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## IRAN At least 100 Christians detained in 24 cities

Christian Solidarity Worldwide has received reports that at least 100 arrests of Iranian Christians have taken place in 24 cities across the country in the last three to four months.

In the early hours of Boxing Day, 25 Christians from evangelical house churches in Tehran and other parts of Iran were detained. Since then, the arrests of Christians have continued in 24 cities, including Tehran, Karaj, Isfahan, Ahwaz, Rasht, Anzali, Mashad and Yazd. Homes were ransacked and Christians were interrogated or ordered to report to security officers in Kermanshah and Sanandaj.

Those arrested have been predominantly Christian evangelicals from Iranian backgrounds. Prior to being released, Christians in Hamadan, Arak, Bandar Abbas, Bandar Mahshahr, Shiraz, Ardabil, Tabriz and Khoramabad were interrogated and forced to sign documents stating that they would not engage in proselytism nor attend house church meetings.

As pressure has mounted some pastors and house church members have been forced to flee the country. Those who remain face possible charges for apostasy (leaving Islam) and for activities such as proselytizing and holding church services.

Typically, Christian detainees are interrogated and then released on bail pending further questioning and re-arrest. Bail rates can be as high as \$30,000, and detainees are also obliged to sign illegal documents forcing them to refrain from Christian activities or recant their faith. No evangelical church has been able to register a building in Iran since the Iranian revolution, despite Christianity being a protected religious minority in the Iranian constitution.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston, who will be speaking about the lack of religious freedom in Iran at the European Parliament on 1 February, said, "CSW has grave concerns for those held in detention, who are vulnerable to abuse whilst in prison, and are being subjected to interrogation tactics that include sleep deprivation and solitary confinement. The international community must continue to urge the government of Iran to abide by its responsibilities as a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, allowing its citizens to exercise their right to freedom of religion and belief, and releasing those detained solely on the basis of their religious affiliation."

### **Notes to editors:**

1. Thirteen Boxing Day detainees who remain in prison include: Javad and Anahita Zare, Leila Akhavan, Sara Akhavan, Mehdi Forootan, Ladan Nouri, Farshid Fathi, Mohammad Zardouz, Nasrin Hosseini Nia, Rasool Abdolahi and his wife Maryam, Miss Yasmaan and Mr Basir.

2. Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani of the Jesus-Only Pentecostal church was charged with apostasy and arrested on October 13, 2009 while attempting to register his church. He had earlier questioned the Muslim monopoly on the religious instruction of children in Iran. Pastor Nadarkhani was reportedly tried and informed orally in late September 2010 that he was to receive the death penalty, although the written sentence was not issued until November 13. Pastor Nadarkhani's lawyer filed an appeal on 5 December; however, the date for the hearing has yet to be announced. Pastor Nadarkhani is currently held incommunicado in Lakan prison.

3. Despite being a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which recognizes the right to choose a religion, in practice Iran is discriminatory towards non-Muslim groups. Article 12 of the Iranian constitution declares Islam to be the country's official religion. Article 13 of the 1979 constitution recognizes Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism as minority religions. The freedom to change one's religion is not recognized for Iranian Muslims.