

IRAN TODAY

Bulletin of the Committee for the Defence of Iranian People's Rights



Vol. 25, No.2

Summer 2013

£1 , €1.5, \$2

For human and democratic rights



Photo : Ali Adhvarshin

www.7tir.com

For trade union rights



EDITORIAL:**The illusion of fairness and the delusion of greatness**

Traditionally anniversaries are important in Iran. People remember and commemorate them and think about their significance for today.

This year there are three important anniversaries. It is 60 years since the British/US engineered coup against Iran's democratically elected government. It is 30 years since the current regime embarked on the mass arrest of opponents of its disastrous policy of war against Iraq. 10,000 democrats and secular political activists were rounded up in spring 1983, including the entire leadership of the Tudeh Party of Iran, which had led the anti-war movement and was a leading force in the overthrow of the Shah in 1979.

Five years later, in 1988, having been forced to accept a ceasefire and with the country facing ruin, the regime executed without trial 5,000 political prisoners. Weeks later the regime released the belongings of the victims to families with a warning to refrain from holding any public commemoration of their loved ones.

The people of Iran do not easily forget these things and neither should the international community.

Forward to June 14th 2013, the Iranian regime organises a state controlled election for a new President of the Islamic Republic. Step forward Hassan Rouhani, the secretary of the Supreme Council of National Security. A subsequent announcement to the world by the Iranian leadership declared Mr Rouhani the winner of the "election" with an unbelievable 51% of the vote!

Several key points are worth noting in assessing the election outcome.

From the start the election was officially



engineered to ensure only candidates with proven loyalty to the theocracy could stand. While the theocratic dictatorship remains politically strong, it is representative of many competing factions, all with bureaucratic and/or economic interests in the existing order of society.

All candidates had to pay homage to the regime's supreme religious leader Ayatollah Khamenei, none could be women and those displaying any independence of the regime were not allowed to stand. Following the previous eight years of the presidency of Ahmadinejad, the Iranian economy is in meltdown. Millions of workers are unemployed; mis-management and economic sanctions have put the economy and society in a state of ruin.

With the economy essentially and historically based on the export of crude oil, it is highly dependent on the dollar exchange rate. The cost of imported goods essential to the quality of life for most Iranians has left the majority of the population impoverished and desperate for change.

Content

Message to the Iranian President	P.5
Canadian Solidarity	P.6
Interview with Drewrey Dyke, Amnesty International's expert on Iran	P.10
What future for Iranian Women under Iran's new President	P.14
<i>Children of the Jacaranda Tree: by Sahar Delijani—Book Review</i>	P.15

Editorial Continued.../

Thousands of political prisoners remain in detention. Executions and arrests of journalists, human rights campaigners and women activists continue on a daily basis.

Since June the West's media and some western politicians, aware of the fragility of the socio-economic situation in Iran, have sought to portray the new president as some kind of religious independent, even as a man they could "do business with". Even as a "fresh start". This is a fallacy.

During the massacre of the democratic opposition representatives 25 years ago, Mr Rouhani was in his post as head of national security. Since then, he has connived to cover up this atrocity. Names have never been officially released, nor have bodies. They remain Iran's disappeared.

Far from being independent, Rouhani is a central figure in the current Iranian establishment. If he is different to Ahmadinejad, it is only in style. The content of his policy remains the same. He only represents a different faction within the regime's ruling elite. He is the "chosen one" to help the regime out of its economic and social crisis and keep it in power.

The majority of Iranians who did vote for Rouhani did not do so because they considered him a fair and independent force. After eight years of severe economic, political and cultural oppression they are desperate for change. Ahmadinejad had to go.

US/Israeli threats to Iran remain strong and are not based on a strategy to achieve independence and democratic change in Iran. The US and its allies are only concerned, as they have been for the last 60 years since their 1953 coup, with securing ensure big business and military/industrial access to Iranian resources and, if possible creating a client, toothless regime to watch over their interests.

Doing business with Rouhani will only encourage the regime to intensify its theocratic dictatorial grip on Iranian society. It will not secure the release of a single political prisoner. It will not see Mr Rouhani come clean on the "disappeared". It will not see democratic change in Iran.

There are many Iranians who remain defiant. Workers heroically still go on strike. Women



and students still organise protests. The regime has failed to neutralise progressive political opposition and it is scared by the international social media.

It is the democratic forces we should do business with- workers, women, students- not the dictators, even when they wear sheep's clothing or are known on a personal basis by some in the western political circles. Internationally, democratic forces need to engage with the struggle in Iran for human rights and for genuine democratic change.

By doing anything less, we are deluding ourselves about the nature of the dictatorship and leaving the theocracy to continue its oppression and spread its influence. Iran's political Islam is under pressure, not from the pernicious US inspired economic sanctions, which are used by the elite to justify their policies, but from the genuine forces of peace, democracy and independence and it is these we should support.

The acid test in "dealing" with and considering Iran must be how many political prisoners are released? Have the executions stopped? Are basic human and economic rights respected?

Mr Rouhani shows no sign of answering these questions positively. He and his allies must be challenged on these issues. This is the starting point in building effective solidarity with the Iranian people.

Rouhani - reformist veneer but what lies beneath?

Before the ink had dried on the documents confirming Hassan Rouhani as the new president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, representatives of trade union and human rights organisations had been active in putting pressure upon the new president.

A number of organisations called on the new president to demonstrate that his approach will break with the past, by freeing all trade union leaders imprisoned in Iran and legalising the work of independent trade unions in the country. The call took the form of a joint appeal, entitled: "Call for the opening of a new chapter in the treatment of trade unions in Iran".

The call to action, initiated by CODIR, brought together major UK trade unions including the TUC, UNITE, UNISON and the RMT, as well as the Pancyprian Labour Federation, Amnesty International and the International Centre for Trades Union Rights (ICTUR).

