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Two face death after Iran morality trial

Human rights groups urge Britons to help save abused women from execution by hanging and stoning

David Smith

Two women convicted of crimes against morality in Iran are facing imminent execution, one by being buried up to her chest and stoned, Amnesty International said last night.

One of the women, a 19-year-old with a mental age of eight who was forced into prostitution by her mother, is to be flogged and executed. An official said yesterday he was waiting for orders on whether to stone or hang her. The other woman was convicted of adultery and is due to be stoned to death this month in accordance with Iran's severe penal code.

Amnesty issued an urgent warning that time was running out for both women and urged the international community to tackle Iran over its executions of women and child offenders. In August another mentally ill girl, 16-year-old Atefeh Rajabi, was hanged in a street for having sex before marriage.

The 19-year-old, known as 'Leyla M', was a prostitute by the age of eight and was raped repeatedly, according to a Tehran newspaper report. She gave birth when aged nine and was sentenced to 100 lashes for prostitution at about the same time. When she was 12 her family sold her to an Afghan to be his 'temporary wife', while her mother became her new pimp, 'selling her body without her consent', the report said.

At 14 she became pregnant again, receiving a further 100 lashes before giving birth to twins. When her temporary marriage ended, her family sold her again, to a 55-year-old man who was married with two children and did not object to Leyla's clients coming to his house.

Last month, Leyla, appearing at a court in the central Iranian city of Arak, was sentenced to death on charges of 'acts contrary to chastity' by controlling a brothel, having intercourse with blood relatives and giving birth to an illegitimate child. The sentence has now been passed to the supreme court for confirmation. She apparently 'confessed' and faces being flogged before being executed.

Iran has executed at least three child offenders in 2004 and 11 others are believed to have been sentenced to death, according to Amnesty. Under the penal code, girls as young as nine and boys as young as 15 can be executed.

Interviewed by an Iranian journalist in her cell, Leyla was asked if she understood she was to be put to death. 'Yes, that's what they are saying,' she replied. 'But people in prison say this is a lie. They want to frighten you a bit.'

'I haven't done anything. My mother told me to go to a man's house and I did. If she said don't, I wouldn't have. I was frightened. If I didn't listen to her, she would have harmed me. She beats me - my father, too.'

Asked when she was first forced to have sex, Leyla said: 'I was eight, the first time my mother took me to a man's house. It was a horrible night. I cried that night. Cried a lot. The day after she [my mother] came after me and took me home and bought chocolate and crisps for me.'

Leyla has been robbed of the consolation of spending time with her children. 'We used to play together before I went to prison. For some time they were with my mother and then they went to my father. I don't know where they are at the moment.'

She said of her father: 'He is a very bad-tempered man. He frightens me. But I liked him when he bought me goodies.'

Asked if her mother had visited her on death row, Leyla said: 'No, she hasn't. If you see my mother, tell her that she promised to bring me crisps and chocolate. Also tell her not to forget my red dress.'

Campaigners in Iran are compiling a petition against the execution, which they will present to the United Nations. Another group, the International Committee Against Stoning, is to meet officials of the European Union tomorrow in an attempt to build diplomatic pressure on Iran over the imminent execution of Hajieh Esmailvand, whose sentence for adultery was upheld by the supreme court and changed from death by hanging to death by stoning, before Tuesday. The man with whom Hajieh had the affair, who was 17 at the time, has been sentenced to death by hanging.

Mike Blakemore, of Amnesty International UK, said: 'Time is running out for Hajieh and Leyla, but it's still not too late. People in the UK can help stop these executions by writing to the Iranian authorities, letting them know that people around the world will not sit idly by and let this happen.'

'But these horrific cases are just the tip of the iceberg. Every day women are subjected to terrifying violence, repression and abuse. Violence against women is a human rights atrocity and one we must tackle urgently.'

· For details of how to help stop the executions, visit: www.amnesty.org.uk/action