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IRAN Further arrests of Christians and Bibles confiscated

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has received reports that Abdolreza 'Matthias' Haghnejad, a pastor in the evangelical Church of Iran denomination from the city of Bandar Anzal, was re-arrested on the morning of August 17 by Iranian authorities in Rasht while making a pastoral visit.

Pastor Haghnejad's family has no idea of his current whereabouts, his condition or the charges against him, and it is believed he is being held without access to an attorney. Earlier this year the pastor was detained, charged, then acquitted, along with ten other members of his denomination, of activities against the order. He had also been arrested in 2006.

Pastor Haghnejad's re-arrest has occurred amidst reports of another escalation in governmental pressure on Christians. In late July a Christian woman named Leila Mohammadi, was arrested in Tehran after police raided her house, according to Iranian news agency Mohabat News. Reports indicate she may have been transferred to Evin prison. A man was also reportedly detained temporarily in connection with this case.

In August a consignment of 6,500 Bibles was confiscated as it was being transported between the cities of Zanzan and Ahbar in the north-western province of Zanzan. In a comment on the seizure, Dr Majid Abhari, advisor to the social issues committee of the Iranian parliament, declared that Christian missionaries were attempting to deceive people, especially the youth, with an expensive propaganda campaign. He also indicated his belief that all religions are strengthening their power to confront Islam.

This rhetoric is the latest in a stream of condemnations of Christians from members of the Iranian regime, who have attempted to demonize Christians as western-backed conspirators, 'parasites' and 'like the Taliban'.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "These latest arrests are extremely concerning, as is the increase in hostile and unwarranted rhetoric on the part of Iranian officials against evangelical Christians. CSW is particularly concerned for the wellbeing of Pastor Haghnejad, who is seemingly being held incommunicado, without charge, and with no access to legal representation. It is vital that the Republic of Iran ensures due process and ends this practice of incarcerating persons simply on the basis of their faith as this is in clear violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Those who, like the pastor, have been arrested must either be charged and tried in a timely manner or released, and all detainees must be allowed contact with their families and lawyers."

Notes to Editors:

1. In April 2011 CSW reported that Pastor Abdolreza 'Matthias' Haghnejad had been arrested along with ten other Christians, including his wife, in Bandar Anzali and charged with activities against the Order. The charges related to meeting as a house-church and taking communion wine. The hearing at the Revolutionary Court of Bandar Anzali occurred on May 1 where the group was represented by the high profile Iranian human rights lawyer, Mohammed-Ali Dadkhah. The group was acquitted of the charges in mid-May.
2. Pastor Matthias was also previously arrested in 2006 in Rasht along with seven others, all of whom faced multiple charges, including evangelism and actions against the national security of Iran. Police confiscated computers, CDs, tapes, Bibles and evangelistic literature from them.