Rouhani's confirmation ceremony took place on Sunday, 4th August and the Iranian regime was looking to use the opportunity to raise its profile in the international arena. For the first time in the life of the Islamic Republic, Iran had invited leaders and dignitaries from across the world to attend its presidential inauguration ceremony as international guests. Activists hoped that this welcome would be matched by an improvement in Iran's respect for its international obligations.

Noel Harris, General Secretary of CODIR, highlighted the significance of the joint appeal. He welcomed the range of organisations which signed up to the appeal and the widespread desire to keep the pressure on the Iranian government for its human rights violations.

"By signing this appeal, trade unionists are sending out internationally a clear signal to the Iranian government. That message is that action to tackle human rights abuses and the persecution of trade union activists is more vital than words and posturing," said

Mr. Harris.

"The media have tried to emphasise the positives in Rouhani's election by highlighting his carefully-worded

statements, designed deliberately to hint at reformist intentions. Well, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Until trade unionists and labour activists in Iran can operate in accordance with accepted International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions, we cannot accept that the regime has made any significant change."

Jane Green, National Campaign Organiser for CODIR added,

"Fear of arrest, intimidation and imprisonment is the everyday reality for trade unionists in Iran at present. All signatories to this appeal are united in their condemnation of the Islamic Republic's track record on the suppression of trade union activity and human rights in general. The appeal calls on the President to end the repression of trade unions by immediately and unconditionally releasing those imprisoned for their trade union work; dropping charges against others currently facing trial for similar reasons; and ending other repressive measures which marginalise trade unions and their members."

The success of the appeal, in uniting trade union and human rights organisations, is a firm basis upon which CODIR will continue to build its campaigns to highlight the plight of the Iranian people. The new president may come into post with a reformist veneer but CODIR will continue to scratch the surface to reveal what lies beneath.



**Alex Gordon, Honorary
President of CODIR writes:**

**MESSAGE TO IRANIAN
PRESIDENT, HASSAN
ROUHANI – RELEASE REZA
SHAHABI FROM PRISON**



The inauguration of Hassan Rouhani as Iran's new president is an opportunity for supporters of Iran's workers' movement to renew the demand for release from prison of trade unionists and campaigners for democratic rights for Iranian workers. Rouhani and his coterie of advisers are no supporters of democratic or workers' rights. They are regime loyalists and economic neo-liberals who believe wages and conditions should be determined without 'interference' from trade unions. Rouhani was a religious student under Ayatollah Khomeini in Qom in 1961 and later a close friend of Hashemi Rafsanjani. During the bloody Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) he was a member of the Supreme Defence Council and commander of the Iran Air Defense Force (1986-1991). Rouhani has been recast for his new Presidential role as a reformer, providing a moderate facade for the politically isolated, economically bankrupt, Iranian ruling class to break Iran's isolation and use neoliberal policies to revive the economy.

In face of continued neoliberal attacks on the Iranian working class and poor, workers' unity and self-organization remains the key to achieve ratification by the regime of International Labour Organisation Conventions 87 (on Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize), which guarantees workers right to establish and to join organisations of their own choosing and 98 (on the Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining), which protects workers against anti-union discrimination.

6 months ago CODIR reported the welcome release from Tehran's Evin prison, of Reza Shahabi, Treasurer and Executive Board member of the Syndicate of Workers of the Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company.

Tehran's municipal Bus company employs around 17,000 workers and Executive Board members of the Busworkers' union (Vehad Syndicate) have in the past been persecuted, dismissed and many jailed since the formation of their union in 2005. Reza was snatched off the streets of Tehran in June 2010 while driving his bus and incarcerated until his temporary release for 'medical leave' on 7 January 2013 after over three weeks of hunger strike in Evin prison that mobilised national and international attention and solidarity. He had been sentenced to 6 years imprisonment with a 5-year

ban on trade union activities as well as a 7 million Toman fine.

Reza's health deteriorated significantly in Evin prison as a result of severe beatings and mistreatment following his arrest. He underwent a cervical spine operation on 24 July 2012.

After 13 weeks on release from prison, on 15 April 2013 Reza returned to Evin Prison on the orders of Intelligence Security Forces. Reza had been receiving a number of medical treatments, most of them still ongoing, which had to stop despite doctors' recommendations. Reza was accompanied on his return to prison by his family, a number of bus drivers, members of the union and other labour activists. The Reza Shahabi Defence Committee has since reported that Reza's back pain has increased since his return to Evin prison affecting his left leg as well. He was taken to the prison clinic but due to lack of medical supplies and mistreatment by the prison doctor he asked to return to prison, where only with the help of his roommates was he able to achieve some movement. His lower back and left leg pain is only tolerable with injected morphine and other strong pain killers. Prison authorities, using the special circumstances surrounding election as an excuse, refused Reza's transfer for MRI and necessary medical treatment outside prison. Reza's doctors had previously noted that he could not tolerate prison conditions and needed to be released. The Reza Shahabi Defence Committee is calling on Iranian government authorities to free Reza immediately. They are calling for increased international pressure on Iran's authorities to expedite Shahabi's freedom.

The international labour movement, including in Britain, must now renew the demand on Iran's new President to release Reza Shahabi from prison permanently to receive essential medical treatment and for freedom for all political prisoners in Iran.

Alex Gordon
Monday 5 August, 2013

Canadian Solidarity for the People of Iran



*Just over 6 years ago, the Canadian chapter of Committee for the Defence of the Iranian People's Rights (CODIR-Canada) launched its campaign to support and expand the solidarity campaign of Britain-based CODIR to Canada and North America. On this occasion, Iran Today spoke with Domenic Bellissimo, a veteran progressive Canadian trade unionist who has served **on the executive** of CODIR-Canada since its launch. Domenic is the head of the communications/Political Action Department at the Ontario Secondary School*

Teachers' Federation and a leading left trade unionist and organizer in Canada and has followed the developments in Iran closely over the past 3 decades. In a brief interview with Iran Today, Domenic responded to a few questions about the activities of CODIR-Canada

Iran Today: Tell us about the inception of CODIR-Canada and how its campaign was launched.

