

U.S. denounces Iran's treatment of American journalist: Convicted of espionage

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An Iranian-American journalist convicted of espionage by Iran's Revolutionary Court and sentenced to eight years in prison has become an unwitting figure in the tensions between the United States and the Middle Eastern nation.

Roxana Saberi, 31, worked as a journalist who filed reports from Iran for National Public Radio, the BBC and other news outlets until her credentials were revoked in 2006. Though she continued to report on a freelance basis, she was arrested in January for allegedly passing documents and information to U.S. intelligence services.

Saberi, named Miss North Dakota in 1997, was a graduate of Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota. Her alma mater had hoped that she could deliver the May 3 commencement address at the college, which is affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. After the April 18 sentencing, Saberi's lawyer said he would appeal.

U.S. officials called the accusations against Saberi "baseless and without foundation." On the day of the sentencing, President Obama said he was "deeply disappointed" by the conviction, a spokesperson said.

During the previous week, Mark S. Hanson, ELCA presiding bishop and president of the Lutheran World Federation, wrote to the Iranian government asking for Saberi's release, noting in the letter the "shared Abrahamic heritage" of Christians and Muslims. "Our culture has grown to value journalists as agents of truth and to give them latitude for investigation and truth-telling," wrote Hanson, according to the ELCA News Service.

There were indications April 16 that Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, hopes to improve relations with the West. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said Washington would "continue to vigorously raise our concerns to the Iranian government. Our thoughts are with her parents and family during this difficult time."

Saberi was born in the United States and grew up in Fargo, North Dakota, with her Iranian father and Japanese mother.

"The news of Roxana's conviction is devastating," said Concordia College president Pamela Jolicoeur.

Vivian Schuller, chief executive of NPR, said the public broadcasting network was "deeply distressed" by what it considers a harsh and unwarranted sentence. "Through her work for NPR over several years, we know her as an established and respected professional journalist."