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Highlights of the week:

- ✓ Iran cut off from SWIFT international clearing house on the eve of Iranian New Year
- ✓ Better close than angry: Supreme Leader retains Rafsanjani as chairman of Expediency Discernment Council
- ✓ From torture chambers to social security: political controversy over appointment of Tehran's former attorney general as Social Security Foundation chief
- ✓ World AIDS Day removed from Islamic republic's official calendar despite continuing increase in number of AIDS cases
- ✓ Debate resumes on use of goldfish on Nowrooz

Iran cut off from SWIFT international clearing house on the eve of Iranian New Year

SWIFT's decision to cut off dozens of Iranian banks and financial institutions from its systems beginning March 17 was not widely covered on Iranian media, which mostly provided brief reports on this new development.

Top Iranian officials also made few comments on the decision made by SWIFT, after in recent weeks a number of banking officials dismissed the possibility of Iran being cut off from the clearing house. This week former Intelligence Minister Ali Fallahian warned the West that Iran will respond to its disconnection from

SWIFT using all means it has available, and said that cutting off Iran from the network is tantamount to closing international waterways.

Mahmoud Ahmadi, director of the Central Bank, recently commented on the possibility of Iran being cut off from SWIFT, saying that the country had prepared in advance for such a development. Speaking at a conference on electronic banking held in Tehran in late February, Ahmadi said that Iran had already found alternative solutions that would allow it to deal with sanctions imposed by SWIFT.

A Saderat Bank official also dismissed the possibility of Iranian banks being cut off from the network, saying that this would harm Western countries first and foremost. In an interview to Fars News Agency, Bahaeddin Hosseini Hashemi said that many European and American companies conduct large-scale banking transactions with Iran using SWIFT, and that cutting off Iranian banks from the system would be highly problematic for these companies.

In contrast, Mohammad-Reza Behzadian, former chairman of the Iranian Chamber of Commerce, warned about the possible repercussions of Iran's disconnection from the international clearing house. In an interview given to the Iranian Diplomacy website, Behzadian said that, with Iranian banks cut off, even smaller banks that do not depend on the United States and were so far willing to continue cooperating with Iran will be unable to perform transactions with it. Behzadian estimated that it will be impossible for Iran to continue doing business securely using old-fashioned telecommunications systems, and that the country's disconnection from SWIFT will lead to an increase in the costs involved in conducting international banking transactions.

As the economic sanctions tighten on Iran, this week the Tabnak website called on the government to increase its assistance to the productive sector. An editorial published by the website this weekend said that the Achilles heel of Iran's economy is the persistent dependence of the agricultural and industrial sectors on raw material and capital import, and that production costs have so far increased by tens of percents.

The website warned that the local currency may continue to devalue, putting more and more pressure on the productive sector, which depends on capital import. The website argued that the only way to contend with the sanctions is by economic development, which will allow the productive sector to become less

dependent on importing machines and technological know-how from abroad. This, however, will take much time, and in the meantime the government needs to help the productive sector overcome the difficulties facing it.

Meanwhile, the Iranian rial set a new low this week, crossing the 2,000 tomans per dollar mark for the first time. ILNA News Agency reported that despite the restrictions recently imposed by the Central Bank on foreign currency trading, the instability on the market continues and many Iranians are having serious difficulties acquiring foreign currency for their trips during the Iranian New Year vacation, which started this week.

Better close than angry: Supreme Leader retains Rafsanjani as chairman of Expediency Discernment Council

A decree issued by the Supreme Leader on March 14 states that Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani will retain his position as chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council. In the past several months some have speculated that Rafsanjani will be dismissed from the council, having already been dismissed from his position as chairman of the Assembly of Experts in March 2011—a dismissal that should be viewed in the context of the decline in his status since the political crisis that broke out after the 2009 presidential elections.

