

Radio Free Europe /Radio Liberty Report

IRAN FACES PROSPECT OF UN SANCTIONS. Members of the UN Security Council approved Resolution 1737 on December 23, which imposes limited sanctions on Iran so it will curb its atomic program and make it fully transparent, agencies reported. The resolution ordered all countries to block the provision of parts and material that could contribute to Iran's atomic or missile programs, AP reported. It would also freeze the foreign assets of certain Iranian agencies and individuals working on the program. Further measures could follow a failure by Iran to abide by UN demands to stop uranium-enrichment and related activities and fully cooperate with UN inspectors. Uranium enrichment and related activities are part of the fuel-making process, with civilian, but also potential military applications.

Iranian officials and politicians reacted with defiance, and speculated on what sanctions could mean for Iran. Several confirmed that Iran would press ahead toward industrial-scale uranium enrichment -- which would bring Iran closer to fuel-production activities with bomb-making applications, which the West wants stopped. Iranian Deputy-Foreign Minister Mehdi Mostafavi said in Saudi Arabia on December 26 that Iran will announce a major step toward large-scale enrichment next February, AFP reported, citing Iranian agencies. Several officials have hinted at the revelation or "celebration" of an unspecified nuclear breakthrough then, to coincide with the anniversary in February of the culmination of the 1979 revolution that toppled the Persian monarchy.

Iran's parliament passed a bill on December 27 authorizing the government to reconsider the scope of its cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA], the UN nuclear inspectorate. Senior legislator Alaeddin Borujerdi said that day that the bill is a "carte blanche" for the government, which can determine its level of cooperation with inspectors, ISNA reported.

Tabriz parliamentary representative Akbar Alami told ILNA on December 27 that strict sanctions would harm Iran's economy and increase its isolation, but would not "paralyze" the economy. Former Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, currently a foreign affairs adviser to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, told IRNA on December 28 that Iran was not surprised by the resolution, which he said would not affect "the forward process of peaceful research in nuclear energy." He said Iran "has not tied the fate of its nuclear energy on this resolution being issued or not," nor would it "halt research, investigation, and development work in this important technology, and work will continue on the present basis." He said the "instrumental use of international bodies" -- such as the UN -- by Western powers will not deter Iranians from their "legitimate goals," and "the importance" of Iran's nuclear technology "goals" is "too great" for it to "submit to...threats."

Supreme National Security Council Secretary Mohsen Rezai told ISNA on December 31 that the resolution is blocking talks, and the solution to the present impasse is resumed talks with EU and Security Council members on the basis of previous agreements between Iran's chief negotiator Ali Larijani and the EU's Javier Solana. He told Mehr agency on January 1 that the resolution was a ploy by the United States to bring Iran to the negotiating table. "By pushing the dossier to an impasse," he said, the U.S. "wants through diplomatic means to be able to sit and negotiate directly with Iran as its only rival," he said. He suggested talks with the EU, or with China and Russia, or the IAEA as possible solutions. Rezai formerly headed the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps [IRGC].

Expediency Council Chief Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani said in a Tehran sermon on December 31 that the resolution is a "pretext" against Iran because "it is clear to everyone" that Iran's is a peaceful program, ISNA reported. He said "we do not accept the insult" that Iran may secretly develop nuclear bombs," and termed the resolution "very dangerous." He said "they have plans for the future," though Iran would not be easily cowed by pressures. "This will not happen. They will only create problems for themselves, our country and the region," and this "is a fire [whose] smoke will go into the eyes of many, and cannot be compared to...Afghanistan, Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine. This is Iran."

