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IRAN Open letter from Bahai international community on detention of seven Iranian leaders

The Bahai International Community has written an open letter for the first time to Ayatollah Mohammed Larijani, Head of Iran's Judiciary, calling for the immediate release of seven Iranian Bahai leaders who have been detained for over two years.

The seven Bahai leaders have been held since early 2008. Mrs Mahvash Sabet, the first leader to be arrested, was summoned to the Ministry of Intelligence on 5 March 2008. The other six leaders were detained in early morning sweeps in Tehran on 14 May 2008.

It is believed that the defendants have received less than one hour's access to legal counsel during the whole of their imprisonment. The International Bahai Community has itself only just learnt of a ruling reportedly received orally by the leaders' lawyers, which communicated that their sentences had been reduced from 20 to 10 years, and that a verdict issued by the lower court relating to charges of espionage, collaboration with the State of Israel and provision of classified documents to foreign nationals with the intention of undermining state security had been overturned by the court of appeal.

The case raises serious questions over due legal process in Iran. Lawyers for the seven Bahai leaders, report a complete absence of written communications relating to the prisoners' cases. The defendants' requests for an open trial have been denied and, despite prosecutors being unable to present any credible evidence in support of charges against the leaders, they remain illegally detained.

In another development, reports have been circulating in Iranian news outlets that an Iranian pastor, who has been detained since 12 October 2009, has been sentenced to death. These reports have been supported by individuals close to the pastor's case. The pastor's wife was also detained from 8 June to 11 October 2010.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "Clearly the seven Bahai leaders are being held solely on account of their faith, and this contravenes Iran's international legal obligations. CSW joins with international Bahai community in calling for the release of the seven leaders, and for Iran to address the grave human rights abuses suffered by its religious minorities. CSW also continues to monitor the potential publication of a penal code bill that would include the provision of capital punishment for apostasy."

Notes to Editors:

1. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom has called upon the Obama administration to secure the pastor's unconditional release. Leonard Leo, Chairman of USCIRF, said the "draconian language in the verdict makes it very clear that the Iranian authorities mean business. He could be executed at any time. And for what? For being a Christian."
2. Middle East Concern has received reports indicating that the Revolutionary Tribunal of Gilan Province declared the Christian pastor guilty of apostasy (leaving Islam) on 21 and 22 September 2010. The written verdict of his death sentence was supposedly delivered on 13 November 2010. An appeal has been submitted to the Supreme Court by his lawyers, however, there is no specific timetable for the court's consideration of the prisoner's appeal.

3. The last known judicial execution of a Christian for apostasy was that of Reverend Hossein Soodmand, who died on 3 December 1990. Nevertheless, extra judicial killings and the threat of death sentences are reportedly widespread.