Domenic Bellissimo: CODIR-Canada officially launched its campaign in Ontario, Canada, in April 2007 after a few sessions of consultations with progressive individuals in Canada at this end, and consultations with CODIR's officials in London, UK. The idea has been to expand, in North America and particularly in Canada, the campaign of CODIR to expose the violations of the human and democratic rights of the people of Iran by the theocratic non-democratic governing regime in Iran, and to offer and advocate solidarity with the people of Iran in their struggle for their universal and legitimate rights. A couple of years after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took the presidential office in Iran, with the deepening crises in Iran, domestically and internationally, and escalation of tensions and risk of war over the nuclear programme of Iran, CODIR's activity in support of the rights of the Iranian people made a lot of sense. This was another way the progressives in Canada could contribute to the struggle of the Iranian people and in favour of peace.

Iran Today: What were the goals and the mandate of CODIR-Canada.

Domenic Bellissimo: First and foremost, CODIR-Canada campaigns to abolish the brutal violation of Human Rights in Iran as stated in its Mission Statement. Exposing and removing the constraints to democracy in Iran is a major goal of CODIR-Canada. As such, CODIR-Canada campaigns to raise the Canadian public awareness of peace, human rights and democracy issues in Iran. Another

pillar of our activities is to advocate for peace and struggles to eliminate the risk of war and tensions in and around Iran in particular, and in the Middle East region on a broader scale. CODIR-Canada welcomes cooperation with other organizations that are partially or completely devoted to its goals, and seeks the solidarity of peace-loving, progressive, and democratic individuals and organizations such as trade unions, government representatives, and peace and human rights coalitions and activists.

Iran Today: And in what ways do you advance your campaigns?

Domenic Bellissimo: As I mentioned previously, we make every effort to gain the support and cooperation of other progressive and peace activists and organizations. We try to have the voice of the Iranian people heard through various means and channels, such as press releases, electronic news letters, presentations to various meetings and conferences, radio and TV interviews, demonstrations, and running domestic and local campaigns singly or jointly with other democratic and human rights organizations.

Iran Today: Could you please name a few specific activities for our readers?

Domenic Bellissimo: Sure. As early as 29th April 2007 CODIR-Canada started writing to the Canadian MPs about the threat of War against Iran: "Recent news coming from the Middle East especially in regards to Iran and the military threat by the US against this country raises deep concerns... It is with this fact in mind that we are writing to you to urge you, as our representatives in the parliament, to seek

peaceful methods at your disposal to prevent a disastrous war in that region.” In June 2007, CODIR-Canada sent out an open letter on the occasion of 12th June, the day of **solidarity with the women of Iran**, about the dire situation of women in Iran, and **against “temporary marriage” in Iran** and the introduction of a misogynistic and outdated law to legalize “temporary marriage”. In September 2007, CODIR-Canada co-organized an emotional event In Memory Of the Victims of Mass Executions in Iran in summer of 1988.

Other main activities of CODIR-Canada in recent years include: 19th July 2009, CODIR-Canada was invited and participated in the People’s Voice **Forum about the fraudulent presidential elections of June 2009 in Iran** and the uprising which followed. After June 2009, **CODIR-Canada actively participated in all demonstrations and rallies** against the brutal suppression of the democracy movement in Iran. In May 2010, CODIR-Canada participated and **spoke in the International Conference for a Nuclear Free, Peaceful, Just and Sustainable World** in New York City and gave a talk in two workshops: Nuclear-Free Zone in the Middle East workshop and For a Nuclear Free, Peaceful, Just and Sustainable World. On 26th November 2011, CODIR-Canada participated as a **guest in the convention of Canadian Peace Conference** and **gave a talk about the threat of war against Iran** and answered the questions presented by the convention participants. After several radio interviews in January 2012, following the Press Release of CODIR “calling for an immediate end to all provocative and dangerous actions/statements pushing the Persian Gulf region towards a new war”. In March 2012, CODIR-Canada facilitated a televised interview with Jane Green by Vancouver’s After Hours on ICTV about CODIR and its campaigns. On 4th February, 2012, the Toronto Association for Peace and Solidarity (**TAPS**) and **CODIR-Canada organized and held a rally in Toronto against the threat of foreign military intervention in Iran.**

One of our largest recent campaigns was in March 2012. We **campaign globally to prevent the execution of Iranian teacher Abdolreza Ghanbari**, and for the immediate release of all detained teachers in Iran. In Canada, we got endorsements from OSSTF and the Canadian Teachers Federation. This



campaign led in 2013 to the annulment of the execution of Mr. Ghanbari. Earlier this year, CODIR-Canada gave interviews to Vancouver’s Media Mornings show about the June 2013 presidential elections and its outcome. On 12th June 2013, CODIR-Canada organized and co-hosted with OSSTF an **information session in Toronto** with the representatives of a few unions and human rights activists in which officials of CODIR from the UK presented CODIR’s goals and campaigns and encouraged the participants to support CODIR’s campaigns and affiliate with CODIR.

Iran Today: What do you have planned for the future?

Domenic Bellissimo: As Noel Harris once said in his interview with Iran Today, we are hoping that the movement for progressive and democratic change in Iran will succeed in achieving its goals and our campaigns become redundant! Iran has now a new president who claims to be a moderate and wants to ease the tensions over the nuclear programme, improve the economic livelihood of the people, and secure freedom of expression and social activities. Knowing the power structure of Iran under a very dark-minded Supreme Leadership system, it remains to be seen how successful the new president will be in delivering what he has promised. We will certainly monitor the situation and will do everything we can to publicize the demands of the Iranian people for a decent life.

Massacre of Iranian opposition in 1988 - International recognition long overdue

This summer marks the 25th anniversary of the massacre of opposition activists by the Iranian government, following the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988. Jane Green for Iran Today looks back over the period and highlights current action which may break the deadlock over this issue.