The Supreme Leader's decree on the composition of the council terminates the membership of five members, including Mir-Hossein Mousavi, the reformist opposition leader who has now been under house arrest for over a year; and Mohammad Hashemi, Rafsanjani's brother. Several new members have been appointed, including Ahmad Vahidi, the current defense minister; Mohammad-Hossein Saffar Harandi, former minister of Islamic guidance in President Ahmadinejad's first government; and Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, former judiciary chief, who in July 2011 was appointed the head of a council for resolving differences of opinion between the three branches of government. The Supreme Leader thanked the outgoing council members and, contrary to his past practice, did not express his personal appreciation to Rafsanjani, the council's chairman.

An article published by intellectual and political commentator Sadegh Zibakalam in the reformist daily Sharq said that keeping Rafsanjani on the job was intended to convey a message of moderation. Zibakalam, who is considered one of Rafsanjani's close allies, wrote that the decision to let Rafsanjani retain his

position is a defeat for right-wing radical elements who in recent months have called for his dismissal on the grounds that he is no longer fit to discern the expediency of the regime and the state. Zibakalam noted that the achievements made by Rafsanjani thanks to his executive abilities during his presidential term (1989-1997) are still in evidence, and that his skills are also required in his current position of chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council. He added, however, that the council has one major flaw, which is its weakness as a supervisory body, and that it needs to make sure that its plans are actually implemented by the executive branch.

In an interview given to ILNA News Agency, Zibakalam discussed the ongoing decline in Rafsanjani's status, saying that the Foreign Ministry had received instructions to prevent foreign visitors from meeting with Rafsanjani, where possible.

However, Khodnevis, an opposition website, defined the retention of Rafsanjani as chairman of the council as a good behavior prize awarded by Khamenei for Rafsanjani's silence over the house arrest of the two reformist opposition leaders and his participation in the Majles elections. The fact that Rafsanjani has retained his position shows that the Supreme Leader, who only has his own and his family's interests in mind, remains the sole decision maker when it comes to the question of whether to let the reformists in or keep them out.

From torture chambers to social security: political controversy over appointment of Tehran's former attorney general as Social Security Foundation chief

The appointment of Tehran's former attorney general Sa'id Mortazavi to director of the Social Security Foundation has stirred a political controversy this week due to his involvement in the Kahrizak detention facility affair. The incident broke out in July 2009, when the south Tehran detention facility was closed down on the Supreme Leader's orders in light of reports according to which at least three detainees had died in the facility as a result of torture and abuse from wardens and criminals with whom they were detained. A parliament inquiry committee appointed to investigate the events put the responsibility for the affair on Sa'id Mortazavi, who had decided to relocate approximately 150 people arrested in the riots that broke out after the presidential elections to Kahrizak, which was originally planned as a detention facility for dangerous criminals and drug addicts.

In 2003 Mortazavi was also involved in the death of Zahra Kazemi, a Canadian journalist and photographer of Iranian descent, who died in Evin Prison after being arrested by the internal security forces. Her death was apparently due to torture she underwent during questioning. The Canadian government, which investigated the incident, claimed that Mortazavi was involved as a judge in summoning Kazemi for questioning and in the questioning itself, and was even present when she died.

Mortazavi's appointment as chief of the Social Security Foundation, which provides security services to 32 million Iranians, drew strong criticism from the political system. A number of Majles members announced that, following the appointment, they launched a move intended to remove from office Abdolreza Sheikholeslami, the minister of welfare and social services. In an interview to Mehr News Agency, Majles member Parviz Sorouri said that Mortazavi is not fit for his new position, and that if he does not resign willingly, the Majles will take action to impeach the welfare minister. He noted that the Social Security Foundation is one of Iran's most sensitive and important economic institutions, and that it has no place for individuals lacking executive experience.

Approximately two weeks ago fifteen Majles members asked President Ahmadinejad to refrain from appointing Mortazavi due to his lack of qualification for the position and his involvement in the Kahrizak incident. The families of several political prisoners who died in prison after the 2009 riots also protested the intent to appoint Mortazavi for the key economic role. The president's critics claimed this week that it was his personal decision to appoint his close ally Mortazavi as head of the Social Security Foundation, and that even the welfare minister was opposed to the appointment.

