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Necessary Gesture Or Bad Decision? U.S. Cuts Funds To Iran Rights Group

by Andrew F. Tully

WASHINGTON -- The Iran Human Rights Documentation Center specializes in collecting data on human rights abuses that it says the government of Iran has been perpetrating against its own people, ranging from unlawful detentions to torture to assassinations.

In the past five years, the group has received about \$3 million from the State Department's U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID.

Rene Redman, the group's executive director, reportedly was ready to ask for \$2 million more for the next two years, to be used to investigate Tehran's harsh response to protests against the June 12 election, which many say was rigged in favor of President Mahmud Ahmadinejad.

But this week the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center learned it will get no money for the foreseeable future.

The funding cutoff comes as the United States is negotiating directly with Iran about its nuclear program, which many Western governments believe is aimed at developing nuclear weapons. It's the first such contact between the two countries in three decades.

'Minor Concession'

Ted Galen Carpenter is the vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, a private policy research center in Washington. He sees the de-funding as a gesture to establish Washington's good will in the talks -- and a rather small gesture at that.

"It's a relatively minor concession, all things considered," Carpenter says. "Programs like that are more designed to make Americans feel noble and honorable than they are actually designed to achieve results. And what the Obama administration has done, I think, is return to the more mainstream approach in U.S. foreign policy, which is to focus on the external behavior of troublesome regimes, not on the internal behavior."

Carpenter stresses that while the U.S. government shouldn't be indifferent to human rights issues, he says it can't allow that concern to eclipse more pressing U.S. security matters. And confronting Iran on its nuclear program is definitely in the U.S. interest, he says.

"[Cutting the group's funding is] an essential precondition to make any progress on issues that are far more important to the interests of the United States," he says. "In other words, for America's security and well-being, we need to be far more concerned about Iran's behavior on the nuclear issue, and also on such matters as Tehran's policy toward a fragile Iraq and an even more fragile Afghanistan, where we have major military commitments."

That doesn't mean this gesture guarantees that Iran will negotiate in good faith, Carpenter says. But he argues that making no concessions probably would lead to fruitless talks between the two countries.

'We Should Care'

Others disagree.

Omid Memarian, a researcher for Human Rights Watch's Middle East/North Africa Division, says the very idea of cutting funds to a human rights group focusing on Iran shows that the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama has its priorities backwards.

"I think for the United States, the nuclear issue has the first priority and human rights are considered as a domestic issue for Iranians," Memarian says. "But we are living in a global world, and as we care for people in Darfur and people in Bosnia, we should care about people in Iran and the way they are treated by their government."

Memarian concedes that the nuclear talks are important, and that the United States has to go out of its way to ensure that Iran takes the discussions seriously. But he says that doesn't mean that Washington has to ignore another critical issue in Iran.

"I think the Obama administration is in a very tricky situation," Memarian says.

"On one hand, Iran's nuclear program is a matter of international security and the concern of many countries. On the other hand, the

brutality of the Iranian government after the election should not be forgotten. And I think [Iran and the United States] can talk about both issues at the same time, and it's not like they first have to talk about the nuclear issues and then talk about human rights." comments

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