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IRAN Attempts to convert Christian prisoners as crackdown on Church intensifies

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has been informed that Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, who is currently in prison awaiting a final decision from the Supreme Leader of Iran regarding a death sentence for apostasy, was recently presented with Islamic literature, allegedly as part of an official campaign to convert Christian prisoners.

Local sources report that a renewed campaign of harassment of Iranian Christians is underway in Iran, and that several members of the Church of Iran denomination have recently been called in for questioning. Many have been threatened with charges of blasphemy, while one was informed he would be punished for engaging in "actions against the security of the state," a term increasingly adopted in reference to taking part in Christian meetings.

CSW was also informed that another Church of Iran member, Mehdi Furutan, was recently transferred from Shiraz prison to an underground cell in Adelabad security prison, where the torture of inmates regularly takes place. Mr. Furutan has been incommunicado for a week and his current condition is unknown. He had just begun serving a one-year prison sentence, after an earlier sentence for 'crimes against the order' was upheld at an appeal hearing. While in the general prison in Shiraz Mr. Furutan had also been presented with Islamic religious books, and sources fear that his transfer to Adelabad may have been prompted by responses he may have made when questioned about them.

CSW has also learned that Pastor Benham Irani of the Church of Iran, who led a church in Karaj, was informed on October 18 that he would immediately begin serving a five-year sentence for an earlier conviction for 'action against the security of the country', which had been suspended since the verdict was confirmed at an appeal hearing in February 2008. The pastor was due to complete a one-year prison sentence for Christian activities on October 20. While a charge of apostasy was not brought against him, the verdict included text that defined Pastor Irani as an apostate and reiterated that apostates "can be killed".

CSW's Special Ambassador Stuart Windsor said, "CSW is deeply concerned at news of a further increase in the harassment of Iranian Christians, especially the wording of the verdict against Pastor Irani, which, according to local sources, opens the way for execution or even assassination. The condition and treatment of Mehdi Furutan and of all persons held in the Adelabad facility is another source of concern. There is an increasing tendency by Iranian courts and officials to characterize legitimate Christian activities as crimes against the state. In addition, reports that non-Muslim prisoners are being forced to comment on Islamic theological works in a manner that could possibly render them vulnerable to mistreatment, and even to charges of blasphemy, indicates that Iran is violating article 23 of its constitution, which forbids the investigation of an individual's beliefs. Iran is also in flagrant violation of its obligations under international law to allow all of its citizens to freely manifest their religious beliefs."