Legislator and member of the parliamentary National Security and Foreign Policy Committee Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh told ISNA on January 1 that downgrading ties with the IAEA does not signify Iran's departure from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty [NPT], "but we can reconsider supervisory protocols." He said "resolutions and sanctions" would not "interrupt" Iran's "nuclear development," and "we must move to the industrial stage in nuclear technology." (Vahid Sepehri)

GOVERNMENT SEEN AS ELECTIONS LOSER. Iran held three elections on December 15, for the Assembly of Experts, a body of senior clerics that officially supervises the Supreme Leader's office, municipal councils, and some parliamentary seats. The results were interpreted by observers as a defeat for the government of President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, as voters elected moderate conservatives, independent candidates or reformers, instead of those closely associated with the government. Officials said the only winners were the nation, and the government had merely played its role as an impartial electoral agent. Reformers complained about prolonged vote-counting in the municipal polls, which they feared might allow tampering with ballots. They wrote to the parliamentary speaker Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel on December 17, urging him to act over apparent irregularities, the daily "Etemad" reported on December 18. These included disagreements between officials and supervisors on whether to counting should be manual or mechanized, inexplicable transfers of ballot boxes from certain designated counting sites by unidentified people, and ballot boxes left unattended for hours.

Results in Tehran received most attention, indicating as they might dominant trends across the country. There, conservatives close to the Tehran mayor Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf - seen as a conservative rival of the president - won six of the city council's 15 seats, with reformers taking four seats, Ahmadinejad supporters including his sister, three seats, an independent taking one seat, and a candidate approved by two conservative lists another seat, RFE/RL's Radio Farda reported. The interior ministry cited the names of new council members on December 21: Mehdi Chamran, Morteza Talai, Rasul Khadem, Abbas Sheibani, Hadi Sai, Hamzeh Shakib, Alireza Dabir, Parvin Ahmadinejad, Masumeh Ebtekar, Ahmad Masjed-Jamei, Mohammad Ali Najafi, Masumeh Abad, Hasan Bayadi, Khosro Daneshju, and Habib Kashani, ISNA reported. Sai, Ebtekar, Masjed-Jamei, and Najafi are reformists, though a "Kayhan" editorial on December 20 opined that Sai had won votes for being a popular sportsman -- he was a tae kwan do champion -- not his reformist affiliations. Masumeh Abad told ISNA on December 26 that there was "agreement" among new council members that Qalibaf should remain mayor.

Tehran election results for the Assembly of Experts showed a prominent moderate, ex-president Hashemi-Rafsanjani, leading over more radical candidates like Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, seen as a mentor to the president and his allies. The leading vote-winners here were Hashemi-Rafsanjani with just over 1.56 million votes, ayatollahs Mohammad Emami-Kashani, Ali Akbar Meshkini, Mohammad Yazdi, Ahmad Jannati, Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, Hojatoleslam Hassan Rohani, and Ayatollah Qorban Ali Dorri-Najafabadi, IRNA reported the Interior Ministry as stating on December 18. All are current members of the assembly and considered conservatives. Mesbah-Yazdi won just under 880,000 votes, which led media to note that almost twice as many electors voted for Rafsanjani as did for the arch-conservative Mesbah-Yazdi. Hussein Marashi, a member of the Executives of Construction, a party associated with Rafsanjani, told ISNA on December 17 that Rafsanjani's decisive election will boost domestic unity and Iran's international credibility, showing the world that "people who think rationally and have roots...still enjoy good public acceptability" in Iran. (Vahid Sepehri)

REFORMER AND A CONSERVATIVE TO ENTER PARLIAMENT. Conservative Hasan Ghafurifard and reformist Soheila Jelodarzadeh were elected members of parliament for Tehran constituencies in midterm polls on December 15, ISNA reported on December 18. Ghafurifard was elected with 801,452 votes and Jelodarzadeh with 529,307 votes, beating conservative Asadollah Badamchian, who was third with just under 295,000 votes, IRNA reported. Jelodarzadeh was a member of the last, reformist-dominated parliament. Ghafurifard told ISNA the real winners are "the people" and the loser "the West," which he said is pressuring Iran. He said he owed his election to "making contact" with electors in the Tehran suburbs of Islamshahr and Shahr-i Rey, and promised to voice their concerns more forcefully. (Vahid Sepehri)

REFORMISTS SATISFIED WITH POLL RESULTS. Safdar Hussein, the reformist coalition's provincial campaign coordinator, said in Tehran on December 18 that reformers had by then won most seats for municipal councils in the country's 22 provinces, ILNA reported. He said that of 1,524 people who had definitely won council seats in 265 cities and towns by December 18, 605 were reformers, 438 "fundamentalist" or conservative, 52 from the Sweet [or Pleasant] Scent of Service [Rayehe-i Khosh-i Khedmat] -- the list associated with President Ahmadinejad -- and 429 were independent. He said many independents have "reformist leanings" but ran as independents for "local considerations and the atmosphere in the provinces," ILNA reported. Reformers could work with them, he said. Hussein was a finance minister in the second government of President Mohammad Khatami.