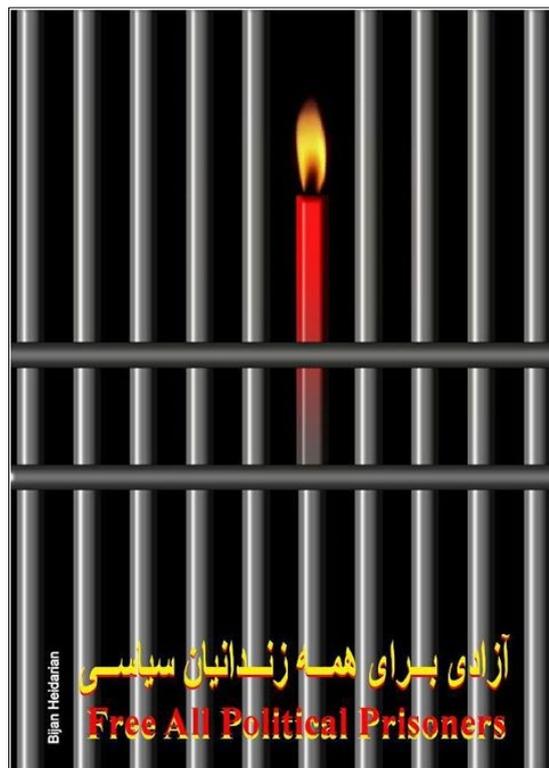
Once the news of the killings in 1988 was out of Iran CODIR was to the forefront in organising protest against the massacres, lobbying the UK government and demanding that pressure be put upon the government of Iran. CODIR has consistently pressed for the massacre of almost 5,000 Iranian political prisoners to be recognised as a crime against humanity under international law.

Numbered among the dead were leaders, members and supporters of the Iranian People's Mojahedin Organisation, the Tudeh Party of Iran, the People's Fedaian (Majority) and the Organisation of Raheh-Kargar. Many of those executed were serving prison sentences which had expired many years earlier.

Others appear to have had little more than summary trials, followed by summary execution and burial in unknown destinations with unmarked graves. Any clear, consistent or internationally recognised judicial process appears to have been bypassed entirely, hence the demands for recognition of the executions as crimes against humanity and the Iranian government to be brought to justice.

In co-ordinating a lobby of the UK Parliament, in May 1989, CODIR pointed out that the information regarding the massacres had been confirmed in reports published by Amnesty International in December 1988 and February 1989. In its Spring 1989 issue of Iran Today the editorial quoted then president, Hashemi Rafsanjani, who said on 3rd December 1988,

"These are human beings whose only



remedy is repression. We must crack down on them."

Rafsanjani may have made efforts to re-invent himself as a moderate in recent years but his endorsement of the massacre of opposition leaders is clear.

Between January and May 1989 Amnesty international reported over 900 executions in Iran for alleged criminal offences but the deaths appear to have been a continuation of the purge of the opposition initiated in July 1988.

Through the pages of Iran Today the reports of the Special Representative of the United Nations on human rights in Iran, Professor Reynaldo Galindo Pohl, who visited Iran twice in 1990, were given wide publicity. Prof. Pohl is unambiguous in his conclusion that,

"...human rights violations occur frequently in the country and... government action...has not been sufficient to put an end to them."

Massacre of Continued.../

Tragically, 25 years since the massacre of the opposition and 23 years since the reports of Prof. Pohl the situation for those opposed to the government has shown little, if any, improvement. Arrest, intimidation, torture and execution are still all too common and a constant threat to the lives of those who speak out against the regime.

It is fitting therefore that in the year of the 25th anniversary of the executions CODIR has been able to welcome the Canadian government's recognition of the massacre of almost 5,000 Iranian political prisoners as being a crime against humanity.

The Canadian parliament acknowledged the massacre as a crime under international law at the beginning of June 2013. The Canadian government is the first to accord this status and CODIR has called upon the UK and other EU governments to follow suit and add to the pressure upon the Iranian government.

Jamshid Ahmadi, Assistant General Secretary of CODIR, stated that the Iranian regime must get the message that this condemnation will only be the first of many from the international community.

"It is simply not acceptable for this crime to have been ignored by the Iranian government for so long and for the international community not to have demanded action. We welcome the stand taken by the Canadian parliament and look forward to other government's following the same path", he stated.

The Canadian position follows on from the findings of the Iran Tribunal, set up in 2007 by families of those executed by the regime and former political prisoners, to investigate crimes committed by the Iranian government. The tribunal published its final judgement on the 5th February 2013 after taking evidence from almost 100 witnesses.

The verdict of the Tribunal indicates that:

- The Islamic Republic of Iran has committed crimes against humanity in the 1980-1989 periods against its own citizens in violation of applicable international laws;
- The Islamic Republic of Iran bears absolute responsibility for the gross

violations of human rights against its citizens under the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights; and,

- Customary International law holds the Islamic Republic of Iran fully accountable for its systematic and widespread commission of crimes against humanity in Iran in the 1980-1989 period.

CODIR has welcomed the position of the Canadian government as one which supports the demands of the Iranian people, rather than seeks to interfere in the internal affairs of Iran.

"Given the unjustified campaign of international sanctions against Iran, which are not supported by the people of Iran, it is good to see practical support for a demand which is in the Iranian people's interests," said Mr Ahmadi.

With the election of a new president, Hassan Rouhani, and talk of a new relationship with the West, the Iranian government's response to the pressure to acknowledge the massacres could be a litmus test of its attitude towards human rights in the Islamic Republic.

As it stands there has been no full list of the names of all victims of the atrocities published. There has been no clear explanation of the judicial processes which resulted in death sentences and who ordered the executions. There is no clear picture of where and when many of the victims were buried.

For 25 years the families of the victims of this crime have been seeking justice, pressing their case with governments and international bodies, in the first instance to have the massacres recognised as crimes against humanity.

CODIR will continue to maintain its pressure upon the UK government and international bodies, especially the United Nations, to build upon the position taken by the parliament in Canada. The momentum to press home this breakthrough must be sustained until a proper investigation into the 1988 massacres is ordered and the families of victims have justice.

