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IRAN Church in Tehran forced to close by Revolutionary Guard

An Assemblies of God (AOG) affiliated church in the Janat-Abad area of west Tehran has been ordered to close by the Intelligence Branch of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.

According to local sources, the church's pastor was told to cancel all church activities and seal its property. Unless this decision is reversed, there will not be any church service this Sunday or for the subsequent future.

The use of the Revolutionary Guard (*Sepah*) to enforce the closure of the church is a worrying development. The Revolutionary Guard is known for using aggressive methods and is usually deployed in situations that are deemed to threaten the national security or stability of the country. Furthermore, they are one of three intelligence organizations in Iran with similar powers to that of the Ministry of Intelligence (*ete la'aat*).

Sources close to CSW have informed the organization that all Farsi speaking churches in Tehran have been threatened with closure as authorities seek to eliminate various churches. One source close to CSW said: "If this aggressive campaign to eliminate evangelical Christianity is not stopped, it is a matter of time before all Farsi-speaking churches are forced to shut down".

The closure of the west Tehran church is the latest move in a crackdown that has increasingly targeted government-sanctioned churches since the end of 2011, when an AOG church in Ahwaz was raided and all attending were detained, including Sunday School children. This year, the leaders of the Anglican Churches of St Paul's and St Peter's in Esfahan have been detained. The head of St Paul's Church was temporarily released in May on bail of around \$40,000. On Sunday, May 6, the leaders of the AOG Central Church in Tehran announced that the Iranian Intelligence Ministry was demanding intrusive information on members of the congregation, including identity card numbers. More recently, members of Emmanuel Presbyterian Church in Tehran were detained, and the church was ordered to cease all weekly activities with the exception of its Sunday services.

Iran has also seen an upsurge in the harassment, arrests, trials and imprisonments of converts to Christianity since the beginning of 2012, particularly in Tehran, Kermanshah, Esfahan and Shiraz.

CSW's Advocacy Director, Andrew Johnston, said: "Whilst we have long been aware that churches in Iran are facing increasing harassment by the authorities, the closing down of the AOG associated church in west Tehran by the intelligence arm of the Revolutionary Guard, marks a particular escalation. This not only underlines Iran's continuing campaign to depict legitimate Christian activity as a danger to the state, but also sets a dangerous precedent by providing a blueprint for further church closures by the regime. CSW is calling for the immediate re-opening of this church and urges Iran, as a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenants on Human Rights, to fulfill its obligations and ensure religious freedom in its fullest sense for Christians and other religious minorities in the country."