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IRAN International pressure mounts on Iran to free Pastor Nadarkhani

Eighteen Uruguayan legislators have signed a letter that was sent to the President of Iran yesterday calling for the release of Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, who is facing the death sentence for apostasy.

The letter was initiated by Senator Gerardo Amarilla, and calls on Iran to respect international human rights standards in Pastor Nadarkhani's case, including freedom of religion, as enshrined in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Iran is signatory.

Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani of the evangelical 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. In July the pastor received the written confirmation of his death sentence, which was dated June 12, following an unsuccessful appeal to the Supreme Court of Iran. The Supreme Court also asked the lower court in Rasht, which issued the original sentence, to re-examine whether the pastor was a practicing Muslim at the age of maturity (fifteen). The hearing is scheduled for September 25, and if the court rules he was indeed a practicing Muslim, the death sentence will stand.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has raised Pastor Nadarkhani's case and that of his lawyer Mohammed Ali Dadkhah, who faces potential imprisonment on unfair charges, with the Council Working Group on human rights (COHOM) of the European Union (EU), and Baroness Catherine Ashton, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Pastor Nadarkhani's case was also brought to the attention of the UK's ambassador to Iran, Mr. Simon Gass, by South East MEP Nigel Farage.

On July 6 the US State Department issued a statement on Pastor Nadarkhani's case, which stated, "We are dismayed over reports that the Iranian courts are requiring Youcef Nadarkhani to recant his Christian faith or face the death penalty for apostasy – a charge based on his religious beliefs...He is just one of thousands who face persecution for their religious beliefs in Iran, including the seven leaders of the Baha'i community whose imprisonment was increased to 20 years for practicing their faith and hundreds of Sufis who have been flogged in public because of their beliefs."

CSW has also learned that another Church of Iran pastor, Abdolreza 'Matthias' Haghnejad from the city of Bandar Anzali, has been released on bail. Pastor Haghnejad was detained on the morning of August 17 by Iranian authorities in Rasht whilst making a pastoral visit. During his detention, his family had no idea of his whereabouts or the charges against him.

CSW's Special Ambassador Stuart Windsor said, "CSW welcomes this move by Uruguayan Senators, taking the lead in Latin America to condemn the imprisonment and potentially imminent execution of Pastor Nadarkhani, and we join with them in calling for his release and the dismissal of all charges against him, which are in flagrant violation of international law. We hope that further international pressure will be brought to bear on Iran to free all prisoners held on the basis of their religious beliefs, and uphold the international standards of religious freedom which it has endorsed as a signatory to the ICCPR."

Notes to Editors:

1. Pastor Nadarkhani's lawyer, Mr. Mohammed Ali Dadkhah, a prominent Iranian human rights defender, is also facing legal difficulties. On Sunday, July 3, a court in Tehran sentenced Mr. Dadkhah to nine years in jail and a 10-year ban on practicing law or teaching at university for "actions and propaganda against the Islamic regime". He is currently appealing the sentence.
2. Earlier this year Pastor Haghnejad was detained, charged then acquitted, along with ten other members of his denomination, on charges of "Activities against the Order." He was also been arrested in 2006.