Amnesty International:

End human and democratic rights abuses in Iran now!

Drewrey Dyke, Amnesty International's expert on Iran, talks to Iran Today about the human rights situation in Iran and the why it is vital that the campaign for an end to the abuse of all basic rights in the country should be brought to an end.



Iran Today: What is your evaluation of the current human rights situation in Iran?

D. Dyke: While very poor for three decades, the human rights situation entered into a downward spiral in the run up to, and after the disputed, June 2009 presidential elections. The last four year term of office of the now former president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was marked by ever more executions; over 600 in 2012 alone; routine reports of ill treatment and torture in pre-trial detention and a denial of full access to legal representation from the time of arrest. These instances often preceded unfair trials, often based on politically-motivated criminal charges which were invariably, vaguely-worded accusations for alleged actions that, on many occasions, do not have any basis in international criminal law. Scores of prisoners of conscience were arrested and convicted; at least tens if not scores languishing in prison today, though it is impossible to know with any certainty, the exact numbers.

Discriminatory practices against Iran's religious and ethnic minorities over the past eight years have been as prevalent as has ever been recorded by the organisation and many of today's prisoners, like Mohammad Kaboudvand, a Kurdish journalist and head of the Human Rights Organisation of Kurdistan, a proscribed organisation in Iran, are human rights and/or minority rights advocates. NGOs like the Committee of Human Rights Reporters have been forcibly closed and its members repressed, while lawyers, like Nasrin Sotoudeh, a prisoner of conscience, was

unfairly jailed for 11 years, merely for doing her job.

The trades union movement has been marginalised in law in recent decades. In the last eight years, unofficial but tolerated workers' bodies, such as bus drivers in Tehran, sugar factory workers in Iran's southwest; and teachers' bodies have been broken up and their members detained.

Student activists have been amongst the first to face repression in the last four years. They were amongst the most engaged sectors of society during the 2009 election. Zia Nabavi was arrested in June 2009 and remains in jail to this day, unfairly convicted to a ten year prison term on politically-motivated charges. He was a member of the Council to Defend the Right to Education, a body set up in 2009 by students barred from further study because of their political activities or on account of their being Baha'is.

That said, in recent years Iranians, have faced unrest in some of the country's peripheral regions, where armed groups opposed to the government or armed drug traffickers have engaged border guards or other security officials while the ever-present threat of an armed intervention over Iran's nuclear programme is a source of concern.

While the evidence is limited and mixed, there appears to be grounds for concern that the international sanctions regime may be impacting on the Iranian peoples' ability to enjoy their human rights too. We cannot examine this, though, since we have not been allowed into Iran for research since 1979.

There is a United Nations 'special rapporteur' on the human rights situation in Iran and we believe, with good reason. Whether and how the new, Rouhani government engages with him, with organisations like Amnesty International and other international human rights

End human and democratic Continued.../

bodies will be an important litmus test for the future direction of human rights in Iran. More immediately, however, is the question of how the new government will deal with Iran's student body and academics. All of the student bodies forcibly closed in recent years should be allowed to re-open; all the students suspended or expelled for reasons of their opinions or beliefs should be allowed to return to their universities in the coming academic year. Banned student publications should be allowed to re-start, where the closure related to matters of expression or identity. And academics sacked for who they are or what they think should be allowed to return to their posts.

Iran Today: Do you have reliable information about the past and present treatment of political prisoners in Iran?

D. Dyke: Sadly, the treatment meted out to political prisoners has been appalling; the documentation about it is copious. Thousands faced torture and executions in the years just after the 1979 revolution; opposition was largely muted during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, but in 1988-9, many thousands of already or newly detained prisoners who had already faced grossly unfair trials were then made to face three-person 'death commissions' that could have prisoners executed if they answered questions relating to their political opinion 'incorrectly'.

The killings came to be known as the 'prison massacres', no one has ever been held to account for the mass and generalised nature of the systematic killing of many thousands of prisoners.

In the 1990s to today, activists have faced brutal torture. Student demonstrator Ahmad Batebi was repeatedly beaten and had his held down a toilet as a form of torture following his arrest during largely peaceful student demonstrations in 1999.

In 2009, political activists, including members of former president Mohammad Khatami's government faced ill treatment and forced, televised 'confessions'. All the while, more and more evidence, both old and new, has been emerging.

The new government has simply got to put an end to this cycle. The conduct of the security forces has got to put respect for human dignity and human rights at the core of its operating policies, like all such bodies

everywhere.

Iran Today: What action has Amnesty International taken in respect of human and democratic rights abuses in Iran during the presidency of Ahmadinejad and what, if any, have been the outcomes? Is Amnesty International currently campaigning in defence of workers' rights and those of trade unionists targeted by the regime?

D. Dyke: Amnesty International reports and documents human rights violations; and its membership engages in campaigns against them.

Between 2005-2008 Amnesty International issued three in-depth reports on the treatment of Iran's Ahwazi Arab, Baluchi and Kurdish minorities, respectively. Others planned for the following year were discontinued on account of the impact of the presidential election in 2009.

That same year - 2009, then 2010 and 2011, we issued in-depth reports on violations arising from the 2009 election, while in 2012, we issued an in-depth report on the expanding use of the death penalty, including for drug trafficking. Smaller reports on stoning and trade union rights were also issued.

We have called upon the movement's members to take up tens of cases, both for long term campaigning, such as those imprisoned after the 2009 presidential election, but also for urgent appeals, to try and save the lives of those facing the death penalty or torture.

In recent years, it has been difficult to discern positive outcomes, but they are evidenced in how some cases are handled by the authorities, in temporary releases, short term reprieves but more often the highly defensive way in which officials talk about human rights in Iran.