Reformist Abdullah Ramezanzadeh told ILNA on December 23 that reformers would work with other council members across the country to resolve the people's "real" problems in municipalities. He hoped there would be no factional quarrels seen in previous councils like the first Tehran city council.

Mohammad Hashemi of the centrist Executive of Construction Party said on December 23 that results showed parties have little influence on Iranians who "reject extremes," the website iranews reported. Conservative Mariam Behruzi told Aftab news agency the same day that people had voted for the president's sister out of affection for him, but still cautioned government supporters not to compete in elections as "people will not vote for government groups." Reformist Ali Mohammad Hazeri told ILNA on December 26 that "political upstarts, scandalmongers, the proud and self-satisfied" evidently enjoy no support among Iranians. Mahmud Mirluhi, a deputy-interior minister in the reformist Khatami government, told ILNA on December 25 that the vote meant a rejection of "monopoly" in power, "radicalism and extremism" in policies, and an approval of "moderation and sincerity." Conservative legislator Javad Arianmanesh said that day that people had mostly voted for conservatives but no single faction had "the first and last say" with voters, ISNA reported on December 25. (Vahid Sepehri)

PRESIDENTIAL ADVISER DENIES GOVERNMENT LOST ELECTIONS. Ali Akbar Javanfekr, President Ahmadinejad's press affairs adviser, told ISNA on December 20 that the government had not lost in the elections as the media claimed, but merely "done its duty" in implementing them and had supported no parties. Claims of a government defeat in municipal polls, he said, were "hostile and baseless," and the government "did not support or oppose any party, group or coalition." He specifically rejected any link with the Sweet Scent of Service -- reputedly the list of Ahmadinejad supporters, which included his sister Parvin Ahmadinejad. He said members of the conservative lists had generally voiced support for Ahmadinejad's government. (Vahid Sepehri)

BAKERS PROTEST BREAD-PRICE FREEZE. Bakers protested outside a Trade Ministry department in Tehran on December 17 after the government seemingly overturned a reported decision to allow an increase in bread prices (see "RFE/RL Newslines," December 11, 2006). Many bakers are apparently making a loss with current prices that are fixed by the government, "Aftab-i Yazd" reported on December 18, citing Iranian agencies. According to the daily, the head of the bakers' guild told IRNA on December 9 that Deputy Trade Minister Mohammad Sadeq Mofatteh, after meeting with officials and guild representatives on December 2, had decided to allow a 14 percent rise in bread prices, though reported figures have differed. A protesting baker told Fars on December 17 that the ministry was to have allowed a 15 percent increase. Another baker told Fars that certain bakeries shut down for raising prices and violating a price freeze have been "disgraced" by their portrayal on television. A baker from northern Tehran said "our living [expenses] have increased several times, whereas bakers' incomes are the same as" in 2002-2003. (Vahid Sepehri)

CHRISTIANS ARRESTED IN CITIES. Iranian state security agents arrested 14 Christians in three cities on December 10, apparently to prevent them from celebrating Christmas and New Year, RFE/RL's Radio Farda reported on December 17, citing the group Human Rights Activists in Iran. The group issued a December 16 statement to report the arrests in Tehran, Karaj -- west of Tehran -- and Rasht on the northern Caspian coast, though two of the arrested have been released, the broadcaster stated. Group member Sadeq Naqashkar told Radio Farda that those arrested are allegedly Christian converts. Islam forbids conversion from Islam, as it is considered heresy or a conscious rejection of truth; it is potentially a capital offense. Naqashkar said the Intelligence Ministry apparently carried out the arrests and relatives of some of the arrested gathered outside the judiciary offices in Rasht to protest the arrests, though they faced "an insulting and aggressive response from the Intelligence Ministry," Radio Farda reported. (Vahid Sepehri)

