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IRAN | Pastor Pressured for False Confession

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) learned that Pastor Abdolreza “Matthias” Ali-Haghnejad, who faces charges of “Moharebeh” (warring against God), was briefly held in solitary confinement. Another Christian, Fatemeh Torkajouri, was tried in absentia.

Pastor Haghnejad, a leader of the Church of Iran denomination in Karaj, reportedly spent a week in solitary confinement in a Ministry of Intelligence and National Security (VEVAK) detention center in Karaj, where he faced pressure to falsely confess that his church is involved in anti-government political activity. He was initially detained July 5, after Iranian security forces raided his home in Karaj, and was charged with “Moharebeh” Aug. 3 following a two-hour interrogation by Judge Mohammad Yari of the Sixth Branch of the Revolutionary Tribunal.

CSW learned the trial in absentia of Fatemeh Torkajouri on charges of “action against national security” took place in Tehran on Aug. 6. A verdict is yet to be issued. Her family is reportedly facing increasing pressure from the Iranian authorities to ensure her return.

Fatemeh Torkajouri was arrested Aug. 18, 2010, and spent an estimated two months in Evin Prison before leaving Iran in 2011. She is the wife of Church of Iran pastor Behrouz Sadegh-Khandjani, who was detained in 2010 on charges of blasphemy and suffered mistreatment while in prison. He was eventually released on bail and also left the country in 2011.

Iranian human rights organizations are reporting that Ward 350 of Evin Prison, which housed political prisoners, has been closed down following a violent raid by security services that took place on the evening of Aug. 12. According to reports, security agents beat and injured several prisoners and destroyed or confiscated property. A similar violent raid on the ward took place in April 2014.

Following the recent raid, former inmates were either transferred to other wards within Evin Prison, or to prisons elsewhere. Among the latter is Farshid Fathi, an Assemblies of God (AoG) church leader, who has reportedly been moved to Rajai Shahr Prison in Karaj.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “CSW is disturbed to hear of the continuing harassment of Pastor Matthias and the undue pressures being placed on the family of Fatemeh Torkajouri. Attempts by the Iranian authorities to justify the charge levelled against the pastor by eliciting a false confession merely underline the fact that his detention is unwarranted and unjust. Moreover, Iran's continuing insistence on classifying normal Christian behavior in national security terms is giving rise to confused and convoluted verdicts of questionable legality, for example a group of Christians convicted in Shiraz in 2013 was found guilty of acting against “cultural national security.” *Hundreds of Iranian journalists, lawyers, political activists and ethnic and religious minorities have been sentenced to lengthy prison sentences, lashes

and even execution on false charges and without due process, and Iranian human rights groups recently identified six judges who regularly hold trials behind closed doors lasting only a few minutes and without essential legal procedures, intimidate defendants, breach judicial independence by acting as prosecutors themselves and deprive prisoners of access to lawyers. It may be time for the international community to consider targeted sanctions against identified judges who are found to have been responsible for major miscarriages of justice that breach the fair trial principles outlined in the Iranian constitution and in international statutes to which the nation is party.”