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IRAN Death sentence for apostasy reportedly upheld for Pastor Nadarkhani

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has learnt that the death sentence handed down in 2010 for the crime of apostasy, to evangelical house pastor Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, has reportedly been upheld by the third chamber of the Supreme Court in the Shia holy city of Qom.

Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani of the Church of Iran denomination was arrested in his home city of Rasht on October 13, 2009 while attempting to register his church. His arrest is believed to have been due to his questioning of the Muslim monopoly on the religious instruction of children in Iran. He was initially charged with protesting, however the charges against him were later changed to apostasy and evangelizing Muslims.

Pastor Nadarkhani has been held in Lakan prison since that time, and was allowed access to a lawyer and visits from his family for most of his incarceration. He was tried and found guilty on September 21 & 22, 2010, when a death sentence was delivered verbally in court. Written confirmation of the sentence was delivered on November 13, 2010 by the 1st Court of the Revolutionary Tribunal.

The pastor's lawyer filed an appeal on December 5, 2010. However, following a 6-month wait for an appeal hearing, the lawyer has confirmed that the appeal was unsuccessful, although so far there has been no official notification of this failure.

Pastor Nadarkhani had been imprisoned previously in December 2006, on charges of apostasy and evangelism, but was released two weeks later in January 2007.

In May, Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, a high-profile cleric in Iran, reportedly said that authorities had not done enough to stem the growth of Christian house churches, despite its massive investment in this effort. At a meeting with the heads of the Islamic Propagation Centre of Qom that month, Ayatollah Yazdi underlined the need for better discipline and proper supervision of those authorities involved in the suppression of churches. Yazdi suggested that the government set up a central system to monitor and coordinate the suppression of churches.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "This is clearly a devastating outcome for Pastor Nadarkhani, his family, and the Church of Iran network, and our thoughts and prayers are with them. CSW condemns the decision to uphold this verdict in the strongest possible terms. The death sentence for the charge of apostasy is not codified in Iranian law. The ruling has deeply worrying implications for all Christians in Iran, and is yet another indicator of the regime's disregard for basic human rights and freedoms. Of particular concern is the fact that the Iranian regime often enacts death sentences without advance notice to prisoners' families, lawyers or even the prisoners themselves. Consequently, the international community must urgently apply pressure on the Iranian regime to rescind this unjust decision. Freedom to change one's religion is a fundamental right which Iran pledged to uphold when it signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Iran must therefore be urged adhere to its commitments under international law."

Notes to Editors:

1. Article 18 of the ICCPR reads: “Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.”
2. The doctrine of the Church of Iran can be found at: http://www.eglisediran.org/?page_id=8