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Trump administration intensifies demands for Iran to release U.S. prisoners

By Melissa Etehad

Since his brother and father were arrested and imprisoned while visiting Iran nearly two years ago, Babak Namazi has been trying to persuade the U.S. government to step up its fight for their freedom.

Both inmates — 45-year-old Siamak Namazi and 81-year-old Baquer Namazi — are Iranian American dual nationals who were convicted of espionage in a secret trial last year and are now serving 10-year sentences in Tehran's Evin Prison, notorious for its harsh conditions.

“You always think the worst and it paralyzes me,” said Babak Namazi.

Now it appears that the family's quest for their release is gaining traction.

The U.S. House passed a bill Wednesday calling for Iran to release all U.S. citizens and legal residents being held for political purposes.

The White House had already started to elevate the issue. Last week, it threatened “new and serious consequences” if Iran did not release all imprisoned U.S. citizens. That prompted Iran to call for the U.S. to release Iranians it is holding, suggesting to some experts that Iran is willing to negotiate a trade.

“For Iran, a prisoner swap would resolve a problem of their making,” said Reza Marashi, research director for the National Iranian American Council. “Iran doesn't have the upper hand when it unjustly detains Americans. Iran needs to resolve this so that a bad situation doesn't get worse.”

It is unclear where the Trump administration stands on the idea of an exchange. The last prisoner swap occurred in January 2016 under the Obama administration when four Iranian American

dual nationals were freed in exchange for the release of seven Iranians. The exchange was seen as a sign of good faith in the wake of a deal to monitor Iran's nuclear program.

Siamak Namazi was rumored to be among the Americans who would be freed, but his release never materialized.

His brother said that engagement with the Trump administration was slow at first, but that it has improved in recent months.

“Last month I left a meeting very confident that the case of my family has become a top priority for the Trump administration,” said Babak Namazi, who testified alongside relatives of other prisoners on Tuesday before a congressional foreign affairs subcommittee.

At least four Americans are imprisoned or missing in Iran.

This month, Iran sentenced Xiyue Wang, a 37-year-old Chinese American student at Princeton, for spying. Robert Levinson, a 69-year-old former FBI agent, went missing in Iran in 2007, and his whereabouts are unknown.

There are also two U.S. permanent residents detained in Iran. Karan Vafadari, who owns an art gallery in Tehran, was arrested last July. Nizar Zakka, an information technology expert originally from Lebanon, is believed to have been detained in Iran since 2015.

In addition, Gholamrez “Reza” Shahini, an Iranian American dual citizen, was sentenced to 18 years in prison in October for national security crimes but was released on bail and is under house arrest in Iran, according to family members.

The issue of jailed Americans in Iran has been a sensitive subject in U.S.-Iranian relations since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. In recent years, Iranian hard-liners have used the arrests of Americans to undermine the efforts of President Hassan Rouhani's government to improve relations with the West, experts said.

The Trump administration's threats on the issue of imprisoned Americans follow the imposition of U.S. sanctions last week on 18 entities and individuals connected to Iran's ballistic missile program, military procurement and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps — the powerful hard-line security and military organization whose members are believed to have jailed the Namazis and other Americans.

“The Iranian regime continues to detain U.S. citizens and other foreigners on fabricated national-security-related charges,” State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said the day the sanctions were announced.

President Trump had made it clear to Secretary of State Rex Tillerson that "bringing Americans home" from overseas detention was an issue of "huge concern" and an administration priority, a senior State Department official told reporters Tuesday, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The official would not say how any negotiations would take place.

Iranian officials have intensified their rhetoric on the issue and this week started releasing names of its nationals whom it says the United States has unlawfully detained, or requested its allies to detain.

"Recently a number of Iranians in various countries, at the request of the U.S., were arrested on the baseless claims of circumventing sanctions," said Abbas Araghchi, Iran's deputy foreign minister, according to an article published Monday by Raja News, an affiliate of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps.

The article also lists the names of 12 Iranians who were apparently detained in the U.S. and elsewhere, including some who were released during the prisoner swap with the U.S. in January 2016.

On a visit to the U.S. last week, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif made similar claims during an event at the Council of Foreign Relations in New York. He said that an Iranian woman who is two months pregnant was arrested a few weeks ago in Australia, along with an Iranian national living in Spain and another in Germany.

"I'm not saying that it's tit for tat, but I'm saying that we need to address this humanitarian problem from a humanitarian perspective and not from a political perspective," Zarif said. "And I'm certainly ready to do all it takes on my side to help resolve this humanitarian problem."

The Namazi family is based in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

Siamak Namazi, who was visiting relatives in Iran, was arrested there in October 2015. In February 2016, his father traveled there to seek his release and was arrested.

According to Babak Namazi, his brother, a businessman, has been held for most of the time in solitary confinement. Their father, a retired official with the United Nations Children's Fund, has lost 30 pounds and twice been hospitalized.

Babak Namazi said he fears his father will die.

"I continue to urge the Trump administration to do everything possible to bring them home. We are literally running out of time," he said.

Times staff writer Tracy Wilkinson in Washington contributed to this report.