



3.23.2011

## IRAN Five Christians to face trial for blasphemy

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has been informed that five Iranian Christians, who were recently sentenced to one year's imprisonment for crimes against the Islamic Order at the Revolutionary Court in Shiraz, will stand trial in a lower court on blasphemy charges in fifteen days time.

Pastor Behrouz Sadegh-Khandjani, Mehdi Furutan, Mohammad Beliad, Parviz Khalaj and Nazly Beliad, members of the Church of Iran denomination, were arrested in June 2010 on charges of apostasy, political meetings, blasphemy and crimes against the Islamic Order. They spent eight months in jail before being released on bail in February. Their lawyer has appealed the one-year prison sentence for crimes against the Islamic Order and a decision is pending.

It was initially assumed that the other charges against the five men had been dropped. However, a source close to the detainees has revealed that they will now face charges of blasphemy in a lower court, possibly due to the fact that lower courts are generally more disposed to hand down guilty verdicts.

The situation for Christians in Iran is worsening, with churches finding it difficult to hold meetings, and many Christians attempting to flee the country.

Christians in Iran are also increasingly concerned for Yousef Nadarkhani, the pastor of a large congregation in the city of Rasht, who was arrested in late 2009. He remains in prison after having been sentenced to death for the crime of apostasy, despite there being no articles in the Iranian legal code that refer to such a crime. Instead, the presiding judge in the Nadarkhani case based his ruling on texts by Iranian religious scholars. An appeal to the Supreme Court was filed in December, and a hearing is due within two months.

CSW's National Director Stuart Windsor said, "CSW is dismayed by the charges faced by the group. The international community must press Iran not only to rescind the unjust punishments to which these Christians have already been subjected, but also to acquit them at the upcoming trial. We are also concerned that the judgment handed down in Pastor Nadarkhani's case did not follow due procedure under Iranian law. As a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Iran has an obligation to uphold international standards of religious freedom for all its citizens, to follow due process and refrain from arbitrary judicial rulings based on open-ended legislation."

### **Notes to Editors:**

1. Pastor Nadarkhani 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.
2. 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.