Amnesty International believes that workers rights are human rights. Members have repeatedly campaigned on behalf of trades union activists who have been detained or imprisoned, including members of the bus drivers' union in Tehran, known as Sherkat-e Vahed; or sugar refinery workers at the Haft Tappeh facility. In recent months we have campaigned for bus driver Reza Shahabi and assisted former bus driving union board member, Mansour Ossanlu, who has now left Iran with his wife. We will assist him as he makes a new life outside of Iran.

End human and democratic Cont.../

Iran Today: There are many reports of the use of psychological torture against political detainees in Iran. What has been the international reaction to these reports? Can the Iranian regime use forced confessions as the basis for sentencing those accused?

D. Dyke: The international community has shown its revulsion over the many accounts of torture and ill treatment in Iran. United Nations human rights bodies have repeatedly called for this to stop; as have organisations like Amnesty International and countless numbers of Iranians themselves.

Forced 'confessions' have no standing in law. They show only the bankruptcy of a system intent on imprisoning dissidents or those seen as opponents. Despite good levels of education and professionalism amongst many in Iran's judicial community, the continued use of such measures is a further insult to the dignity of all Iranians.

One way to help limit the use of such practices would be to allow those arrested full access to a lawyer of their choice from the time of arrest. A global practice, it is not allowed under current Iranian law.

That said, it could end tomorrow, if there was a clear and unambiguous directive from the Head of the Judiciary or The Supreme Leader, Ali Khamene'i, ordering its halt.

Iran Today: On 4th August 2013, President Hassan Rouhani, Iran's new president, formally started his term of office. What does Amnesty International consider to be the main challenges confronting him and what are the key and immediate steps that his government should take to improve its human rights record?

D. Dyke: The appointment of the new president is an opportunity for the leadership of the country, as a whole, to re-evaluate its policies and practices. President Hasan Rouhani obtained a strong majority for his campaign, in which he made a number of pledges to improve Iran's dire human rights record. The heads



of Iran's judiciary, legislature and security bodies must taken heed of this mandate for change.

Both before and after the election, President Rouhani has been critical of gender segregation in educational facilities; emphasized the importance of freedom of expression, including by criticising internet restrictions, and the need to allow government criticism to make way for true progress.

He has talked about drafting a 'civil rights charter', which calls for equality for all citizens without discrimination based on race, religion or sex. It also calls for greater freedom for political parties and minorities, as well as ensuring the right to fair trial, freedom of assembly and legal protection for all.

Proposed draft bills on women; about establishing the country's first Ministry of Women, and ensuring gender equality, including in relation to job opportunities would be welcome – if he is able to deliver on such promises.

Next month, when university campuses open, the government will face perhaps its first human rights challenge: campuses should again become centres of debate and discussion and learning, in an atmosphere in which individuals' opinions should not be tolerated but celebrated. In other words, the government must protect the right to education and academic freedom.

In the 'agenda for change' that Amnesty International recently issued the organisation set out a range of areas where progress is needed. They include eliminating discrimination on any grounds; reforming the justice system; eradicating torture and ill treatment; ending impunity, tasking measures to end the death penalty; ensuring the full realization of economic social and cultural rights and cooperate with UN mechanisms.

If the government seriously tackles these issues, one by one, it would represent a sea-change in government conduct.

End human and democratic Continued.../

Iran Today: The treatment of women by the Islamic Republic of Iran has been a major concern of those following developments in Iran. Considering what we know of Hassan Rouhani's plans, are you optimistic that there will be a significant and measurable improvement?

D. Dyke: The powers of the president are limited. But his own conduct and that of his government; and others that he has the power to appoint, such as university administrators, will be in a position to change the context in which women exercise their rights in society.

Whether the president can bring about the legal changes in the status of women that would represent significant and measurable improvements remains to be seen. That he has made this a priority for the government is encouraging, but we must all remain realistic about what he can achieve.

Iran Today: What can western governments do to support the recognition in Iran of genuine rights and freedoms, including the freedom to form trade unions, freedom of expression and the right to be treated equally irrespective of gender, political opinions and religious or other beliefs?

The international community should welcome the stated direction of the government but also insist that only concrete action can bring about concrete change, such as a change in the level of international scrutiny or opprobrium. We look to the global south, along with European and other nations, to encourage Iran to bring about the changes that the Iranian people have waited decades to see, so that Iran resumes its rightful place in the global community of nations.

Iran Today: The number of executions, including the execution of minors, is very high in Iran. How best can public opinion internationally put pressure on the regime in Tehran to stop these executions and ban the death penalty?

D. Dyke: Global public opinion resonates in Iran. It always has done, even if in recent years, the effects have been difficult to discern.

We would urge activists across the world to join with Amnesty International and other human rights bodies, including many Iranian bodies, in expressing their concern not just about the about the death penalty in and of itself, but also how it is used, the procedural

guarantees of those on trial.

We believe that human rights permeate every facet of life. Consequently, we look to artists and writers; salaried office workers and government officials; factory workers and labourers to look to their own consciences; to ask how they can better respect human rights in their everyday work, with the people they come across.

It is about respect and recognition, not least the recognition of the inherent dignity of the person before you and of life itself. We think that if we can convey this change of outlook to the Iranian people, then change will happen. Why? Since people who put human rights first are people who will have no truck with tyranny.

Iran Today: What does Amnesty International consider as a minimum programme on human rights improvement to be achieved by Rouhani if his claim to moderation and fairness is to be taken seriously?

The minimum that the government can do is live up to what it said it will do. Iran is a state party to a range of international human rights treaties that envision much of what I have talked about here. On the one hand, it is not rocket science; on the other, by merely adhering to them now would represent a near-existential threat for many of the powerful in Iran; those with vested interests.

We are looking to the government to persuade and cajole such entrenched interest groups that there is, in reality, no other way, and that by adhering to international human rights standards, they are strengthening the country, not weakening it.

Iran Today: What are the main ways in which CODIR and Amnesty International might in future work together to secure and improve the rights of the people of Iran?