STUDENTS FEAR BACKLASH OVER PROTESTS. Students from Tehran's prestigious Amir Kabir University are concerned officials or state agents will take retaliatory action against students who protested and heckled when President Ahmadinejad spoke at the university earlier, RFE/RL's Radio Farda and "The Guardian" reported on December 16 and 18 (see "RFE/RL Newslines," December 12, 2006). Yashar Qajar, a member of the university Islamic Student Association, told Radio Farda on December 16: "I think harsh measures may be taken," not just by university disciplinary bodies but also through the courts. "The Guardian" stated on December 18 that some protesting students have gone into hiding in fear for their lives. These include one student who brandished a placard calling Ahmadinejad a fascist, and three others who burned his picture. They fear they are being sought out by unspecified agents or militants from the Ansar-i Hizbullah, a group known for its violent disruption of liberal and reformist gatherings. The daily upped its estimate of demonstrating students during the presidential speech from 50 or 60 to "hundreds," apparently citing witnesses. The president, it added, citing an unnamed witness, was visibly distressed by the display of hostility. (Vahid Sepehri)

MINISTER'S SPOKESMAN KILLED IN CRASH, ANOTHER MIGHT BE DISMISSED.

Minister of Justice and Judiciary spokesman Jamal Karimi-Rad died in a car crash outside Tehran on December 28, Iranian agencies reported. His car reportedly crashed into a truck as he traveled to the central city of Isfahan, ILNA reported. Family members traveling with him were injured.

Earlier there had been rumors in parliament that the government might dismiss Transport Minister Mohammad Rahmati, ILNA reported on December 18, quoting legislator Mohammad Khosh-Chehreh. Vali Azarvash, another legislator and member of the parliamentary Construction Committee also said he had heard rumors about Rahmati's removal, and also of Oil Minister Kazem Vaziri, "Aftab-i Yazd" reported on December 19. Rahmati became transport minister in the last reformist government, and remained under President Ahmadinejad. Tabriz representative Akbar Alami said on December 18 that lawmakers would soon question the minister on delays in the construction of an important motorway in north-west Iran, "Aftab-i Yazd" reported on December 19.

Another official changing positions was Hamid Reza Asefi, the former Foreign Ministry spokesman who has resigned his other post as deputy-foreign minister for consular and parliamentary affairs, Aftab news agency reported on December 27. Asefi told legislators and parliamentary reporters at a farewell meeting that day that reporters were not unlike prophets, as they pursue an educational and "sanitizing" task in society. According to UN figures, he told them, countries with a free press have "90 per cent" less crime, aftab reported. He said he is to be Iran's new ambassador to the United Arab Emirates. (Vahid Sepehri)

IRANIAN CHIEF JUSTICE BLOCKS FORMER DEPUTY'S ARREST. Ayatollah Mahmud Hashemi-Shahrudi ordered the Tehran chief justice not to arrest former legislator Mohammad Dadfar, who was to go to court on December 19 to begin serving a jail sentence given him five years ago, Radio Farda reported on December 19. This was apparently due to the long gap between the sentence and the arrest, and Dadfar's lawyer, Saleh Nikbakht, told ISNA on December 18 that this was a reason to rescind the sentence. Dadfar was initially sentenced to seven months in prison and given a fine when -- as a parliamentarian and member of the last parliament's Article 90 Committee - - he wrote a press article criticizing the judiciary for alleged laxity in dealing with a 1999 attack by police and right-wing vigilantes on the Tehran University campus, Radio Farda reported. The Article 90 Committee deals with public complaints against state agencies. Many protested the sentence, arguing that Dadfar enjoyed parliamentary immunity and therefore had the right to talk freely, Radio Farda stated. Dadfar represented Bushehr in the parliament.

