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IRAN | Prison Sentences for Six Christians Upheld

Six members of a group of eight Christians from Shiraz, who were sentenced to various prison terms last year, had their prison sentences upheld on March 29 following an appeal.

On July 16, 2013, the Christians were charged with 'action against the national security' and 'propaganda against the order of the system'. Mohammad Roghangir was sentenced to six years in prison, Massoud Rezai to five years; Mehdi Ameruni and Bijan Farokhpour Haghighi received three-year sentences, Shahin Lahouti and Suroush Saraie received two and half years, and Eskandar Rezai and Roxana Forghi each received a one-year sentence. Charges against Roxana Forghi were dropped at the appeal on March 29, and Shahin Lahouti was released from prison in December 2013.

Seven of the Christians were initially arrested on October 12, 2012 when security forces raided a prayer meeting, while the eighth, Massoud Rezai, was detained a day later.

In other news, Mohabat News reports that Vahid Hakkani, a convert to Christianity, is currently on hunger strike in Adel-Abad Prison in Shiraz. Hakkani began a hunger strike on the March 20, after his appeal for conditional release was rejected. Hakkani is reportedly on the second week of his hunger strike, despite suffering from digestive problems, for which he received surgery in the latter of part 2013. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) understands his health is now deteriorating daily.

Hakkani was part of a group of four converts who were sentenced by Branch 3 of the Revolutionary Court to three years and eight months imprisonment in June 2013 on charges of 'attending house church services', 'promoting Christianity', 'propagating against the regime' and 'disturbing national security'.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "Despite the promises of President Rouhani to ensure equality for all Iranians and to release political prisoners, it is disappointing to note that the Iranian regime continues to detain religious minorities on false political charges, as has occurred once again in this case. We call for the charges against the six Christians sentenced to be dropped, urge the government to end the practice of characterizing legitimate religious activities as national security crimes, and to uphold the right of all religious minorities to freedom of religion and belief, as contained in Article 18 of International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which includes to right to change one's belief, and to which Iran is signatory. We also urge the regime to ensure the unconditional release of Vahid Hakkani, particularly in light of his deteriorating health. Finally, we call on the Iranian authorities to bring an end the harassment of religious minorities and to ensure that every Iranian citizen is able to enjoy the

rights and freedoms to which they are entitled under national and international law, including the right to freedom of religion or belief.”