D. Dyke: There are a variety of areas and ways in which CODIR and Amnesty International can cooperate. Above all, let us champion the human rights of the Iranian people, by speaking out against violations in the country. In this, every voice counts. Let us come together where and when it makes sense, to actively campaign on specific causes and cases, where we can have an impact, or where our voices can make a difference.

What future for women under Iran's new president?

Before the presidential election in June candidate Rouhani declared his support for equal opportunities and promised to create a Women's Affairs Ministry. Two months on his promises are looking rather hollow.

With no women allowed to stand in the election, many of them felt abandoned and now, with no mention of the creation of a women's affairs ministry in the recent ministerial appointments, their fears have been reinforced.

There is no doubt that women voted massively for Rouhani in the hope that restrictions would be relaxed. The Ahmadinejad government had recently clamped down on them once more: cropped trousers, open-toed sandals and loud colours were forbidden. In their usual summer charade the police are out to arrest women showing the least whisp of hair. Women were banned from studying many subjects, including oil engineering and nuclear physics, (High unemployment in these fields was the excuse used to justify the decision). Yet about 52 percent of university graduates and 68 percent of science graduates were women, according to UNESCO data for 2009 the most recent year available. However, In 2011, women accounted for only 27 percent of the workforce. According to Noushin, a 32-year-old graphic designer interviewed by Bloomberg.com, "Rouhani understands the importance of freedom for people, that the government needs people's backing, And women are half the population." With this in mind a group of women activists met on 10 July to draw up a list of demands w they want Rouhanin to fulfill.

To improve womens condition Rouhani should take a number of steps, including ending the country's "security atmosphere," removing restrictions on women's public life, and eliminating censorship on women's issues. Among those who spoke was Narges Mohammadi, deputy head of the Centre for the Defence of Human Rights, which was co-founded by Nobel Peace Prizewinner Shirin Ebadi. Narges Mohammadi has been sentenced to six years in prison on charges that include acting against national security but is currently free because of her poor health She said the prevailing security atmosphere is the main obstacle preventing activists from seriously pursuing their causes. The women called for the removal of all the "obstacles" created under Ahmadinejad. According to sociologist Shahla Ezazzi these obstacles included



measures aimed at limiting women's public and social lives.

"Apparently, [the authorities] had come to the conclusion that if men don't want to control their women and force them to stay at home, the government should act as father and grandfather and control women,"

Ezazzi said that this way of thinking has led to restrictions on women's access to higher education, prohibitions on their studying certain subjects at university.

Lawyers Farideh Gheyrat and Giti Pourfazel, suggested that Rouhani should move towards removing the laws that discriminate against women.

Other participants demanded the removal of censorship on women's bodies.

"The women's [body], or form, is being eliminated in society. said actor Marzieh Vafamehr, (herself detained in 2011 after appearing in an Australian film which criticised the Islamic republic). Women should be allowed to make movies or write books about their own issues. "Today, feminism has become a taboo in society," she said. Journalist Farideh Ghaeb called on Rouhani to eliminate censorship by removing filters on websites. Maryam Nourayinejad, said the least Rouhani could do was to select cabinet ministers who support gender equality. It was even rumoured that one politician being considered for the post of culture minister supported polygamy.

Following this meeting came the surprise announcement of the appointment of Elham Aminzadeh, a professor of law at Tehran University, as Minister for Legal Affairs. Astutely, Rouhani had sensed the women's mood and bowed to public. Unfortunately Aminzadeh's views on human rights and women's equality are rather reactionary. She is a well known right wing sympathiser, wedded to the regime's principles. She is unlikely then to help improve the lives of Iranian women

We can but hope that Rouhani will be more astute in appointing other women to senior posts and will see the benefit of policies which favour the advancement of women and will lead to a more egalitarian society.

Linda Sherwood

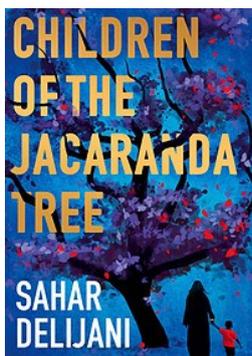
Children of the Jacaranda Tree by Sahar Delijani

Liz Payne, a member of the National Executive Council of CODIR, reviews the Internationally acclaimed book that reveals the tragedies of life under the rule of theocratic regime.

Amir is reduced to 'a dirty shapeless blob on the wet cement floor' of Tehran's Evin prison. 'What have they done to you?' is his wife's unspoken question as they bring her in to look at him. Her question is not only about her Amir. It is the central question of this whole damning work. What has the theocratic regime done to the people of Iran? At the outset, Evin prison is a dreaded place outside on Tehran's outer edge. By the end, the spreading suburbs have swallowed it. All its terror, the worst a dictatorship can do, like canker in the city's heart, within its confines, an ever present part of what it is. Some things that human beings do to other human beings are unspeakable in their horror. Words cannot adequately convey them. But Sahar Delijani has broken the silence of suffering to set down in this haunting novel what the Iranian theocratic regime has done - coldly, knowingly and systematically - to those whose only crime was to strive for a more just, democratic and peaceful society.

Delijani's novel is a powerful and penetrating treatment of deliberately imposed suffering, in which the oppression of a whole society is told through the lives and experiences of individual victims. These victims were not only political prisoners, young men and women, innocent of any crime, but also their children, born in prison cells or left at home in fear and silence, as revolutionary guards dragged their parents away before their eyes to imprisonment, torture and execution. These are the children of the jacaranda, the beautiful flowering tree that grew in Tehran's gardens, remembered by the detainees as the symbol of freedom, of the world outside their prison walls and of hope for a very different future.

The novel opens in the spring of 1983 with the mass arrest of the regime's political opponents. The regime is setting out to crush for ever the energy and hope of the February 1979 revolution. The narrative moves through the 1988 massacres of thousands of political prisoners, the National Catastrophe, and on via the 2009 mass protests against the 'stolen election' into the present. At its



close, the 'children of the jacaranda tree', now adults, are making their way in the world, trying to come to terms with their parents' suffering, their own past and their responsibility for the future.

