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IRAN Eleven Christians await verdict following rushed trial

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has learned that eleven members of the Church of Iran who are facing charges of 'activities against the Order' and drinking alcohol were suddenly brought before the Revolutionary Tribunal in the Iranian city of Bandar-Anzali on Sunday, May 1.

The charges against the group relate to their involvement in a house church meeting, and to taking communion wine. During what was described as a very brief hearing they were asked to present its defense. Their lawyer, Mr Seyyed Mohammed-Ali Dadkhah, only had time to draft a hastily written statement declaring that their meeting was a religious gathering, that there had been no violation of Shari'a law or the constitution, and reminding the court of constitutional provisions for the rights of Christians and minorities. The group was told to expect an answer from the court within ten days.

CSW has also learnt that in late April, three Christians, Sonia Keshish Avanesian, Arash Kermanjani and his wife Arezo Teimouri, were released from Hamadan prison after having being held for nearly eight months without charge. A fourth member of the group, Vahik Abrahamian, Sonia's husband, who also has Dutch citizenship, remains imprisoned and his condition is unknown.

The four Christians were arrested along with eight others during a Christian meeting at Vahik and Sonia's home. They were held in solitary confinement in an unknown location for forty days before being transferred to Hamadan Public Prison.

During their imprisonment, they received no official charges. However, on September 19, 2010, the group was accused in a TV news broadcast of attempting to destroy the Islamic Republic of Iran, and was referred to as "Zionist Christians".

CSW sources report that prior to their release, the equivalent of almost \$200,000 was demanded for the freedom of each individual, possibly because the group was known to have links to international Christian organizations. However, when it became clear that no such payment would be forthcoming, three were released, but were neither bailed nor acquitted. No reason has been given for Vahik Abrahamian's continued imprisonment.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "A guilty verdict against the Church of Iran members would effectively criminalize the taking of Communion, and constitute a violation of Iran's pledge under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to respect the right of citizens to manifest their religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching. Furthermore, the extended detention without charge of the Hamadan group, the extortionate sums of money demanded for their release, and the continuing detention of Vahik Abrahamian are wholly unacceptable. CSW urges the government of Iran to ensure an end to extended detentions without charge, and that Mr. Abrahamian and other members of religious minorities receive due process, are acquitted of all charges that have no legal basis, and enjoy the rights and privileges due to them under the national constitution and international statutes to which Iran is party."

Notes to Editors:

1. The Christians on trial in Bandar-Anzali include Pastor Abdolreza Ali-Haghnejad and his wife Anahita Khademi, Mahmoud Khosh-Hal and his wife Hava Saadetmend, Fatemah Modir-Nouri, Mehrdad Habibzade,

Milad Radeh and Behzad Taalipas, and Amir Goldoust, his sister Mina Goldoust, and his grandmother Zainab Bahremend.