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2 Iranian poets, facing lashings and prison, escape country

By JON GAMBRELL

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Two Iranian poets who face lashings and prison sentences have fled Iran, one of the writers said Monday, a rare escape for local artists and activists ensnared in an ongoing crackdown on expression in the country.

Fatemeh Ekhtesari and Mehdi Mousavi's freedom came as world powers lifted sanctions on Iran over its contested nuclear program and as the country separately freed four Iranian-Americans in exchange for seven Iranians held in the U.S.

The poets' escape is a reminder that despite the growing detente with the West, hard-liners still exert control over much of life in the Islamic Republic, which is one of the world's top jailers of journalists.

"Iranian political prisoners who are imprisoned on similarly baseless charges and do not hold a foreign passport do not get the same attention," Hadi Ghaemi, the executive director of the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, said in a statement this weekend. "This is a continuing travesty of justice."

Ekhtesari, a practicing obstetrician, told The Associated Press on Monday that both she and Mousavi, a trained doctor who teaches literature and poetry, escaped from Iran in recent days and made it to another country. She declined to elaborate out of continuing concerns about their safety.

Ekhtesari faced an 11½-year prison sentence, while Mousavi faced nine years on charges ranging from propaganda against the state to "insulting sanctities." Each also was sentenced to 99 lashings for shaking hands with members of the opposite sex. They likely were targeted because their work is known abroad. Both are self-described "postmodern Ghazal" poets who seek to revive the traditional Persian love sonnet by applying it to contemporary political and social issues.



In this undated photo made available by the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, Iranian ...

Hard-liners in the police, judiciary and military view any rapprochement with the West as a threat to the Islamic Republic and a sign of moral decay. That fear saw authorities arrest a group of young Iranian men and women in May 2014 for making a video, showing them dancing to Pharrell Williams' song "Happy."

Those arrested more recently, rights groups and analysts say, serve as pawns in the hard-liners' struggle with moderates ahead of February's parliamentary elections.

Among those targeted are 19 reporters imprisoned in Iran, the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists said in a December survey, making the Islamic Republic the world's third-worst jailer of journalists behind China and Egypt. Among the four Iranian-Americans freed in

the swap this weekend was Washington Post correspondent Jason Rezaian. A fifth American held in Iran, student Matthew Trevithick, also was released.

Award-winning Iranian filmmaker Keywan Karimi faces six years in prison and up to 223 lashes over his films, which authorities also charged with "insulting sanctities." In June, a court handed cartoonist Atena Farghadani a 12-year, nine-month sentence in part for depicting Iranian parliament members as animals to criticize a draft law restricting contraception and criminalizing voluntary sterilization, according to Amnesty International.

Others held include human rights activist Narges Mohammadi, as well as politicians who challenged the results of the disputed 2009 presidential election that saw hard-liner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad re-elected. Hila Sedighi, another young poet who is also a political activist, also was arrested and later bailed out of jail earlier this month, though the charges against her remain unclear, according to the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran.

Meanwhile, Iranian-American businessman Siamak Namazi, who is believed to be detained in Iran, was not freed as part of the swap between Iran and the U.S. Nor was Washington-based Lebanese citizen Nizar Zakka, who holds permanent-resident status in the U.S. Also still missing is former FBI agent Robert Levinson, who disappeared in Iran in 2007 on an unauthorized CIA mission.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, speaking to MSNBC's "Morning Joe" on Monday, said Iran remained pulled by hard-line elements and moderates who want reform.

"It is a tension between those who want to play the Revolutionary (Guard) card ... and those who believe that Iran will be better off rejoining the world and engaging in commerce and doing better by their people," Kerry said.

He added: "Iran has an opportunity here. ... Whether it will happen or not, I can't tell you."

However, while criticizing Iran for releasing footage showing 10 U.S. Navy sailors who recently were detained overnight for straying into Iranian waters, Kerry made a point to thank Ayatollah Ali Khamenei by name for resolving the crisis quickly.