

# Iranian director protests harassment by US immigration officials

4 May 2001

*The following is an open letter to the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures and the international media from renowned Iranian film director Jafar Panahi. The letter recounts his harrowing experience at the hands of US immigration officials while attempting to travel from Hong Kong to film festivals in South America via New York City. Panahi is the director of The White Balloon (1995), The Mirror (1997) and The Circle (2000).*

*The National Board of Review bestowed its "Freedom of Expression" award on Panahi for The Circle in December 2000. The Board is a prestigious film-appreciation society (originally established in 1909 as a censorship organization) based in New York City.*

April 30, 2001

To The National Board of Review of Motion Pictures  
Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

As the winner of your Freedom of Expression Award for my film, *The Circle*, I would like to call your kind attention to what happened to me in your country, an event which takes place every day in US. I look forward to seeing your reaction to these inhuman events. Since you have seen fit to honor freedom of expression, this is something you clearly value, so I would like to call upon you to defend it. You have honored my film, and I hope that you and all your colleagues in the US media will dare to condemn the savage acts of US Immigration officials. I feel that such condemnation would uphold the values of your Freedom of Expression Award. Otherwise, what would winning such an Award mean for me? And what honor would I have in keeping it? Perhaps if I have no freedom of expression, I should return this Award to you so you may find another figure who would be more appropriate.

In the booklet you kindly sent me together with your Award, I read that the prestigious film personality,

Orson Welles, has already received this Award. Should I be happy that this great man is not among us now to hear how the American police behave toward filmmakers and other people who enter your country? As a filmmaker obsessed with social issues, my films deal with social problems and limits, and naturally I cannot be indifferent to racist, violent, insulting and inhuman acts in any place in the world. However, I certainly do separate the acts of American police and politicians from cultural institutions and figures, as well as the great people of the USA, as I was informed my film was very well received by film critics and audiences in your country. Nevertheless, I will inform the world media about my unpleasant experience in New York and I hope you members of the National Board of Review, who honor freedom of expression, will join me in denouncing these policies.

On April 15, I left the Hong Kong Film Festival for the Montevideo and Buenos Aires Festivals on United Airlines' flight 820. This 30-hour trip was via New York's JFK airport, where I was to stay for two hours and board my flight to Montevideo. Further to my requests, the staff of all the said Festivals had previously checked if a transit visa is required, and they assured me there is no need for such visa. Moreover, the airline issued me the ticket via NY. Nevertheless, I too asked the United Airlines staff in the Hong Kong Airport about the need for a transit visa, and I received the same response. But as soon as I arrived at JFK airport, the American immigration police took me to an office and asked that I be fingerprinted and photographed because of my nationality. I refused to do it, and I showed them my invitations from the Festivals. They threatened to put me in jail if I would not be fingerprinted. I asked for an interpreter and to make a phone call. They refused. Then, they chained me like the medieval prisoners and put me in a police patrol

and took me to another part of the airport. There were many people, women and men from different countries. They handed me off to new policemen. They chained my feet and locked my chain to the others, all locked to a very dirty bench. For 10 hours, no questions and answers, I was forced to sit on that bench, pressed to the others. I could not move. I was suffering from an old illness. However, nobody noticed. Again, I requested that they let me call someone in New York, but they refused. They not only ignored my request, but also that of a boy from Sri Lanka who wanted to call his mom. Everybody was moved by the crying of the boy, people from Mexico, Peru, Eastern Europe, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and ... I was thinking that every country has its own law, but I just could not understand those inhuman acts.

At last, I saw the next morning. Another policeman came to me and said that they have to take my photograph. I said, “never”. I offered to give them a picture of myself that I had with me. They said no, they have to take my photo (in the way criminals' photos are taken) and do the fingerprinting. I refused. An hour later, two other guys came to me and threatened to do the fingerprinting and photography by computer, and again I refused and asked for a phone. At last, they accepted and I could call Dr. Jamsheed Akrami, Iranian film professor at Columbia University and I told him the whole story. I asked him to convince them, since he knows me well, that I am not a guy to do what they were looking for. Two hours later, a policeman came and took one of my own photos of myself. They chained me again and took me to a plane, a plane that was going back to Hong Kong.

In the plane and from my window, I could see New York. I knew my film, *The Circle*, was released there two days before, and I was told the film was very well received too. Perhaps, audiences would understand my film better if they could know the director of the film was chained at the same time. They would accept my belief that circles of human limits exist in all parts of this world, but in different ratios. I saw the Statue of Liberty in the waters, and I unconsciously smiled. I tried to draw the curtain and there were scars of the chain on my hand. I could not stand the other travelers gazing at me and I just wanted to stand up and cry that I'm not a thief! I'm not a murderer! I'm not a drug dealer! I ... I am just an Iranian, a filmmaker. But how

could I say this? In what language? In Chinese, Japanese or in the mother tongues of those people from Mexico, Peru, Russia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, ... or in the language of that young boy from Sri Lanka? Really, in what language? I had not slept for 16 hours and I had to spend another 15 hours on the way back to Hong Kong. It was just a torture among all those watching eyes. I closed my eyes and tried to sleep. But I could not. I could just see the images of those sleepless women and men who were still chained.

—Jafar Panahi



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