World AIDS Day removed from Islamic republic's official calendar despite continuing increase in number of AIDS cases

The Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution has decided to remove the World AIDS Day, marked on December 1, from the official calendar of the Islamic republic. The daily E'temad reported this week that the reasoning offered to support the decision was that events and observances are included in the calendar only when they have special significance for the various sectors of society and when they strengthen at least one component of the Iranian national identity, or strengthen religious, cultural, social, political, economic, and scientific bonds.

Officials in Iran's healthcare system criticized the decision, saying that the council made it without consulting with the Health Ministry. A top Health Ministry official said that the ministry believes it is necessary to continue marking the World AIDS Day given the importance of the disease and the need to broaden public awareness on means of its prevention. The chairman of the Majles Health Committee noted that it would have been better if the decision had been made with the cooperation of the Health Ministry, since AIDS is on the rise in Iran and the society needs to be made more aware of the disease.

According to official data released by the Iranian Health Ministry, over 23 thousand Iranian citizens are currently diagnosed with AIDS. Various estimates suggest that the number of undiagnosed patients is five times more than that. Health Ministry officials recently warned about a third outbreak of AIDS in Iran, primarily among women and young people. The first outbreak of the disease in Iran took place in 1986, when a number of patients received infected blood transfusions imported to Iran. The second outbreak took place in 1995 and mostly affected drug addicts who used infected needles. In recent years there has been a change in AIDS contraction in Iran: unlike in the past, most newly discovered cases are due to unprotected sex.

Debate resumes on use of goldfish on Nowrooz

As in previous years, Iranian web surfers are examining the question of whether it is appropriate to use goldfish at the Iranian New Year (Nowrooz) dinner.

This week an Iranian blogger called on the public not to purchase goldfish for Nowrooz to avoid the killing of five million fish per year. The blogger stressed that the use of goldfish has nothing to do with Nowrooz traditions, being instead a Chinese custom that came to Iran in the early 20th century with the first tea imports from China. He said that fish merchants and most buyers are unaware of the meaning behind the use of goldfish at the holiday dinner, and only purchase them for their children to play with for two days.

Another blogger, however, said that there is no reason why goldfish should not be used for Nowrooz, taking issue with those who put forth various baseless arguments to combat the phenomenon. He said that the campaign against the use of goldfish is exploited by animal haters to justify their fight on keeping other pets, particularly dogs. According to the blogger, the result of the anti-goldfish campaign is that rarer animals—such as salamanders and turtles—now feature at

the holiday dinner. He suggested keeping stricter control over the goldfish production process and educating the public on how to provide the fish with better living conditions, instead of fighting the very fact of their use. Just as no one is saying that traffic should be stopped during the Nowrooz vacation to keep thousands of Iranians from dying in car accidents, there is no reason to ban the use of goldfish on Nowrooz simply because they sometimes suffer premature deaths when handled inappropriately.

Goldfish are considered one of the symbols of Nowrooz, and it is common for many Iranian families to decorate their holiday dinner table with a jar containing at least one goldfish as a symbol of a happy life. In recent years the custom has come under increasing criticism due to considerations having to do with animal rights, as well as health and economic reasons.

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Mahmoud Ahmadi, director of the Central Bank, recently commented on the possibility of Iran being cut off from SWIFT, saying that the country had prepared in advance for such a development. Speaking at a conference on electronic banking held in Tehran in late February, Ahmadi said that Iran had already found alternative solutions that would allow it to deal with sanctions imposed by SWIFT.

A Saderat Bank official also dismissed the possibility of Iranian banks being cut off from the network, saying that this would harm Western companies first and foremost. In an interview to Fars News Agency, Bahaeddin Hosseini Hashemi said that many European and American companies perform large-scale banking transactions with Iran using SWIFT, and that cutting off Iranian banks from the system would be highly problematic for these companies. He

noted that while SWIFT's decision will also pose problems to Iran, the country will be able to find alternative solutions for its international transactions (Fars, February 29).

