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IRAN | Two Christians Among 11 Prisoners Released From Jail

Iranian Christians Maryam Jalili and Mitra Rahmati were released from Evin Prison Sept. 18, six weeks before their 2 ½ year sentences were due to be completed. The women were among 11 prisoners of conscience released; others included prominent human rights lawyer, Nasrin Sotoudeh, and the reformist politician, Mohsen Aminzadeh.

Maryam and Mitra, both converts from Islam, were arrested on Christmas Eve in 2009, along with 13 others, after a raid by government officials on a house church in Pakdasht, southeast of Tehran. While most of the others were released shortly after being arrested, the two women were detained until March 17, 2010, when they were released temporarily. They were re-arrested in April 2011 and imprisoned after being convicted of “membership of an illegal group.”

Although the Iranian government has not given an explanation for the release of the 11 prisoners, it comes as President Hassan Rouhani prepares to address the United Nations General Assembly in New York, where there is speculation he may hold talks with President Obama.

During the presidential campaign, President Rouhani, viewed as a moderate and a pragmatist, promised to uphold the rights of women and religious minorities and to release political prisoners. The President also pledged to set up a “civil rights charter,” which would ensure equality without discrimination based on race, religion, or gender.

An investigation by the UK-based Guardian newspaper uncovered close to 800 political prisoners and prisoners of conscience in Iran, including journalists, lawyers, human rights activists, feminists, Christian priests, Sunni clerics, and Baha’i leaders.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), said, “CSW welcomes the release of Maryam Jailli and Mitra Rahmati, Nasrin Sotoudeh and the other prisoners. While this positive step by the Iranian government is to be commended, it is by no means sufficient given the vast number of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience. CSW

continues to call for the unconditional release of all of these prisoners, including Farshid Fathi, Benham Irani, Saeed Abedini, Shahin Lahooti, the seven Baha'i leaders, and others who belong to religious minorities and have been unjustly detained.”