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IRAN | More Christians Jailed In Annual Campaign Of Repression

Two Christians from the Church of Iran denomination, Behzad Taalipasand and Mohammadreza (Johann) Omid, were detained this morning in the northern city of Rasht. The arrests are the latest developments in a December crackdown on house churches by the Iranian government.

In an annual ritual ironically referred to by local Christians as a 'Christmas gift', the Iranian regime generally intensifies its campaign of repression during the Christmas season. In 2010, 70 Christians were arrested during this period, while in 2011, the authorities in the southern city of Ahwaz aided and detained an entire Assemblies of God (AoG) congregation, including the Sunday school children.

This year has been no exception. Dec. 25, Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani of the Church of Iran, acquitted of apostasy in September, was jailed again in Rasht at the instigation of prison authorities to serve the remaining 45 days of a three year sentence for evangelizing Muslims.

On Dec. 27, around 50 Christians were arrested at a residential home in Tehran where they had gathered to celebrate Christmas. According to reports received by Iranian news agency Mohabat News, the majority were released after being interrogated and handing over mobile phones, full contact details and passwords to emails and social networking sites. However, 60-year old Rev. Vruir Avanesian was detained in Evin Prison, despite suffering severe health challenges. Avanesian has since been escorted by guards to a specialist clinic for compulsory dialysis treatment, where he was briefly visited by his wife before being returned to prison.

Also in December, news emerged of the imprisonment without charge of the Rev. Saeed Abedini, a 32-year-old dual Iranian and American citizen, who was detained while visiting his parents in September. According to reports, Abedini has been given several dates for a court hearing, which has been repeatedly postponed.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide said, "The Iranian government's annual campaign of arrest and harassment during a significant religious holiday is wholly unacceptable. As a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Iran is obligated to uphold freedom of religion or belief for all of its citizens, and this must include the right to observe days of worship and manifest their belief in communion with others. Moreover, while it is good that Rev. Avanesian is being allowed to receive necessary medical treatment, CSW condemns his arrest and questions Iran's continuing unwillingness or inability to provide adequate medical attention for Pastor Benham Irani, whose health continues to

deteriorate in prison. It is vital that the Iranian government ends the harassment of religious minorities within its borders, respects their right to religious freedom, and releases immediately and unconditionally all who have been imprisoned on account of their faith.”