In contrast, Mohammad-Reza Behzadian, former chairman of the Iranian Chamber of Commerce, warned about the possible repercussions of Iran's disconnection from SWIFT. In an interview given to the Iranian Diplomacy website on February 22, Behzadian said that the economic sanctions imposed on Iran have worsened the difficulties it is facing when conducting international banking transactions, but haven't made them entirely impossible since various alternative solutions have been found. With the Iranian banks cut off from SWIFT, he said, even smaller banks that do not depend on the United States and were so far willing to continue cooperating with Iran will be unable to conduct transactions with it. Behzadian estimated that it will be impossible for Iran to continue doing business securely using old-fashioned telecommunications systems, and that the country's disconnection from SWIFT will lead to an increase in the costs involved in conducting international banking transactions.

As the economic sanctions tighten on Iran, this week the Tabnak website called on the government to increase its assistance to the productive sector to render the international sanctions ineffective. An editorial published by the website this weekend said that the sanctions are targeting the soft underbelly of the Iranian economy. The Achilles heel of the Iranian economy, according to the website, is the persistent dependence of the agricultural and industrial sectors on importing raw materials, machines, and capital. Import is vitally important for Iran's productive sector, and if the sanctions achieve their major objective of hitting imports into Iran, domestic production will come under considerable threat.

Tabnak noted that, without government support for producers, production costs have gone up by tens of percents, which is already felt in the increasing prices of such products as medicines, meat, eggs, poultry, fruits, and cars. The problem is that Iran's economy is not developed enough, which is why it still depends on imports from abroad.

Speaking about the ongoing devaluation of the local currency, the website warned that the sanctions may further exacerbate this trend, putting more and more pressure on the productive sector, which depends on capital import. The only way to contend with the sanctions is by real economic development, which will lead to economic progress that in turn will allow the productive sector to become less dependent on importing machines and technological know-how from abroad. This, however, will take much time, and in the meantime the government needs to help the productive sector so that it can overcome the difficulties facing it. Protecting producers is the main task currently facing the government,

Tabnak argued. The website called on the government to adopt an educated fiscal policy to prevent damage to producers, and warned that if the government continues to allow money-changers on the free market to freely trade foreign currency, the producers will be hit even more, which is precisely the goal of the international sanctions (Tabnak, March 16).

Meanwhile, the local currency (rial) set a new low this week, crossing the 2,000 tomans per dollar mark for the first time. ILNA News Agency reported that despite the restrictions recently imposed by the Central Bank on foreign currency trading, the instability on the market continues and many Iranians are having serious difficulties acquiring foreign currency for their trips during the Iranian New Year vacation, which started this week (ILNA, March 16).

Better close than angry: Supreme Leader retains Rafsanjani as chairman of Expediency Discernment Council

A decree issued by the Supreme Leader on March 14 states that Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani will retain his position as chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council. The council, established in 1988 by Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic revolution, has 36 members appointed by the Supreme Leader. It has the final say in the occasional disputes between the Majles and the Guardian Council. It also serves as an advisory body to the Supreme Leader on various issues pertaining to state affairs. In the past several months some have speculated that Rafsanjani will be dismissed from the council, having already been dismissed from his position as chairman of the Assembly of Experts in March 2011—a dismissal that should be viewed in the context of the decline in his status since the political crisis that broke out after the 2009 presidential elections.

The Supreme Leader's decree on the composition of the council terminates the membership of five members: Mir-Hossein Mousavi, the reformist opposition leader who has now been under house arrest for over a year; Mohammad Hashemi, Rafsanjani's brother; Ayatollah Mohammad Emami Kashani, the Friday prayer leader in Tehran; Mohammad Reyshahri, former chairman of the Organization of Iranian Pilgrims; and Bijan Zanganeh, former petroleum minister in President Mohammad Khatami's government and Mousavi's advisor in the 2009 elections.

Several new members have also been appointed: Mohammad-Hossein Saffar Harandi, former minister of Islamic guidance in President Ahmadinejad's first government; Ahmad Vahidi, the current minister of defense; conservative Majles member Gholam-Reza Mesbahi Moqaddam; Sadegh Vaezzadeh, member of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution; Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, former judiciary chief, who in July 2011 was appointed the

head of a council for resolving differences of opinion between the three branches of government; Hossein Mohammadi; and Hojjat-ol-Eslam Mahmoud Mohammadi Eraqi, member of the Association for the Rapprochement of Islamic Schools of Thought. The Supreme Leader thanked the outgoing council members and, contrary to his past practice, did not express his personal appreciation to Rafsanjani, the council's chairman. The new appointments will run for five years. In an interview to ISNA News Agency, Rafsanjani's brother Mohammad Hashemi said that the new council members are affiliated with the conservative bloc, and thanked the leader for dismissing him from his position as council member (ISNA, March 14).

