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## IRAN Authorities detain Sunday school children during church raid

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has been informed that earlier this week, Iranian authorities in the southern town of Ahwaz raided the Christmas celebrations of an Assemblies of God-affiliated church, detaining everyone in the building, including children attending Sunday school.

According to CSW's sources, the authorities herded the entire congregation, including children, into two buses that had been brought specifically for this purpose. The majority were interrogated, threatened and eventually released. However, the church's senior pastor, Pastor Farhad, remains in detention, along with his wife and some church leaders.

The church in Ahwaz is not a part of the house church movement, but is an official and long-established church whose membership largely consists of former followers of John the Baptist who converted to Christianity. Nevertheless, Pastor Farhad has been detained on several occasions in the past and warned not to allow Muslim converts into his church. This is also not the first time that Christmas celebrations in Iranian churches have been raided in this way. Similar raids and detentions during the Christmas season have occurred in Iran for the last three years.

In response to the arrests the Iranian Church in London is asking for cards of encouragement to be sent to the children, who may have been traumatized by their ordeal.

This wave of arrest comes as Iranian media has been publicizing a Christmas message sent to Pope Benedict from Speaker of the Iranian Parliament, Ali Larijani, in which he congratulated his Christian counterparts on the "auspicious anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ", wished blessing, happiness and prosperity to the Pope and all Christians in the coming year, and stated that the world's ills were caused by ignoring ethics and justice.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "Mr. Larijani's Christmas message may have been well intentioned, but it is entirely undermined by these arrests, which violate the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and Iran's own constitution. The Iranian authorities often insist that Christians are being arrested for indulging in actions that threaten public security, however, it is difficult to conceive how children attending Sunday school or, for that matter, legitimate Christmas celebrations fit into this category. It increasingly appears as if the Iranian regime has decided to deem every act of Christian worship a threat to national security. If this is indeed the case, then the right to freedom of religion or belief is gravely under threat in Iran."

### Notes to Editors:

1. Cards and letters of encouragement for the children of the church in Ahwaz can be sent to Christian Solidarity Worldwide, P.O. Box 50608, Casper WY 82605. Any mail will be forwarded to the church through CSW's contacts in Iran.