A Tehran court also quashed unspecified charges against another member of the last parliament, former Ahvaz deputy Qasem Shadidzadeh, after hearing his defense, ILNA reported on December 27. The charges had been brought by Guardian Council officials in the south-western Khuzestan province, and the local Basij, a state-affiliated militia. (Vahid Sepehri)

IRANIAN PRESIDENT DENOUNCES 'OPPRESSIVE POWERS'... Mahmud Ahmadinejad toured the Western Kermanshah province on December 19 to 21, denouncing Iran's supposed enemies abroad and asserting its rights, agencies reported. He told a gathering in the town of Kermanshah, the provincial capital, on December 19 that "oppressive" and agnostic powers would thwart and violate Iran's rights if permitted, ISNA reported. "Without standing up to oppressive powers the country cannot be built," he said, praising the "culture" of "selflessness" and martyrdom in Iran. If "our enemies have presently taken positions behind the Security Council, then [the council] will certainly not have legitimacy" for Iranians, he said. Iranians, he added, discern their enemies, even when those hide in bodies like the IAEA or "behind the mask of human rights and defense of democracy." He said the world did not react when "artificial" Israel insinuated it has nuclear weapons, because Israel is "their trained servant." He asked, "Are you not worried by your own arsenals, full of destructive weapons, when you say you are worried by Iran's peaceful activities?" Iran, he said, is but a "small step" from reaching the "pinnacle" of its nuclear path, ISNA reported.

He said in a speech in Hersin, in the same province, on December 20 that Iran will celebrate its nuclear achievements in the 10 days leading up to February 11 -- the next anniversary of the 1979 revolution, ISNA reported. Ahmadinejad said separately in Sahneh that states he termed "bullies" have "put on masks and are chanting about human rights, when they have created the most suffocating conditions." He said the "most dictatorial governments" are beholden to states that keep speaking of human rights. Later in Javanrud, he said "forceful powers and America, Great Britain, and the Zionist regime are destructible because they have moved away from God's teachings," ISNA reported on December 20.

On December 21, he told a gathering in Islamabad-i Gharb (West Islamabad) that Iranians are united against Western ploys to divide them, ISNA reported that day. He said "enemies" have failed to create "groups and bands" in Iran. Great Britain and the United States, he said, have worked against Iran since 1979. "They threaten us with sanctions," he said, and now "with a propaganda war, psychological pressure, and...their illegitimate influence in...illegitimate organizations, they wish to block Iran's movement." He added: "I do not know what is going on in the minds" of Iran's "enemies...they imagine only [some Iranians] want to have nuclear energy, when...all [Iranians] want this country to access peaceful nuclear energy." He rejected the threat of diplomatic isolation for Iran. "I declare here that it is [U.S. President George W.] Bush and his friend [British Prime Minister Tony] Blair who are isolated on the world stage," he said. (Vahid Sepehri)

...AND THEIR PURPORTED AGENTS. Ahmadinejad, like some other Iranian conservatives, has intermittently suggested that some in Iran -- by possible inference liberals or government critics -- are wittingly or not acting in the interests of foreign powers. He told the cabinet on December 25 that the authors of UN Resolution 1737 [see above] "have pinned their hopes on a limited group inside Iran" and are trying "with noise and publicity" to sow "fear and discord among the people," "Aftab-i Yazd" reported the next day. He and his government's spokesman have accused unspecified people of "obstructing" the government's work, "Aftab-i Yazd" reported on December 27, citing activists. Reformist Davud Soleimani told Aftab news agency on December 26 that the government must not throw "all sorts of insults" at people every time there are elections, referring to the December 15 polls. He said the government must realize "party politics" and "correct and systematic" competition is "the legal right" of all Iranians. Mohammad Sadeq Javadi-Hesar, a member of the reformist National Trust Party also urged the government not to make vague accusations of financial corruption against unspecified politicians it did not like, when it has failed to honor its electoral pledge to reveal those involved in financial malpractice, ILNA reported on December 26. (Vahid Sepehri)

