

Unknown

From: Mohammad Mansouri [mmansouri@niacouncil.org]
Sent: Thursday, September 28, 2006 11:45 AM
To: tparsi@niacouncil.org
Subject: letter to Abdu...

Trita jaan,

Take a look at this, make changes if you wish, and send it back to me so that I can email it to Abdu.

ghorbanat,
Mo

Dear Abdu,

Here is a brief report of my trips to Turkey and Iran regarding to holding the workshop for Iranian NGOs in Turkey as you requested. Please keep in mind that I have avoided mentioning the names of Iranian NGOs due to the sensitivity of this issue and affiliation of this project with NED that might cause some problems for the members of such NGOs in Iran. I appreciate if you keep this report confidential and do not disclose it public viewers for the same reasons.

During my visit to Turkey I was able to meet with 5 Turkish NGOs, including the FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, Sanar Yurdatapan's NGO. In fact, Sanar was the person who coordinated my meetings with Mazlumder (Organization for Human Rights and Solidarity for Oppressed People - <http://www.mazlumder.org/ana.php?konu=ana?=en>), Tesev (Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation - <http://www.tesev.org.tr/eng/>), and Helsinki Citizenship Assembly (<http://www.hyd.org.tr/>). Sanar and I had communicated for several months before these meetings since we wanted to meet the kind of NGOs that can be the host of their counterparts from Iran. Other than the aforementioned NGOs I was able to meet with Seyda Taluk as well who is the representative of ASHOKA in Turkey.

All of the interviewed Turkish NGOs were interested in taking part in the workshop project. They shared their thoughts on this issue and agreed on collaborating even under different circumstances.

In Iran, I met with almost 14 Iranian NGOs in Tehran, Kashan, and Isfahan about the 16-day-long workshop in Turkey. The criteria of selecting these NGOs were as following:

- Being active members of civil society
- Being familiar with English language
- Having experience in being trained and training other NGOs/people as well
- Being responsible in holding educational gatherings and/or similar workshops in the future
- Being professionals and able to serve other NGOs
- Not being active in political activities and issues
- Being a member of those NGOs that mostly offer educational services to the society and are neutral about politically sensitive issues

After preliminary analysis and considering the situation explained by the NGOs some issues were pointed out. Considering the current social and political circumstances in Iran, the sensitivity of issues concerning NGOs, the 37th term of recently issued law in this regard by the interior ministry, and the last but not the least, the ignorance of governmental entities about NGOs and their functionality, Iranian NGO's inclination to attend this workshop is subject to acceptance of the interior ministry. This will bring about the following suppositions:

1. The interior ministry will not allow any NGO to attend this workshop. Moreover, they will keep the names of the facilitators as well as the potential attendants in their databases, which might cause future surveillance and/or interrogation.

2. The ministry will accept holding such workshop subject to evaluation of the sponsors and facilitators. The volume of paper-work involved will stop the project for at least 4 month and there is no guarantee that they allow Iranian NGOs to attend such workshop at the end of this period.

3. They agree with holding the workshop, but they will choose the attendants themselves. The experiences show that in these circumstances, they will send their own agents who have mostly even not relevant backgrounds.

4. They will allow Iranian NGOs to attend the workshop, but they will evaluate and document the background of all the attendants, sponsors, and facilitators, the attendants will have to prepare a report for the ministry upon their return, and everyone has to abide by the laws of Islamic Republic during the workshop.

Now, based on what has been analyzed, the following options are available for NIAC in order to hold this workshop:

1. A coordinator can be chosen among those Iranian NGOs that have done similar jobs before. This coordinator must be selected from those NGOs who have good connections with the government and have held similar workshops (international gatherings) in the past. In this way, the risk of attending these series will be minimum for the Iranian NGOs as the coordinator will take care of the details of execution including the negotiations with the government. The disadvantage will be the least control over selecting the attendants. In fact, it is very probable that none of the NGOs are from those who really need this education.

2. Reporting to the interior ministry directly and go through the 4 aforementioned suppositions.

3. Holding the workshop in Iran and inviting the Turkish NGOs to come over and talk to Iranian counterparts. This will reduce risks to some extent but the disadvantages of being under strict surveillance will remain for us as well as the legal restrictions that we have from our sponsors regarding to spending money in Iran.

4. Put an online recall for Iranian NGOs and trying to recruit them via internet and without any direct contact with them through interviews or alike. This way, each and every one of the attendants will have to buy the risk of this trip on their own (if anyone does). They will be able to register independently and go to Turkey with their own responsibilities. The problem is that many (almost everyone in this situation) will not even consider applying for such projects as they are not looking for any trouble inside. Also, there is no guarantee that we can access to the best candidates. In fact, we will not be able to even evaluate the volunteers, as they might be from any entity including governmental dependant NGOs. Moreover, those who will attend, if caught, will have to face arresting or more for a short period of time. They will be interrogated and lose the right of privacy ever since.

Moreover, I was called in, apparently by a division operating under the interior ministry and was interviewed. Basically, the interviewer admonished me from taking any action in regards to Iranian NGOs in Iran. He sounded very scary but at the same time he stated his points in a friendly manner. He said that the reason they would let go of me is that they knew NIAC had never done anything seriously bad against Islamic Republic. He said that they did not care about other educational projects that we had carried out in the past (referring to the NGO Resources Online), but would confront us if we would have involved Iranian NGOs in some international gatherings. And finally, he threatened me of not being able to leave the country.

Later on, when I was leaving the boarder (I took the train from Tehran to Istanbul), they stopped me (and the rest of passengers) for 6 hours. They were supposed to check all the passports, which they did, but did not return my passport when they did others. When I asked, they explained that nothing is wrong and that they are just checking! Fortunately this process ended up after about 6 hours and I was able to take my flight from Turkey.

If you need to know more details about any parts of this short report, please do not hesitate to ask me and I will be more than happy to elaborate more.

Respectfully,

