

Trial of Iran's seven Baha'i leaders

Inside Evin Prison

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For more than two years, the seven Baha'i leaders were held in Tehran's notorious Evin prison.

During her own incarceration, journalist Roxana Saberi shared a cell for three weeks in early 2009 with the two women Baha'i prisoners, Fariba Kamalabadi and Mahvash Sabet.

In an account published in *One Country*, June-November 2009, Ms. Saberi spoke of how they gave her strength and inspiration as she faced the interrogations of her keepers and the harsh conditions of the jail itself.

NEW YORK — During her time in Iran's notorious Evin prison, journalist Roxana Saberi met a number of fellow women prisoners who gave her strength and inspiration as she faced the interrogations of her keepers and the harsh conditions of the jail itself.

Among these were two Baha'i prisoners, Fariba Kamalabadi and Mahvash Sabet, with whom Ms. Saberi shared a cell for about three weeks in early 2009.

"Fariba and Mahvash were two of the women prisoners I met in Evin who inspired me the most," said Ms. Saberi in a recent interview. "They showed me what it means to be selfless, to care more about one's community and beliefs than about oneself."

Ms. Saberi, an Iranian-Japanese-American journalist who was arrested in Tehran, had served about a month of an eight-year sentence for spying when she was released in May 2009, apparently in response to international pressure...

Ms. Saberi's description of the conditions facing the two Baha'i women offers considerable insight into what it is like to be unjustly incarcerated in Iran today — a situation experienced not only by Baha'is, but by hundreds if not thousands among the journalists, women's activists, human rights defenders, and peaceful protestors who are currently held in Iran.

According to Ms. Saberi, the two Baha'i women are confined in a small cell about four meters by five meters in size, with two little, metal-covered windows.

They have no bed. “They must sleep on blankets,” said Ms. Saberi. “They have no pillows, either. They roll up a blanket to use as a pillow. They use their chadors as a bed sheet.

“The floor is cement and covered with only a thin, brown carpet, and prisoners often get backaches and bruises from sleeping on it.

“The bathroom is down the hall, and prisoners must get permission to use it,” she said.

Exercise periods were also limited. “When I was with them, we were allowed into a walled-in cement yard four days a week for 20 to 30 minutes,” she said. “We were allowed to take a shower and wash our clothes by hand on the other three days of the week.”

Before she joined them, the two had for a time each been kept in solitary confinement, and they had no access to outside news or books — save for the Qur’an and a few Islamic prayer books.

“When I was with Mahvash and Fariba, they tried to keep a routine of reading those books that are allowed in prison, watching the state-run TV news, exercising in place in the cell, and praying,” Ms. Saberi said.

Based on her experience and her knowledge of the situation in Iran today, she said their trial will most likely be closed, as hers was.

“The Baha’i leaders’ case seems to be seen by certain Iranian authorities as a ‘security’ one, and a major problem in Iran is that ‘security’ and ‘threats to national security’ are often politically motivated and so vaguely, broadly and arbitrarily defined that innocent defendants can be considered guilty.

“If the Baha’i leaders are lucky, they will be assigned a judge who will give them a fair trial. However, there are many shortcomings in Iran’s judicial system, and it is likely the seven will be confronted with these shortcomings.

“It is common for defendants to be prohibited from having substantive or private meetings with their lawyers before trials, for their lawyers to lack sufficient access to their files and for the lawyers and defendants to be barred from studying what the prosecution claims is ‘evidence.’

“We have already seen infringements of their rights from the very beginning, including being held incommunicado, being

interrogated while blindfolded, and having no access to a lawyer for months and months.”

Ms. Saberi described the response of the two Baha’i women.

“I believe they always kept in mind the fact that their behavior in prison could have consequences for the wider Baha’i community. They seemed to feel this was both a responsibility but also a blessing, something that gave them strength to carry on,” she said.