

## CANADA

# Executions a sad reminder of home for Iranian author

Human rights activist says hanging of two gay teens shows Canada must get tough with Iran's regime, which she describes as 'a cancer,' writes **ARON HELLER**.

When Ghazal Omid first heard about the public hanging of two gay teenagers in Iran, she instinctively started to cry.

"I was devastated. When I saw those pictures it was like someone putting a hand to my heart and pulling it," said Ms. Omid, 35, a Vancouver-based author and human right advocate from Iran. "That's what the government of Iran does. The government of Iran is about oppression, it's about abusing other people and showing off that 'I can do it, and if you say anything I will kill you, too.'"

On Jul. 19, Mahmoud Asgari and Ayaz Marhoni were executed at a public square in Mashad, in northeast Iran. Iranian officials said both were over 18 and were sentenced for kidnapping, rape and homosexual activities. Prior to their execution, the two were also given 228 lashes each for drinking, disturbing the peace and theft, according to Amnesty International Canada.

Gay rights and Iranian opposition groups, though, said the two were only 16 and 18, and have suggested the rape charges against them were meant to undermine public sympathy. The groups have further suggested the boys made their confessions under torture.

Canada's Foreign Affairs Department has warned same-sex married couples to be wary of the law when travelling or moving to foreign countries, like Iran, that do not recognize their marriages.

Iran enforces Islamic Sharia law, which dictates the death penalty for gay sex.

The incident has sparked outrage around the world, with human rights groups saying this is just the latest example of widespread abuse in Iran's Islamic theocracy.

If anyone knows the horrors of living under the Iranian regime, it is Ms. Omid.

She was born in Abadan, Iran, in 1970, the only daughter in a very religious family. At 12, she says she was raped and molested by her older brother, but could never speak about it. Muslim women who have been sexually abused are often killed by their own relatives, for bringing shame upon the family. In high school, she became active in opposition groups and, as a result, was denied entry to medical school or any public university. Ultimately, she enrolled at a private university where she continued her resistance, participating in student protests. She was monitored and eventually abducted by the secret police for her activities. She escaped and fled the country, arriving in Canada ten years ago.

Ms. Omid recently published her life story in a book entitled *Living in Hell*. In an interview, she said it was just that.

"How you live, how you breathe, how you have relationships with other people is for government to monitor. Your nails, your outfit, the colour of your outfit, these are the simple freedoms. If these are taken away from you — it's a hell," she said.

She said she has also had a "brush" with lesbianism and said "if they would have found out, they would have killed me. It's as simple as that."

But the real issue in Iran, she agreed, is not about gay rights in particular, but human rights in general.

"We can not kill other people just because we feel like it," she said. "It's almost like they are paralyzing people to what they want to do. They say that 'I'll decide who lives and who dies.'"

Hopes were high in 1997 when Mohammad Khatami, a seemingly reform-minded and moderate candidate, was elected president on a platform of reform and democratization.

But with only a few weeks left in his presidency, the consensus among analysts and human right groups is that those efforts have failed miserably. Iran is still governed primarily by a group of



Ghazal Omid, author of *Living in Hell*, says she would have been put to death had authorities ever learned that she had a 'brush' with lesbianism while living in Iran.



Blindfolded teenagers Mahmoud Asgari, 16, left, and Ayaz Marhoni were executed at a public square in Mashad, in northeast Iran. They were sentenced for kidnapping, rape and homosexual acts, but human rights groups say the rape charges were trumped up.

hard-line conservative mullahs, loyal to the ways of Ayatollah Khomeini, leader of the 1979 revolution.

In addition to children and homosexuals, women, ethnic minorities and political dissidents are commonly abused and persecuted in Iran, according to human right groups. Aside from its domestic policies, Iran has drawn the ire of the western world, as well, for its aggressive pursuit of development of nuclear weapons and for supporting Islamic terrorist groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah.

Ghazal Omid fears Iran's ideological tyranny will spread, perhaps to next-door neighbour Iraq, and taint the image of Muslims around the world. She has made the religious pilgrimage to Mecca and still considers herself a devout Muslim despite living a modern, western life.

"Islam is not what the government of Iran does," she says. "The government of Iran says 'you have to cover your head because I say so.' But there is no 'I say so' in Islam."

And she said physical appearance was just the superficial example of this.

"They made Islam look like a bloodshed, look like a monster who wants to eat everybody.

What they are doing, the terror and terrorism, is essentially a cancer that is eating the body of Islam," she said.

Canada's interest in the situation in Iran has grown since the case of Iranian-Canadian photojournalist Zahra Kazemi came to light. Ms. Kazemi, 54, died in an Iranian prison in July 2003, about three weeks after being detained for taking photographs during anti-government protests. She was reportedly beaten to death.

