

Canyon News

SANTA MONICA NEWS

Santa Monica Man Pleads Guilty To Assisting Terrorist Organization

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SANTA MONICA—A total of seven people plead guilty in court on Tuesday, April 28, as they appeared in court to face federal charges for providing material assistance to a foreign terrorist organization Mujahedin-e Khalq, known as the MEK. The group had been designated a terrorist organization by the United States Secretary of State back in October 1997. Since then, the organization has been renewed on several occasions and remains intact today. Providing material support to a foreign terrorist organization carries a statutory maximum penalty of at least 20 years in a federal prison.

According to the Web site globalsecurity.org, the MEK is one of the biggest and most militant groups opposed to the Islamic Republic of Iran. The organization is run by Massoud Rajavi and his wife, Maryam Rajavi. The group originated in the 1960s by "college-educated Iranian leftists opposed to Iranian leftists opposed to the country's Western ruler, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi." The group is believed to have several thousand members, with more than half of them being fighters.

Thom Mrozek, Public Affairs Officer, for the U.S. Attorney's Office Central District of California spoke to Canyon News via e-mail about the case. He indicated that all suspects pleaded last week. "Charges they did not plead guilty to will be dismissed pursuant to the agreement," he added.

Among those arrested last week included, Roya Rahmani, of Virginia, 48; Alireza Mohammadmoradi, of Los Angeles, 38; Moustafa Ahmady, of Los Angeles, 54; Hossein Kalani Afshari, of Mission Viejo, 52; Hassan Rezaie, of Los Angeles, 54; Mohammad Omivadar, of Corona, 54; and 58-year-old Navid Taj, of Santa Monica.

Navid Taj also known as Najaf Eshkoftegi and Najafgholi Taji Eshkoftegi provided financial assistance to the MEK and allowed his name to be used to lease locations used by the organization.

Canyon News spoke to Nasser Sharif, president of the California Society for Democracy in Iran via email about the case. "It is rather ironic and regrettable that the US government is prosecuting the very people who have bravely supported the humanitarian activities of a resistance movement which is trying to replace the current Iranian regime, which the State Department has described recently as April 2009 as the world's most active state sponsor of terrorism. A regime which has to date executed more than 100,000 political opponents, has rejected international calls to abandon its nuclear weapons programs and whose terrorist tentacles are causing havoc and carnage in Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon. According to top US commander Iraq, Iranian made road-side bombs have claimed most of the casualties among US and coalition forces in Iraq," said Sharif.

He added, "Some of the seven spent several years in prisons of the Iranian regime and endured enormous torture and mistreatment. Prosecuting these individuals violates the First Amendment, which recognizes the right to help a political organization. If the U.S. wants to prosecute Iranian Americans for helping the MEK, it should round up tens of thousands of Iranians in the US and imprison them. It is only the Iranian regime which benefits from the prosecution of its opponents in foreign countries."

In a press release obtained by Canyon News from Thom Mrozek, the defendants appeared in court in front of U.S. District Judge David O. Carter and admitted that they "raised funds to support activities for the MEK by collecting money for MEK supporters and soliciting money from unwitting donors at public locations, such as Los Angeles International Airport. The unwitting donors were told that they were supporting a charity called the Committee for Human Rights (CHR), which was sometimes referred to as the Committee for Human Rights in Iran. However, CHR was a simply a 'front organization' for MEK fund-raising operations in United States and CHR was being used by the MEK as a front to raise money to support MEK operations and activities, including its terrorist activities."

Originally, the defendants were indicted by a federal grand jury back in March 2001. The case was dismissed by a District Court in LA, and the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals reversed the ruling made by the lower court in 2006, but the U.S. Supreme Court declined to review the case. In February 2007, the case made its return to LA and was assigned to Judge Carter in Santa Ana.

"These defendants raised money at locations like LAX on behalf of the MEK, which is a terrorist organization," said United States Attorney Thomas P. O'Brien. "We cannot allow any terrorist organization to fundraise on our shores or to steal money from our own citizens so that they can finance their own terrorism operations. Terrorism anywhere poses a significant security risk to United States."

In a court document obtained by Canyon News from Thom Mrozek, the "Mujahedin-e Khalq has used a number of aliases, including: the National Liberation Army of Iran (the "NLA"); the People's Mujahedin of Iran (the "PMOI"); the National Council of Resistance (the "NCR"); the National Council of Resistance of Iran (the "NCRI"); and the Muslim Iranian Student's Society." The MEK also produced television programs like "Face of Freedom" and "Face of Resistance." These programs were used to solicit members to join the MEK.

When Canyon News asked Mr. Sharif how important the MEK is to helping the country Iran become a democratic state he responded, "The MEK has been waging a resistance for democracy and secular rule in Iran for the past 30 years. It has provided enormous support to Iranians who have fled the repression of the mullahs. The MEK also played a key role in uncovering Tehran's 20-year clandestine nuclear weapons program and provided critical information regarding Tehran's terrorist networks across the Middle East, including Iraq. A majority in the United States Congress have on a number of occasions, even after the MEK was designated, demanded the MEK be taken off the list and described it as a legitimate resistance movement to the tyrannical regime ruling Iran."

Canyon News asked Sharif how people have been supporting the defendants. He indicated that many of the defendants are "respectable citizens, each having lived in the US for many years." He added, "The Iranian community is giving moral support to the defendants. Because we believe they are innocent. They are law abiding people. It is regrettable indeed that these people are being prosecuted in the U.S., the very country to which they came, hoping to be free of the repression of the Iranian regime."

Judge Carter is expected to sentence the defendants on August 10. Participants in the case included the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force, and include the participation of agents of the FBI, IRS-Criminal Investigation and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.