Reporting and is under escalating pressure for his critical reporting on local officials and warlords.

NOTE: there is an elaborate appeals process for this case, so execution is not imminent. The WIPC of International PEN feels strongly that international intervention will prove effective. Please send the letter below to His Excellency President Hamid Karzai and to Canadian authorities.

His Excellency Hamid Karzai
President of the Islamic State of Afghanistan
Gul Khana Palace
Presidential Palace
Kabul
Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
Email: president@afghanistangov.org

Your Excellency:

As a member of PEN Canada, the Canadian Centre of International PEN, the writers organization with 145 centres in 104 countries, I join with my writer colleagues worldwide to express shock at the death sentence handed down on January 22, 2008 to journalist Sayed Parwez Kambakhsh on blasphemy charges.

He was detained by National Directorate of Security (NDS) forces on blasphemy charges after downloading and giving to friends an article that allegedly said the Prophet Mohammed ignored women’s rights. He was not the author of the article. He was also reportedly accused of possessing allegedly anti-Islamic books and starting un-Islamic debates in his classes. Mr. Kambakhsh admits to circulating the article, but he denies the accusations of blasphemy.

We request two things:

First, that Mr. Kambakhsh be given full access to the legal representation to which he is entitled;

Secondly, that you intervene to secure Mr. Kambakhsh’s immediate and unconditional release in accordance with Afghan law and Article 19 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In the Afghanistan Compact (February 2006), the Afghan Government and the international community [committed to] “the protection and promotion of rights provided for in the Afghan Constitution and under applicable international law, including the international human rights and other instruments to which Afghanistan is a party.” And yet, while freedom of the press is granted in the Afghan Constitution, harassment of journalists in Afghanistan has increased. Several have been arrested, some killed in the past year. Journalists in Afghanistan face

severe threats from the Taliban, and increasing interference from government officials in their right to a free professional life.

Your Excellency, we urge you to act swiftly and with compassion to ensure justice for this young man.

Sincerely,
[your name and address]

Please send a copy of your letter to:

Ambassador Omar Samad
Embassy of Afghanistan
240 Argyle Ave.
Ottawa, Ontario K2P 1B9
Fax: (613) 563-4962
email: contact@afghanemb-canada.net

Please send copies of your appeal to the following Canadian authorities:

The Hon. Maxime Bernier
Minister of Foreign Affairs
Lester B. Pearson Building, Room A-10 125 Sussex Drive
Ottawa ON K1A 0G2
Fax: (613) 996 3443
Email: maxime.bernier@international.gc.ca

David Mulroney
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DFAIT/MAECI
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