The author, basing her writing on the testimony of her family members and those close to her, takes us with her into scene after sad and shocking scene. Her narrative brings us so close that as we turn the pages, we believe that we too are witnesses, and must speak up, indeed have a duty to speak up, about what we have seen.

Azar, is giving birth on the floor of a van. She is being driven not to the maternity ward but to interrogation in the final stages of her labour. Her waters break. She does not know how long the man waited for her to answer his last question. Her answer never came. From her prison cell, her baby girl is snatched out of her arms. The milk her child will never drink runs down her body.

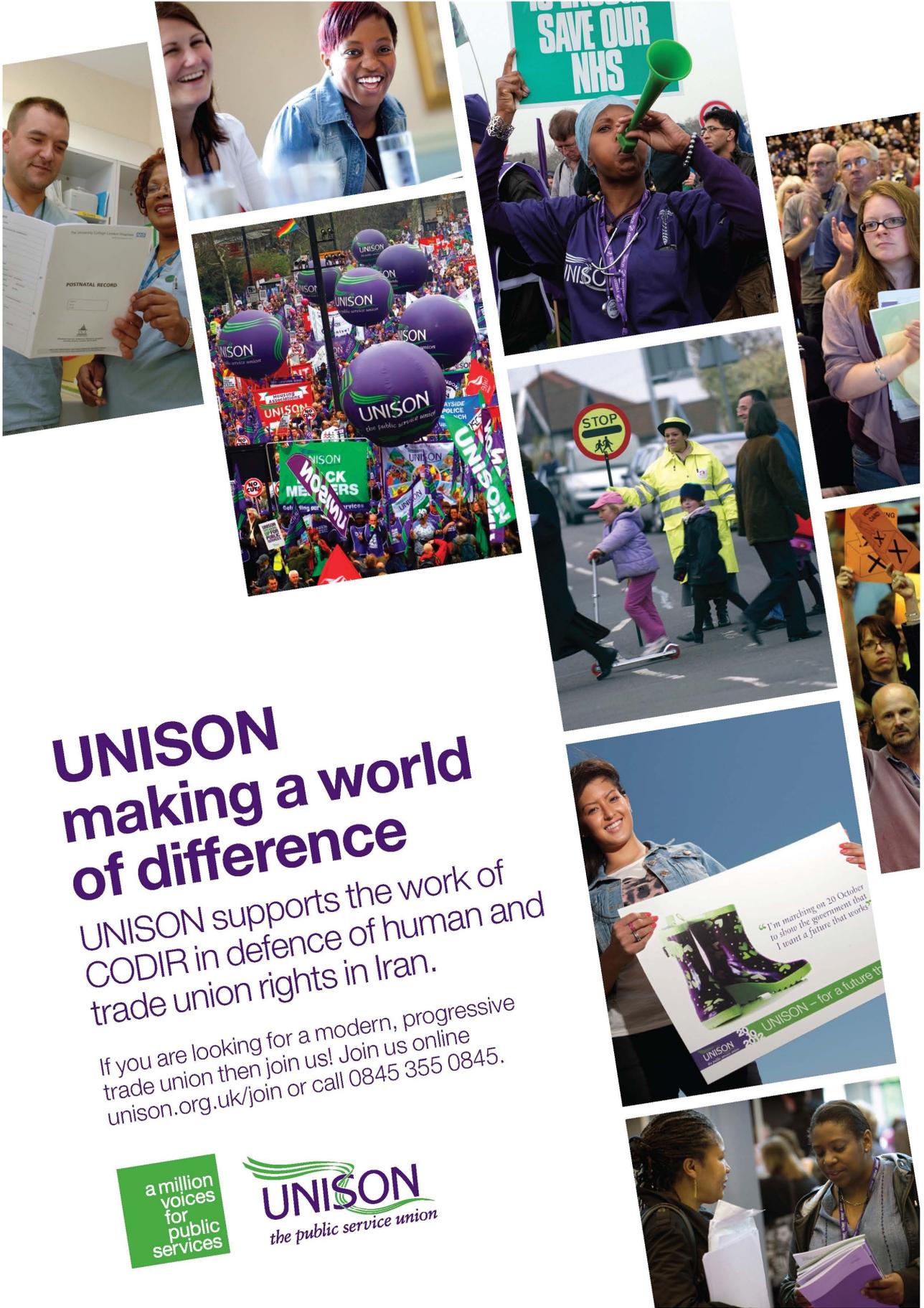
Leila finds the little boy, Omid her nephew, in his empty ransacked home. His parents have been arrested as he, traumatised, looked on. He is still sitting at the dinner table, his meal in front of him, shaking and sucking his fingers.

This is a challenging and courageous text and it is timely, appearing as it does on the 25th anniversary of the prison massacres. It is not something we can read, put down and walk away from. It asks something of us all.

We must demand answers from the perpetrators. We must ask the regime with its new president - What have you done? On whose orders did you do it? Where are the parents, sisters, brothers, children, friends and comrades? Lead us to the disappeared. Accept responsibility for your crimes. Apologise. But most of all, tell us what you will now do to change things, so that yet another generation is not suffocated and blighted by suppression?

Khaled Hosseini, author of *The Kite Runner*, has described this work as 'a blistering indictment of tyranny, a poignant tribute to those who bear the scars of it and a celebration of the human heart's eternal yearning for freedom'. It is all of these things. The past and future meet in its pages with the knowledge that the jacaranda tree will blossom for its children. It is a novel of hope for the Iranian people.

Children of the Jacaranda Tree by Sahar Delijani is published by Weidenfeld and Nicholson (London) in hardback and is priced £12-99.



UNISON making a world of difference

UNISON supports the work of
CODIR in defence of human and
trade union rights in Iran.

If you are looking for a modern, progressive
trade union then join us! Join us online
unison.org.uk/join or call 0845 355 0845.



Affiliate to CODIR. For affiliation form write to CODIR at or visit the website, www.codir.net