Iran's judiciary charged a low-ranking intelligence official with unintentionally killing her during interrogation. The official was cleared of the charge at a trial last July, and, last week, an Iranian appeals court rejected demands for a new investigation into whether Ms. Kazemi's death was premeditated murder, effectively ending the case. Canada has continued to demand a thorough investigation, but many critics have said the federal government needs to take a tougher stand.

Ms. Omid agreed. "You're talking about a government that does not have any fear of hurting anybody," she said. "How much are we willing to sacrifice for our human rights?"

Canada's policy towards Iran has remained one of "controlled engagement," limited primarily

because of human rights concerns.

"Canada is very concerned about Iran's performance — especially relating to the independence of the judiciary, arbitrary detention, freedom of expression and the treatment of women, inmates and religious minorities," said Marie-Christine Lilkoff, a Foreign Affairs department spokeswoman. "Canada's objective is still to promote and accelerate positive change in Iran. This objective underpins our general approach to Iran's human rights situation."

Ms. Lilkoff said the death sentence for minors violates Iran's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which bans executions of persons who were under 18 years of age at the time of the offence.

"Canada calls on Iran to abolish child executions immediately, and to impose a moratorium on all executions, with a view to abolishing the death penalty," she said.

But Ms. Omid said this tough talk is far from enough and called Canada's soft approach toward Iran a mistake.

"This is not the way to go with governments like Iran," she said. "Something people in this part of the world don't know is when you are dealing with people like mullahs in Iran you absolutely have to be firm and put your foot down and say 'I don't care what is going to come, you are going to do it my way.' That is the only way they are going to understand. Sometimes you need to speak the language of that person in order for them to understand you," she said.

So far this year, Iran has executed at least four people for crimes committed when they were children, including one who was still a child. Amnesty International has recorded 42 executions so far in 2005, but says the actual number is likely higher.

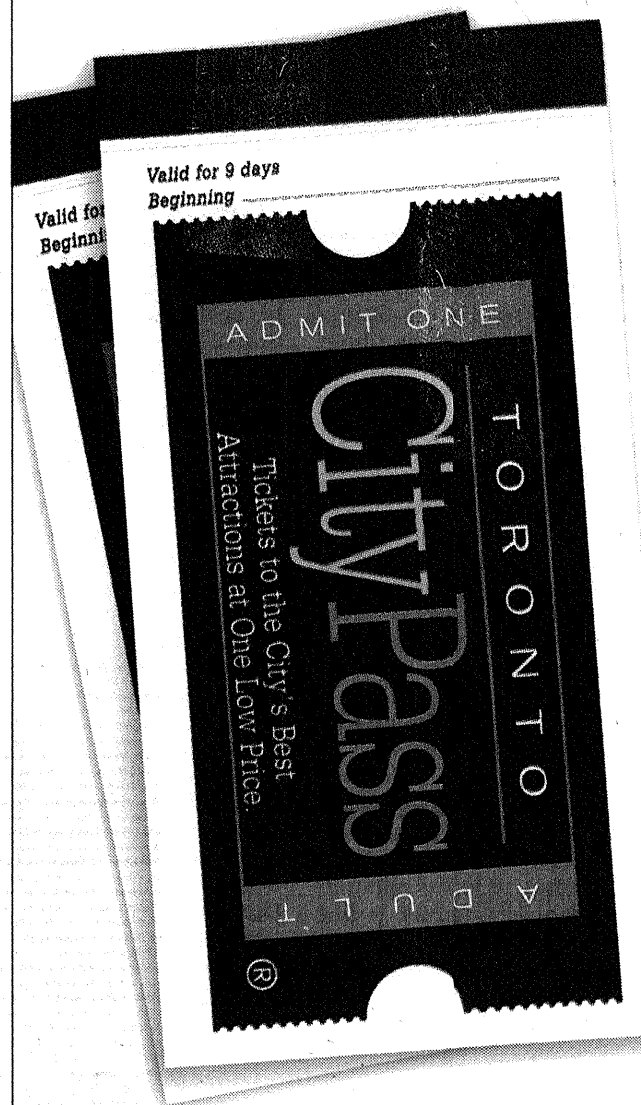
Ms. Omid called the latest incident "a symbolic execution" meant to intimidate and show power.

"I am very sad and very angry that we have come to this point that two kids are hanged publicly and we sort of stand and do nothing," she said.

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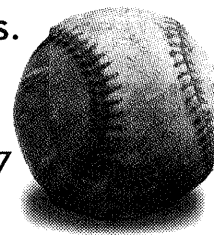
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