An article published by intellectual and political commentator Sadegh Zibakalam in the reformist daily Sharq said that keeping Rafsanjani on the job was intended to convey a message of preferring moderation over extremism, and that it is welcome news for those who care about the future of Iran. Zibakalam, who is considered one of Rafsanjani's close allies, wrote that the decision to let Rafsanjani retain his position is a defeat for right-wing radical elements who in recent months have called for his dismissal on the grounds that he is no longer fit to discern the expediency of the regime and the state, as well as a defeat for those who argued that the council was no longer necessary. In the past three years Rafsanjani has had to endure personal insults from his political opponents, yet he has overlooked them for the good of the regime and the future of Iran.

Zibakalam added that the achievements made by Rafsanjani thanks to his executive abilities during his presidential term (1989-1997) are still in evidence, and that his skills are also required in his current position of chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council. Even those who do not agree with his views believe that he is a person willing to consult and listen to the opinions of others. The presence of someone like Rafsanjani on a council where different approaches are represented is an asset, Zibakalam noted. He added, however, that the council has one major flaw, which is its weakness as a supervisory body. The council, he said, should not just formulate long-term plans and present them to the Supreme Leader, but also make sure that these plans are implemented by the executive branch (Sharq, March 15).

In an interview given to ILNA News Agency, Zibakalam discussed the ongoing decline in Rafsanjani's status, saying that, as part of the efforts made by government supporters to undermine his status, the Foreign Ministry had received instructions to prevent foreign visitors from meeting with Rafsanjani, where possible (ILNA, March 16).

However, Khodnevis, an opposition website, defined the retention of Rafsanjani as chairman of the council as a good behavior prize awarded by Khamenei for Rafsanjani's silence over

the house arrest of the two reformist opposition leaders and his participation in the Majles elections. The fact that Rafsanjani has retained his position shows that the Supreme Leader, who only has his own and his family's interests in mind, remains the sole decision maker when it comes to the question of whether to let the reformists in or keep them out. Khamenei, who owes his position as Khomeini's successor to Rafsanjani, did not even deign to mention Rafsanjani's qualities in his letter of appointment to the council, the website said (Khodnevis, March 14).



www.khodnevis.org

From torture chambers to social security: political controversy over appointment of Tehran's former attorney general as Social Security Foundation chief

The appointment of Tehran's former attorney general Sa'id Mortazavi to director of the Social Security Foundation has stirred a political controversy this week due to his involvement in the Kahrizak detention facility affair. The incident broke out in July 2009, when the south Tehran detention facility was closed down on the Supreme Leader's orders in light of reports according to which at least three detainees had died in the facility as a result of torture and abuse from wardens and criminals with whom they were detained. One of the detainees who died in the detention facility was Abdolhossein Ruholamini, the son of a top advisor to Mohsen Reza'i, secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council and former commander of the Revolutionary Guards.

In August 2009 the Iranian authorities were forced to admit that some of the people detained in the riots that broke out after the presidential elections had died in the detention facility as a result of being held in bad conditions. A parliament inquiry committee appointed to investigate the events put the responsibility for the affair on Sa'id Mortazavi, who had decided to relocate approximately 150 people arrested in the riots that broke out after the

presidential elections to Kahrizak, which was originally planned as a detention facility for dangerous criminals and drug addicts.

In 2003 Mortazavi was also involved in the death of Zahra Kazemi, a Canadian journalist and photographer of Iranian descent, who died in Evin Prison after being arrested by the internal security forces. Her death was apparently due to torture she underwent during questioning. The Canadian government, which investigated the incident, claimed that Mortazavi was involved as a judge in summoning Kazemi for questioning and in the questioning itself, and was even present when she died. In his different judiciary capacities, Mortazavi was also responsible for shutting down dozens of pro-reformist newspapers and arresting journalists and bloggers.

