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IRAN Eleven Christians receive death threats as false charges emerge against Nadarkhani

Eleven Iranian Christians who fled Iran in the wake of a government campaign against evangelical Christianity have received threats via email from 'the unknown soldiers of the Hidden Imam' calling on them to either repent or face extra-judicial execution. The 'unknown soldiers' are alleged to have links with Iranian security services.

The email, which was sent to each individual on September 14, warned the recipients that although they may have managed to flee Iran, they are not hidden from the 'acute eyes of the unknown soldiers', who claim they have been advancing to the heart of the 'Zionist regime' over a number of years. The email concludes by offering the eleven Christians 'the opportunity to repent and ask forgiveness from the presence of the Hidden Imam [the 12th Imam, the Messiah-figure in Shia Twelver theology] and the Great Allah. Otherwise, according to the Fatwa given by Mehdi the Hidden Imam, they must be killed.'

Reverend Samuel Yeghnazar of Elam Ministries, who has been closely involved in the house church movement in Iran, has indicated that he and his network of churches are taking the threat very seriously.

Meanwhile in Rasht, the written verdict of the most recent trial of Pastor Nadarkhani is still being awaited. Unconfirmed reports indicate that the fate of the pastor may now lie in the hands of the local religious leader, Ayatollah Ghorbani.

Following a demonstration in support of Pastor Nadarkhani organized by CSW, the Iranian Embassy in London released a statement claiming that fears of a death sentence were 'unsubstantiated'. However, in a worrying development, disinformation has been spreading in recent days concerning the charges against the pastor. These include claims that he was found guilty of rape, and accusations that he is a Zionist "working against the Islamic Order". Sources close to the case have expressed fears that efforts may be underway to formulate spurious charges in order to justify the sentence.

The threat to the lives of the eleven Christians, together with the continuing threat of execution of Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, are indicative of what Pastor Yeghnazar terms the "utter hypocrisy of a government that claims Christians live in freedom." Protestant Christians, along with many other religious minorities, do not enjoy religious freedom in Iran and in the past eleven months at least 137 Christians have suffered arbitrary arrests and interrogations and nearly forty have been kept in prison for several weeks. One Christian from Tehran, Fashid Fathi-Malayeri, has been imprisoned for nine months, several weeks of which were spent in solitary confinement. He has had no access to a lawyer and still has not been informed of the exact charges against him. His wife and two small children have fled Iran for their own safety.

CSW's Chief Executive Officer Mervyn Thomas said, "The threat against the eleven Iranian citizens in the Diaspora is an appalling and vicious move by a group suspected of close association with the Iranian security forces. It is vital that countries hosting Iranian refugees and asylum seekers ensure these vulnerable people receive adequate protection, and make it clear to the Iranian authorities that cross-border assassinations are wholly unacceptable and will not be tolerated. In addition, with regard to the pastor, CSW is in possession of

original court documents which clearly state that the charge against him is apostasy, and that the death sentence was upheld by the Supreme Court. Iran's efforts to fabricate fresh charges against Pastor Nadarkhani this late in the day reflect badly on the ruling regime and will only serve to bring the Iranian legal system into disrepute and occasion further questions regarding the independence of the judiciary."