CHRISTIAN SOLIDARITY WORLDWIDE USA
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IRAN News website suspended after reporting burning of New Testaments

Mohabat News, the only active news agency inside Iran reporting on the recent mass arrests of Christians in the country, was suddenly suspended today. It is unclear why the website has been disabled, however in the past the authorities have been known to shut down websites run by human rights groups and critics of the regime under the guise of defending the nation against "cyber warfare".

In recent months a staff member of Mohabat News was allegedly threatened via an email from the Revolutionary Guard, which stated that he and his family would be targeted, and “bad things” would happen to them as a result of Mohabat’s output.

The suspension of Mohabat News came the day after it reported the seizure and burning of 600 New Testaments by authorities in western Iran on 7 February 2011. In a routine border inspection of a bus in Salmas in Western Azerbaijan, the Office of Contraband Search and Seizure along with the Revolutionary Guards reportedly discovered two boxes, each containing 300 New Testaments that had allegedly been smuggled across the border. No passengers claimed ownership of the confiscated boxes, and the official website of the Revolutionary Guards accused the United States of playing a major role in this incident.

These developments have occurred within the context of escalating fears for religious minorities in Iran. The Baha’i International Community recently reported that so far this month, the Iranian authorities have arrested at least nine Baha’is who provided schooling to children in a region of Iran devastated by an earthquake seven years ago. The authorities allege the Baha'is "took advantage" of the desperate need for teachers following the earthquake.

Furthermore, at least 282 Christians have been arrested in around 34 cities in Iran since June 2010. All have faced many hours of intense interrogation and most have faced long periods in solitary confinement. At least fifteen of these Christians remain in prison, including Khalil Yarali, who was held in solitary confinement for 28 days in an unknown place and under intense interrogations before being transferred to Karoon prison in Ahwaz.

CSW Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, “The sudden suspension of Mohabat News is a disturbing development, and we await clarification on the reasons behind it. However, CSW is deeply concerned both by the restrictions placed on the publication, importation and reprinting of Christian literature, which have caused the rise in smuggling, and by the continuing cycle of arrests and detentions of Baha’is and Christians on the basis of their religious beliefs. We once again call on the Iranian government to respect its international obligations to uphold all aspects of the right to religious freedom, and to also release those who are still held without charge.”

Notes to Editors:

1. In mid February, hackers belonging to the government of Iran managed to disable the Mohabat News website for two days.

2. The government closed the operations of the Iranian Bible Society in 1980, and the publishing, importation or reprinting of Bibles or Christian literature is illegal. Therefore, the smuggling of Bibles across the borders is relatively common. A similar incident occurred on June 8, 2010, in one of the western towns of Sardasht.

3. A Press Release on the arrest of the Baha'is can be found on the website of the Baha'i International Community: http://news.bahai.org/story/812