Following the Kahrizak incident, Mortazavi was removed from his position as Tehran's prosecutor general. In 2010, however, he was appointed chief of the government headquarters for the prevention of smuggling goods and foreign currency.

Mortazavi's appointment as chief of the Social Security Foundation drew strong criticism from the political system. A number of Majles members announced that, following the appointment, they launched a move intended to remove from office Abdolreza Sheikholeslami, the minister of welfare and social services. Majles member Parviz Sorouri said in an interview to Mehr News Agency that Mortazavi is absolutely not fit for his new position, and that if he does not resign willingly, the Majles will take action to impeach the welfare minister. He noted that the Social Security Foundation is one of Iran's most sensitive, important, and influential economic institutions, and that it has no place for individuals lacking executive experience (Mehr, March 17). Thirty-two million Iranians use the services of the Social Security Foundation, which has seen six directors in as many years.



Mortazavi and Ahmadinejad

Ahmad Tavakoli, chairman of the Majles Research Center, also criticized the appointment, saying it will be a problem for both Mortazavi and the minister of welfare and social services

(Bultan News, March 17). The appointment was also criticized by Majles member Fatemeh Ajorlou, who referred to it as highly surprising and said that Mortazavi is a person with a problematic background who had abused his powers as Tehran's prosecutor general. She further added that the Majles members intend to seriously look into the appointment after the Nowrooz holiday (Fars, March 18).

Approximately two weeks ago fifteen Majles members asked President Ahmadinejad to refrain from appointing Mortazavi due to his lack of qualification for the position and his involvement in the Kahrizak incident. The families of several political prisoners who died in prison after the 2009 riots also protested the intent to appoint Mortazavi for the key economic role.

The Parsineh website said this week that the president's decision to appoint his close ally Mortazavi as head of the Social Security Foundation was intended as a provocation to his political opponents in the conservative camp and to judiciary chief Sadeq Larijani, who removed Mortazavi from his position as Tehran's prosecutor general (Parsineh, March 17). Fars News Agency also said that it was the president himself who decided on Mortazavi's appointment, and that the "deviant faction" (a term used to refer to the faction affiliated with the president and his office chief Rahim Masha'i) was involved as well. According to Fars, even the welfare minister was opposed to the appointment (Fars, March 18).

World AIDS Day removed from Islamic republic's official calendar despite continuing increase in number of AIDS cases

The Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution has decided to remove the World AIDS Day, marked on December 1, from the official calendar of the Islamic republic. The daily E'temad reported this week that the decision was made by the council and approved by the president, who serves as its chairman. The reasoning offered to support the decision was that events and observances are included in the calendar only when they have special significance for the various sectors of society and when they strengthen at least one component of the Iranian national identity, or strengthen religious, cultural, social, political, economic, and scientific bonds.

The decision to remove the World AIDS Day, observed in Iran since 2005, was made without consulting with the Health Ministry. Seyyed Hamid Hosseini, director of the Health Ministry's Publicity Department, told E'temad that the health minister and her deputies were unaware of the decision made by the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, and that the ministry believes it is necessary to continue marking the World AIDS Day given the importance of the disease, the need to broaden public awareness on means of its prevention, and the

opportunity to increase public awareness that it offers. Hosseini said that the Health Ministry intends to explain the significance of the issue to the council.

Hossein-Ali Shahriari, chairman of the Majles Health Committee, also said that he was unaware of the decision. He noted that the inclusion of the World AIDS Day in the official calendar is not particularly important by itself, since the Health Ministry is committed to fighting the disease with all means it has available. He stressed, however, that it would have been better if the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution's decision had been made with the cooperation of the Health Ministry, since AIDS is on the rise in Iran and the society needs to be made more aware of the disease.



Dr. Minoo Mohraz, member of the committee for the prevention of AIDS, also criticized the decision, saying it is inappropriate that such an important day should not be observed in the official calendar, particularly when there are new outbreaks of AIDS in the country to be addressed. She noted that the council's decision was made as a result of negligence, lack of awareness, and disregard for the publicity significance of the day (www.entekhab.ir, March 17).

