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Washington Post: Iran Charges Against US Journalist 'Ludicrous'

by Mike Richman



The executive editor of *The Washington Post* says espionage and other charges against a correspondent of the paper imprisoned in Iran are "ludicrous" and "preposterous."

In an exclusive interview Wednesday with VOA's Persian service, the *Post's* Martin Baron said correspondent Jason Rezaian is an "innocent and good man who deserves to have his freedom as any other human being."

Rezaian had been working for the *Post* in Iran since 2012 before he was arrested nine months ago with his wife, Yeganeh "Yegi" Salehi, and two other people. Salehi, also a journalist, has since been released, but Rezaian, a dual U.S.-Iranian citizen, has remained in jail for nine months.

"He's just a reporter, and he never had any access to classified information," Baron told VOA Persian service Director Setareh Derakhshesh. "All of his communications were through regular email channels, which we all know the Iranian government is likely to monitor regularly. They're likely to monitor his movements regularly, and

yet, he was functioning in Iran for a long period of time as a reporter.

"He never took any efforts as far as anybody knows to circumvent the Iranians in any way, to do anything, and he never had any access to classified information. So these are ludicrous charges, preposterous, and his imprisonment in Iran is a gross injustice."

No warning

Baron said the *Post* had no advance word that Rezaian would be arrested in July 2014 and to this day does not know why he was detained. He said Rezaian focused on covering the life and culture of Iran, noting that Iranian authorities have not accused him of producing stories that were slanted.

"They said he was engaged in propaganda but haven't said it was his stories that were involved in propaganda," Baron said. "I'm not quite sure what they meant when they say he engaged in propaganda.

"In fact, the president of Iran, [Hassan] Rouhani, and his foreign minister, [Mohammad Javad] Zarif, have said in the past that he's a good reporter, and they said that not too long ago — shortly after he was arrested and many months later as well. So they think he was a good reporter, a fair reporter, and we felt he was a good reporter also."

Rezaian's lawyer, Leilah Ahsan, recently told the *Post* that the journalist faces charges of "conducting propaganda against the establishment" and "collaborating with hostile governments." Ahsan said his client is also accused of gathering "information about internal and foreign policy" and disseminating it to those with "malicious intent."

At one point Wednesday, VOA's Derakhshesh asked Baron whether it was more than a coincidence that Rezaian was arrested a few weeks after meeting in Iran with celebrity travel journalist Anthony Bourdain. Rezaian later wrote with admiration about Bourdain and his film crew as they shot the CNN travel show "Parts Unknown."

According to Baron, Rezaian was never assigned to work with Bourdain, who has appealed publicly for Rezaian's release.

"But [Rezaian] was a correspondent in Iran and obviously he extends courtesies to all sorts of people, as any human being would do," Baron said. "Just being a decent human being, you try to extend courtesies to people to help them out, and obviously Jason had spent a considerable amount of time in the country, understood its culture, its people. And it's only natural that Bourdain, in trying to translate that culture to a wider audience, would turn to someone like Jason."

Iran's image tainted

The detainment of Rezaian, Baron added, does not help Iran's image in the United States and probably in the rest of the world.

"By the way, the press throughout the world is paying attention to this case," Baron said. "Many news organizations have written about it or broadcast programs about it. Many radio programs, television programs, as well, and that amount of attention is increasing and should increase, because this is, as I said before, an injustice. But we just have no idea why he's been arrested, no idea why this is happening, and it's a complete mystery to us."

The health of Rezaian, 39, who has been held at the notorious Evin Prison in Tehran, is believed to be deteriorating. Baron said the *Post* has asked for his release on humanitarian grounds and "on grounds that he never did anything wrong." The Obama administration has also called for his release.

<http://www.voanews.com/content/washington-post-executive-denounces-journalist-imprisonment-iran/2742626.html>