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IRAN Eleven Christians walk free from court

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has learned that eleven members of an evangelical denomination, who were charged with 'action against the order of the country' and drinking alcohol, have been acquitted by an Iranian court. The charges referred to their involvement in a house church meeting and to taking communion wine.

Following their arrests in April, the eleven members of the Church of Iran denomination were brought before the Revolutionary Tribunal in Bandar-Anzali on May 1 for a rushed hearing where their lawyer, Mr. Seyyed Mohammed-Ali Dadkhah, hastily drafted a statement in their defense.

In a written verdict issued in mid-May, the court ruled that since the eleven claimed to be conducting a Christian ceremony, their activities were covered by Article 13 of the Iranian Constitution, which allows Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians to "perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education". The judge added that the case involved a religious ceremony, thus there was no evidence to sustain the charge that they had been acting against the national security or the order of the country. The local authorities have 20 days in which to appeal the acquittal.

Six other members of the Church of Iran, based in Shiraz, are still awaiting the outcome of a consultation on their case. They are charged with blasphemy. After struggling to find evidence to convict them, the case was adjourned to allow time for the prosecution to seek the opinion of Iran's traditional churches concerning the validity of the charge. Another member of the Church of Iran, Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, is also still awaiting a date for his appeal against a death sentence for apostasy.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "In a climate where evangelical Christians are regularly targeted by the regime, this acquittal is a very welcome development. It is unfortunate that although the Iranian constitution clearly states that Christians are a protected minority, such protection is denied to any who do not belong to Iran's traditional churches. We commend the judge in this case for ensuring due process, and for recognizing that these people belong to a Christian denomination, so the exercising of their faith poses no threat to the country. We continue to urge the acquittal of the six in Shiraz, whose charges are baseless, and of Pastor Nadarkhani, whose death sentence is an appalling violation of the right to freedom of religion and belief, which, as a signatory of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Iran is obliged to uphold. We also call for the immediate release of house church pastor Vahik Abrahamian, who remains imprisoned in Hamadan despite the release of his three co-accused."

Notes to Editors:

1. The eleven acquitted Christians are: Pastor Abdolreza Ali-Haghnejad and his wife Anahita Khademi, Mahmoud Khosh-Hal and his wife Hava Saadetmend, Fatemah Modir-Nouri, Mehrdad Habibzade, Milad Radef and Behzad Taalipas, and Amir Goldoust, his sister Mina Goldoust, and his grandmother Zainab Bahremend.
2. Article 13 of the Iranian Constitution: "Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only recognized religious minorities, who, within the limits of the law, are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education"
3. In the acquittal the presiding judge also made references to articles 23 and 37 of the Iranian Constitution. Article 23 states: "The investigation of individuals' beliefs is forbidden, and no one may be molested or taken to

task simply for holding a certain belief." Article 37: "Innocence is to be presumed, and no one is to be held guilty of a charge unless his or her guilt has been established by a competent court."

4. The six Church of Iran members in Shiraz are: Behrouz Sadegh-Khandjani, Mehdi Furutan, Mohammad Beliad, Parviz Khalaj, Nazly Beliad and Amin Afsharmanesh.

5. Pastor Vahik Abrahamian was detained along with eight others, including his wife Sonia Keshish Avanesian, during a raid on his home in Hamadan on September 4, 2010. Five of those arrested were soon released but four, including Vahik and Sonia, were placed in solitary confinement in an unknown location for forty days before being transferred to Hamadan Public Prison. The group was held in Hamadan for over eight months without charge. An exorbitant sum was demanded for the release of each individual, and was unable to be met. In April 2011 the three other detainees were released but Vahik remains imprisoned.