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IRAN Grave concerns for health of Pastor Benham Irani

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is gravely concerned about the health of Pastor Benham Irani, who reportedly lost consciousness three days ago. Although he has now regained consciousness, his health is said to be declining steadily as a result of the harsh treatment he has endured in Karaj's Ghezel Hesar Prison, where he is serving a five-year sentence.

Benham Irani pastors the Church of Iran in Karaj. He was arrested in December 2006, and sentenced to six years imprisonment on charges of "action against the state" and "action against the order." The verdict against him includes text that describes Pastor Irani as an apostate and reiterates that apostates "can be killed".

Ghezel Hesar is one of Iran's most notorious prisons and, according to CSW's sources, Pastor Irani has been beaten regularly by his cell mates and prison authorities. As a result of injuries sustained during these assaults, he has difficulty walking. His health has further deteriorated due to the harsh prison conditions; he has suffered severe bleeding as a result of ulcers and complications with his colon, which led to his recent loss of consciousness. He is also unable to see very well and there are growing concerns that he could die within the next few months.

CSW's sources also report that during the first few months of his imprisonment, the pastor was held incommunicado in a small cell, where guards would repeatedly wake him from sleep as a form of psychological torture. He was moved into a cramped room where inmates could not lie down to sleep, before being transferred to his current cell.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "CSW is deeply concerned for the health and welfare of Pastor Irani, and urges the Iranian government to ensure that he receives urgent medical attention and is protected from assault, in accordance with the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. Though the charges against him are couched in political language, in reality Pastor Irani, like so many other Christian prisoners, has been imprisoned solely on account of his faith. We continue to call on Iran to honor its obligations as a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantees freedom of religion, and to release Pastor Irani unconditionally as a matter of urgency, given his deteriorating health. We also call for the unconditional release of Pastor Nadarkhani, Pastor Farshid Fathi Malayeri and all others unjustly detained or facing execution due to flawed judicial processes."