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**PRESS RELEASE**

**Iran: ARTICLE 19 Launches Azad Tribune - an Online Platform to Encourage Free Expression**

**On International Human Rights Day, ARTICLE 19 today launches an interactive website to encourage networking among bloggers, journalists and activists in Iran.**

Azad Tribune will host articles from writers based in and outside Iran. It will also provide a platform for debate about freedom of expression and will provide information and other resources that will support civil society campaigning against censorship in that country.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is one of the most repressive countries in the world, with tight restrictions on all forms of mass communication, including the print and broadcast media, the publishing sector, the internet, and mobile and fixed line telephone networks.

This stifling trend has worsened since the mass citizen protests that escalated following the presidential elections in June this year. Although the Government downplays the means it employs to curtail dissent, with official figures of 2,500 people arrested and up to 30 killed during this period, independent organisations believe the numbers are far greater.

The Government views any expression of dissent or nonconformist views as opposition to be met with tighter bans on foreign press, restrictions on internet access and a clampdown on any attempt at peaceful protest. On 7 December 2009, widespread protests marking National Student Day signified a continued momentum of the post-election outrage. However, in the week before, the number of arbitrary arrests and detentions grew.

Journalists, activists and bloggers face unfair trials, torture and lengthy prison sentences for criminal offences such as mutiny and disruption of public order. Among those imprisoned this month, two prominent journalists, Hengameh Shahidi and Saeed Laylaz, were sentenced to six and nine years' imprisonment respectively.

A number of publications have been closed, with *Hayat-e No*, a Tehran-based daily newspaper, affiliated with Hadi Khamenei, a younger brother of Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, among the most recent.

A new web crime task force has also recently been established to reinforce internet censorship and fight cyber crime. This unit has reportedly raided homes, confiscated computers, tracked and blocked websites, and arrested bloggers who may be attempting to raise critical views.

In this climate, ARTICLE 19 extends its support to all sectors of Iranian society, particularly the vibrant blogging community, with the aim of protecting space for freedom of expression and combating censorship.

Azad Tribune goes live today and can be found at [www.azadtribune.org](http://www.azadtribune.org) in English and Farsi.

*“The Iranian government has been unable to hide its repressive activities, thanks to the courageous men and women who have recorded, taped, written and reported on violations via the internet and other channels,”* says Dr Agnès Callamard, ARTICLE 19 Executive Director. *“Azad Tribune will contribute to this expanding and crucial movement by providing them with tools against censorship. This will be an interactive platform for the people of Iran living in and outside the country, and will reach out to bloggers, activists, journalists and human rights defenders who want to protect and promote free speech and open debate.”*

*“Over the next weeks and months, further resources and articles will be added to the site and ARTICLE 19 welcomes online contributions from all Iranians concerned about free speech and extends this invitation to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to engage in open dialogue with those from all sides of the debate.”*

**NOTES TO EDITORS:**

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- Contributions to Azad Tribune can be submitted to [azadtribune@article19.org](mailto:azadtribune@article19.org)
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.