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## IRAN Christians sentenced for “crimes against the Islamic order”

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Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has learned that on March 8, five Iranian Christians were sentenced to one year’s imprisonment for “Crimes against the Islamic Order”.

Pastor Behrouz Sadegh-Khandjani, Mehdi Furutan, Mohammad Beliad, Parviz Khalaj and Nazly Beliad, all members of the Church of Iran, a Jesus-Only Pentecostal denomination, were found guilty by the Revolutionary Court in Shiraz. They have 20 days to appeal the sentence.

The five men were arrested last June, but released on February 13, 2011, after posting high bail payments. They had spent nearly eight months in prison in Shiraz on charges of apostasy, political meetings, blasphemy and crimes against the Islamic Order. However, four of the charges were dropped during the trial.

A source close to the defendants revealed that in the period between his arrest and late November 2010, 33-year old Pastor Sadegh-Khanjani was held in solitary confinement and given access to his attorney only once. His health suffered due to extremely unhygienic conditions and the infliction of deliberate harm. A second generation Christian from Tehran, Pastor Sadegh-Khanjani has been arrested for his faith a total of three times in the past four years. Most members of the group have been caught in cycles of detentions and releases by the authorities for a number of years, and some have suffered severe levels of torture during previous detentions.

Concern also remains high for another Church of Iran leader, Pastor Yousef Nadakharni, who has been sentenced to death for apostasy. Pastor Nadarkhani is currently held incommunicado in Lakan prison, and his appeal is pending at the Supreme Court.

Christians in Iran have recently been subjected to waves of arrest, with 282 now confirmed to have been arrested in 34 cities since June 2010. At least 15 of these Christians remain in prison, while others have been released, generally after posting large amounts of bail.

CSW’s National Director Stuart Windsor said, “We condemn the conviction of these five individuals, as well as the continuing detention of many other Christians in Iran. Clearly these men have been convicted for simply exercising their right to freedom of religion and belief, and it is imperative that the international community presses Iran to rescind these unjust sentences at the appeal. Iran is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and therefore has an obligation to uphold international standards of religious freedom for all its citizens.”

### Notes to the editor

Pastor Nadakharni was 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, which contravenes the Iranian Constitution.. 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 December 5; however, the date for the hearing has yet to be announced.