SUPREME LEADER DENOUNCES 'VIRUS' OF DISCORD. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei echoed the president's denunciations, accusing Western spies of trying to divide Shia and Sunni Muslims, in a December 31 statement addressed to pilgrims going to Mecca, "Aftab-i Yazd" reported on January 1. He said the Middle East shows a picture of Western policy failures, growing devotion to "Islamic values" among youngsters and "hatred of America and the West." Khamenei said America, "Western capitalism" and "corrupt" Zionists are using "political tricks" to counter the "Islamic consciousness," and "one of the most efficient" tricks is "to light the fire of discord." And he denounced those he said play along with this, encouraging Muslim divisions with bigotry or ignorance, or even "those who speak of the imagined danger of a Shia crescent, to welcome America and the Zionists," referring to the apparent fears of some Middle East statesmen of emerging Shia power in the region. He accused Western spies of sowing "the virus of religious discord" in Iraq, Lebanon and "anywhere else they can." (Vahid Sepehri)

GENERAL SAYS POWERS FEAR IRAN'S GROWING STRENGTH. Revolutionary Guards commander Yahya Rahim Safavi said in Tehran on December 28 that Iran intends to "access new scientific technologies" to become the Middle East's principal "pole in the economic, political, and security spheres," and the West fears that, IRNA reported. The "enemies of Iran," he said, are doing everything to prevent Iran becoming a "superior" regional power. Iran has respected its nuclear nonproliferation commitments, he said, but the West has made Tehran's nuclear dossier a pretext "to prevent Iran's progress," and "Iran's growth and progress is essentially the problem for the superpowers," IRNA reported. But he said "the enemies" could not inflict much harm on Iranians, who "are the founders of a universal civilization." Safavi was speaking to a gathering at the Baqiatullah Medical Science University, which may be affiliated with the armed forces. He cited some of the programs the university should work on in coming years, including the formation of research centers to "meet the needs of the" IRGC, a "military research center on the basis of" the IRGC's "strategic programs," and coordinating efforts to develop antidotes or protective medicines relating to biological

warfare. (Vahid Sepehri)

UN ASSEMBLY VOTES ON RIGHTS ABUSES IN IRAN. The UN General Assembly voted to denounce allegedly widespread rights abuses in Iran, RFE/RL's Radio Farda reported on December 20. In an assembly with 192 members, the resolution received 72 votes for, 50 against, and 55 abstentions. The resolution expressed grave concern over the abuse of the rights of groups in Iran including political and religious dissidents, journalists, students and academics, Radio Farda reported. It added that Iranian diplomats at the UN failed to prevent the resolution's approval, though Iran was backed in its efforts by Pakistan and Zimbabwe. The resolution criticized Iranian judicial practices, and the use of torture and public executions. It asked Iran to respect its citizens' right to assembly and free expression, and end the use of torture and harassment against opponents or rights activists, Radio Farda reported. VS

IRAN MAY REDUCE DOLLAR USE. Iranian officials recently announced Iran's decision to diversify its foreign-currency reserves and currency for transactions, and reduce reliance on U.S. dollars in the face of U.S. hostility to Iran's regime, Radio Farda reported on December 16, citing news agencies. Government spokesman Gholam-Hussein Elham said in Tehran on December 18 that Iran will calculate the value of its transactions in euros and rials, the basic local currency unit. "From now on...our foreign assets and oil revenues will be calculated and received on the basis of the euro," ISNA reported. "Our hard-currency resources abroad will be turned to euros, and the Economy Council has made a decision on this," he said. Legislator Morteza Tamaddon suggested in Tehran on December 19 that Iran should sell its crude in a "rising" currency like the euro, adding that the government considered changing its reserve currency "when the price of the dollar began to fall against other currencies," "Aftab-i Yazd" reported on December 20. He said foreign threats against Iran are "not without an effect" on the decision. Iran, he added, would do better to diversify with a basket of various hard currencies. VS

IRAN EXECUTES CONVICTED BOMBERS, MURDERERS. Iran hanged three men on December 19 who were convicted of carrying out bombings in 2005 in Ahvaz, the capital of the southwestern Khuzestan Province, ILNA reported on December 20, without saying where the executions took place (see "RFE/RL Iran Report," June 20, 2005). The four were convicted of bombings that targeted the Ahvaz district governor's office and a local bank, the agency added. Separately, six convicted murderers were hanged on December 20, apparently inside a Tehran prison, "Iran" newspaper reported on December 21. The murders had occurred during disputes or robberies, "Iran" reported. One of the hanged was an Afghan convicted of killing an elderly couple he robbed. Two others had killed five taxi drivers on the open road in apparent acts of banditry in 1996-97.

