**A chance to stand tall against Iran on human rights**

By Roxana Saberi

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Shortly after Iran announced that it had executed five Kurdish political activists on Sunday, I received an e-mail from a human rights campaigner in Tehran who knew one of them, asking me to spread the word about the hangings.

"We are truly helpless," she wrote, "and we feel lost."

Iran labeled the five "terrorists," but human rights advocates have said the prisoners denied the charges against them, were subjected to torture and convicted in unfair trials. One of the five, Farzad Kamangar, was sentenced to death after a trial that his lawyer said lasted seven minutes. Another, Shirin Alam-houli, wrote in several letters from jail that she had made false confessions on camera after being tortured. The prisoners' families reportedly were not informed of the executions beforehand.

If the international community fails to condemn such atrocities, Iran's regime will continue to trample on the basic rights of individuals, many of whom have been detained simply for peacefully standing up for universal human rights. It is common for Tehran's prisoners -- including journalists, bloggers, women's rights campaigners, student activists and adherents of the minority Baha'i faith -- to be held in prolonged solitary confinement without access to an attorney as they try to defend themselves against fabricated charges such as espionage and "propaganda against Islam" or the regime.

When I was incarcerated in Iran's Evin prison last year on a trumped-up charge of espionage, I was fortunate that my case received a great deal of international attention. I was not aware of the extent of this attention until the day my interrogator allowed me to lift my blindfold to see a pile of news articles on a desk in front of me. As he read aloud the names of journalism and human rights organizations, Iranian-American groups and others that had been calling for my freedom, I realized he was trying to scare me into thinking that this outcry was bad for me. But suddenly I no longer felt so alone. Friends and strangers were standing with me, and I didn't have to face my captors by myself anymore. I believe the pressure from this international support eventually persuaded Iranian authorities to free me one year ago this week.

Iranian officials sometimes claim that the regime is impervious to outside pressure over its treatment of prisoners or that it reacts negatively to such attention. Indeed, my captors ordered me early on to tell my parents that publicizing my case would jeopardize my freedom. But even though my parents remained silent during the first month of my captivity, Iranian authorities dragged their feet. I later learned that such threats are routine in Iran and that silence has usually harmed, rather than helped, political prisoners.

Some Iranian decision-makers do care what outsiders say about the Islamic Republic. If they didn't, Iran would not have satellite television networks such as the English-language Press TV trying to spread state-sanctioned messages to international audiences. Nor would Tehran attempt to restrict journalists and censor images leaving the country.

Why should those who are free to speak out voice support for Iranians struggling to make their voices heard? Because people everywhere -- even those who hold different ideas about what it means to be free -- share many basic values, such as the right to freedom of expression, of peaceful assembly and of religion; because many ordinary Iranians want a more democratic government that respects human rights; and because what happens in Iran will affect the region and what happens in the region will affect the world.

As the international community focuses on Iran's nuclear program, it should also make human rights a first-tier issue. When the U.N. Human Rights Council meets in Geneva next month, Washington and the European Union should lead calls for a resolution setting up a mechanism to investigate human rights atrocities in Iran during the past year. A bigger push should be made to send a U.N. special envoy on human rights to Iran and to aid Iranians, including the many journalists forced to flee their country out of fear of persecution.

But perhaps even more important than government efforts is the outcry of ordinary people worldwide. When everyday citizens speak out against Iran's human rights violations, Tehran has a tougher time asserting that their calls have been masterminded by foreign governments.

Time is of the essence: Several political prisoners are on death row, and a fresh crackdown on opposition supporters is likely as the first anniversary of Iran's controversial presidential election approaches. Regular citizens can demonstrate support for the Iranian people by participating in any of the rallies expected in several cities around the world on June 12. They can also contribute to human rights groups or take part in Internet and letter-writing campaigns to Iranian officials. Such steps, if done continuously by large numbers of people, can make a difference, making clear to Iran that it cannot get away with torture and wrongful imprisonment or stop people from exercising universal human rights.

If these voices are loud enough, they will be heard by Iranians and maybe even by the detainees enduring injustices. Perhaps those prisoners will feel like I did when I learned of the efforts for my release: empowered.

The writer was detained for 100 days in 2009 in Iran. Her book, "Between Two Worlds: My Life and Captivity in Iran," published by HarperCollins, chronicles her experiences and the stories of her fellow political prisoners in Evin prison.