According to official data released by the Iranian Health Ministry, over 23 thousand Iranian citizens are currently diagnosed with AIDS. Various estimates suggest that the number of undiagnosed patients is five times more than that. Health Ministry officials recently warned about a third outbreak of AIDS in Iran, primarily among women and young people. The first outbreak of the disease in Iran took place in 1986, when a number of patients received infected blood transfusions imported to Iran. The second outbreak took place in 1995 and mostly affected drug addicts who used infected needles. In recent years there has been a change in AIDS contraction in Iran: unlike in the past, most newly discovered cases are due

to unprotected sex. There are currently several dozens of safe sex counseling centers in Iran; however, education on ways to prevent the disease is still inadequate.

Debate resumes on use of goldfish on Nowrooz

As in previous years, Iranian web surfers are examining the question of whether it is appropriate to use goldfish at the Iranian New Year (Nowrooz) dinner.

This week an Iranian blogger called on the public not to purchase goldfish for Nowrooz so as not to infringe on animal rights. A post published by the blogger said that the struggle waged on social media against the use of goldfish at the Nowrooz dinner is growing more and more successful with each year. The blogger stressed that the use of goldfish has nothing to do with Nowrooz traditions, being instead a Chinese custom that came to Iran in the early 20th century with the first tea imports from China. The use of goldfish is not historically rooted in the Zoroastrian cultural legacy, which is why there is no justification for killing 5 million goldfish every year for Nowrooz. Fish merchants and 90 percent of buyers are unaware of the meaning behind the use of goldfish at the holiday dinner, and most only purchase them for their children to play with for two days. The trade and killing of fish are at odds with the tradition of Nowrooz, which symbolizes the rebirth of nature, and should therefore be avoided.



"We don't buy goldfish" (<http://nasimesaba.parsiblog.com>)

Another blogger, however, said that there is no reason why goldfish should not be used for Nowrooz, taking issue with those who put forth various and baseless arguments to combat the phenomenon. Referring to the claim that the fish are carriers of disease, the blogger said that the health risks posed by goldfish are no greater than those posed by other animals, such as cats and dogs. He even argued that the campaign to remove fish from people's homes is exploited by animal haters to justify their fight on keeping other pets, particularly dogs. According to the blogger, the result of the anti-goldfish campaign is that rarer animals—such as salamanders and turtles—now feature at the holiday dinner. He suggested

keeping stricter control over the goldfish production process and educating the public on how to provide the fish with better living conditions, instead of fighting the very fact of their use for Nowrooz. Just as no one is saying that traffic should be stopped during the Nowrooz vacation to keep thousands of Iranians from dying in car accidents, there is no reason to ban the use of goldfish on Nowrooz simply because they sometimes suffer premature deaths when handled inappropriately. Those not interested in purchasing goldfish are within their rights to do so, the blogger said, but they have no right to ask others not to buy goldfish under various pretexts (<http://greenblog.ir/index.php/archives/12072#comment-415>).

Goldfish are considered one of the symbols of Nowrooz, and it is common for many Iranian families to decorate their holiday dinner table with a jar containing at least one goldfish as a symbol of a happy life. In recent years the custom has come under increasing criticism due to considerations having to do with animal rights, as well as health and economic reasons. Two years ago a top official in the Environment Department of the Tehran municipality claimed that the fish were held in improper conditions and could cause various diseases. In the past, the Farda website published an article expressing strong reservations about using goldfish for the holiday. The author of the article listed several reasons against using goldfish as a symbol at the holiday dinner: the custom has its roots in China and was only introduced to Iran in the twentieth century; the fish might carry salmonella; the premature death of the goldfish may have a negative impact on small children and even compromise their mental health; transporting goldfish to a small, crowded place and keeping them in improper conditions throughout the holiday may result in their death and is tantamount to animal abuse, which is forbidden in religious law; finally, the price of a goldfish is very high and economically unjustified.

Pictures of the week: President's media advisor Ali-Akbar Javanfekr visits Lebanon

(Source: IRNA News Agency)



