



12.21.2010

IRAN CSW gravely concerned for two Iranian pastors charged with apostasy

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is deeply concerned by reports that two Iranian pastors have been charged with apostasy, and that one of them currently faces a death sentence. Their cases come at a time when religious minorities in the country are experiencing an increase in persecution, including detention and imprisonment.

Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, from Rasht in Northern Iran, is currently being held incommunicado in Lakan prison. The Pastor was arrested on 13 October 2009 and charged with apostasy after he questioned the Muslim monopoly on the religious instruction of children in Iran, which contravenes the Iranian constitution, which permits parents to raise children in their own faith, and violates international statutes to which Iran is party, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). He was reportedly tried and informed orally in late September that he was to receive the death penalty, although the written sentence was not issued until 13 November. Pastor Nadarkhani's lawyers filed an appeal on 5 December, but a date for the hearing has yet to be announced.

Pastor Behrouz Sadegh-Khanjani, a second generation Christian from Tehran and chairman of the Pastoral Council of the Church of Iran, has been detained in a high security prison in Shiraz since June this year. Pastor Khanjani was initially arrested in January 2010 after being summoned to Shiraz to offer an explanation for church activities, and was detained along with two other Christians. He was released on bail on 17 March, then was once more summoned to Shiraz on 16 June to "present his defence", but was re-arrested and transferred to the infamous "Plate 100 Prison". Pastor Khanjani has now been charged with apostasy, blasphemy, and contact with the enemy. The possible penalty is a death sentence. He too is held incommunicado, and despite the gravity of the charges, he has only been given access to his attorney once in the period between his arrest and late November. For the majority of his imprisonment Pastor Khandjani has been kept in solitary confinement, and CSW has received reports that his health is suffering due to extremely unhygienic conditions and deliberate mistreatment. CSW's sources also report that Christian prisoners are subjected to eight hours of interrogation a day and some are kept in cramped rooms where they are unable to sleep.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "We are deeply concerned for the welfare of Pastors Nadarkhani and Khanjani, who are detained in appalling conditions and cannot be contacted. They are being held solely for exercising their right to freedom of thought, conscience and belief. The international community must continue to urge the Iranian Government to release all those detained on the basis of their religious affiliation, to adhere to its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the CRC, and to ensure that all of its citizens can fully exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief".

Notes to Editor:

1. Pastor Nadarkhani was previously imprisoned in December of 2006 on charges of apostasy and evangelism, but was released two weeks later.
2. Pastor Nadarkhani's wife, Fatemeh Passandideh, was also charged with apostasy, but released in October 2010 after four months in prison.

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3. This is the third time in the past four years Pastor Khanjani has been detained on account of his faith. In December 2006 he was arrested for apostasy, but was acquitted and released in January 2007.