



5.21.13

## **IRAN | Pastor Arrested as Farsi Language Church Considers Closure**

Rev. Robert Asserian, a pastor at the Central Assemblies of God (AoG) Church in Tehran, was arrested May 21 while conducting a prayer meeting at the church. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has also received reports that the church may be forced to close by the end of June due to continued pressure from the Iranian Intelligence Ministry.

Security forces are reported to have raided Rev. Asserian's house and confiscated some of his belongings, including his computer and books. They then proceeded to the church where he was leading a prayer meeting. He was arrested and taken to an unknown location.

The Iranian human rights organization Article 18 reports that on May 19, church leaders informed the congregation that they would soon make an important decision about the future of the church. A local source stated that, "The pressure has become unbearable, they [the authorities] constantly threaten the church leaders and their families with imprisonment, unexplained accidents, kidnapping and even with execution. We cannot go on like this." A final decision is expected later this week.

Pressure on Iranian Christians has intensified in recent years, with churches and their members being targeted. The AoG Church in Tehran was one of a few churches that offered services in Farsi. In 2009, they were ordered to end Farsi services on Friday, a day off for Iranians, and were only permitted to hold services in Farsi on Sundays. However, sources have confirmed that the Iranian authorities have now ordered the ending of Farsi services on Sunday, giving church leaders the option of conducting Sunday services in Armenian or facing closure. This news has caused church leaders to evaluate their options, with serious consideration being given to closure.

CSW's Advocacy Director, Andrew Johnston, said, "We are deeply concerned for the welfare of Rev. Asserian and urge the authorities to make his whereabouts known. The continued and sustained pressure by the Iranian regime on churches in Tehran has boxed them into a corner

to such an extent that they can no longer function. We renew our call for the Iranian government to honor its national and international obligations, in particular Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which guarantees freedom of religion or belief, and the right, either alone or in community with others, and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”