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IRAN Prison sentence upheld for Baha'i leaders ahead of Christians' blasphemy trial

Seven leaders of the Baha'i faith, currently detained in Gohardasht prison in Karaj, have been informed that their original 20-year prison term has been reinstated. The judgment came days before the blasphemy trial of five members of the Church of Iran is due to begin.

The seven Baha'is were arrested in early 2008 and held for over two years without trial. In August 2010 they were finally tried and found guilty of espionage, acting against national security and forming an illegal cult. The group was acquitted of the two former charges at appeal following vocal international condemnation of the case, and the original sentence of 20 years was halved.

According to the Baha'i International Community, despite repeated requests, an official copy of the original verdict and the appeal ruling was never received by the defendants. The reason for the restoration of the original sentence has not been formally given; however, the Baha'i International Community believes that the Prosecutor General challenged the appeals court's ruling because he understood it to be contradictory to Sharia law.

There has recently been a sharp upsurge in the harassment of religious minorities in Iran, with Christians in particular facing widespread cycles of arrests, interrogations, detentions and releases on exorbitant bail postings. The legal team representing five members of the Church of Iran, who are due in court on blasphemy charges on April 5, appear confident of a successful outcome to the trial, as there are no legal grounds for the blasphemy charges. They also anticipate the withdrawal of a one-year sentence for "Crimes against the Islamic Order," that was imposed on the group in an earlier trial at the Revolutionary Court in Shiraz.

The legal team has also expressed confidence regarding the situation of Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, who is facing the death sentence for apostasy, and believes that the sentence is likely to be rescinded at the appeal, since there are no legal grounds for a death penalty.

The persecution of religious minorities has coincided with a general deterioration in human rights in the country. In late March the UN Human Rights Council passed a resolution to appoint a Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Iran.

CSW's National Director Stuart Windsor said, "The reinstatement of such a severe sentence on the Baha'is is a further blow to the group, who has already faced gross injustices, including 30 months of detention without trial, harsh treatment and no access to medical care. Despite Iran being a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, by which countries pledge to uphold international standards of religious freedom for all citizens, it is clear that both the Baha'is and certain Christian communities are being targeted solely on the grounds of their faith. The international community must press Iran to release all detainees who are held solely on account of their religion. The Iranian government must also ensure that the members of the Church of Iran, and especially Pastor Nadarkhani, receive due process, and are acquitted of all charges that have no legal bearing under Iranian law."

Notes to Editors:

1. The seven Baha'i leaders are Fariba Kamalabadi, Mahvash Sabet, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Saeid Rezaie, Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Vahid Tizfahm.
2. The five Church of Iran Christians are Pastor Behrouz Sadegh-Khandjani, Mehdi Furutan, Mohammad Beliad, Parviz Khalaj and Nazly Beliad.