Separately, the Revolutionary Court in Mahshahr in the Khuzestan province sentenced three unnamed individuals to death after convicting them of acting against national security and fighting God and religion [moharebeh], ILNA reported on January 1. The three have appealed against the sentence to Iran's supreme court, ILNA reported.

(Vahid Sepehri)

ACTIVISTS, LEGISLATOR DENOUNCE UNIVERSITY REPRESSION. A group of 542 activists issued a statement on December 26 denouncing "suppression and pressure in the university" by the government and the Science, Research and Technology Ministry, Iran's higher-education ministry, RFE/RL's Radio Farda reported the same day (see "RFE/RL Iran Report," October 9, 2006). It included a litany of problems students and academics have reportedly faced since the 2005 election of conservative President Mahmud Ahmadinejad. These, the statement alleged, include deteriorating university management, students prevented from pursuing their studies, dismissals of academics and closing of student journals and disciplinary committees being extra strict with students. University academic boards, it added, have been forbidden to appoint senior university authorities who have increasingly been nominated by the higher-education ministry. The statement said recent student heckling at a presidential speech was a response to increasing restrictions, Radio Farda reported. It highlighted the case of "starred" students: students who have passed examinations for postgraduate courses but been refused admission, apparently for their antigovernment views or past activism. The signatories stated that Article 30 of Iran's Constitution gives people the right to pursue an education.

Shahriar Moshiri, a member of parliament's education and research committee, told ILNA on December 23 that Science and Research Minister Mohammad Mehdi Zahedi has not only unjustly prevented certain "starred" students from pursuing their studies, but resorted to false accusations to justify the move. The minister has reportedly said that certain students prevented from registering in universities at the start of this academic year had criminal records, including convictions for indecent conduct or sexual assault, the daily "Aftab-i Yazd" reported on December 24. Moshiri said he checked with the Intelligence Ministry -- after students complained to him -- and found no such convictions. "Mr. Zahedi may have created imaginary students...and leveled these accusations" by forming "nonexistent dossiers," he said. The matter could be openly debated in parliament if the minister did not reverse the ban, he warned. Authorities have differentiated between postgraduate candidates with one, two, or three stars placed by their names -- these apparently measuring the gravity of their alleged offenses. Morteza Nurbakhsh, a Science Ministry official dealing with university admissions, told ISNA on December 23 that "three-star" students had been disqualified by the Intelligence Ministry, unlike those with one or two stars, whose cases had been cleared up. (Vahid Sepehri)

JUDICIARY CHIEF WANTS JUSTICE TO BACK BUSINESS. Ayatollah Mahmud Hashemi-Shahrudi told senior judicial officials in Tehran on December 28 that the judiciary should give priority to supporting economic policies, and that "reorganizing the economy" is the best response to the "plots of world arrogance" and threatened UN sanctions, ISNA reported. He urged a reduction of obstructive regulations, "economic security" for businesses and government downsizing through the implementation of Article 44 of the constitution, which envisages large-scale privatization (see "RFE/RL Iran Report," August 10 and October 17, 2006). The country needs "large-scale

domestic and foreign investment" from the private sector, he said. "Unfortunately the way the market is now, anyone who wishes to engage in economic activity must have connections with particular people, and this is the source of corruption, bribery, and cronyism," he said. The successful economy, he said, is not one that turns natural resources "into cash and uses them," but one "that earns its income from work and production by its human resources," ISNA reported. (Vahid Sepehri)