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IRAN | Pastor Irani Faces 18 New Charges

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) learned Iranian pastor, Behnam Irani, is being held in solitary confinement and is facing 18 new charges, including “Mofsed-e-filarz”, translated as “spreading corruption on Earth”, which is a capital crime.

The charge is similar to “Moharabeh”, “warring against God”, which was recently levelled against another Christian, Pastor Matthias Haghnejad, and can be punished by capital punishment.

Pastor Irani was initially arrested in December 2006, and sentenced in 2011 to six years imprisonment for “action against the state” and “action against the order.”

In June, Pastor Irani was removed from prison and temporarily held in solitary confinement in a VEVAK (Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security) detention center, where he was interrogated on five occasions for four hours each time. He was warned that if he did not obey VEVAK, he would receive a further sentence and remain in prison for a longer time.

The fresh charges appear to be part of a surge in repression under the Rouhani presidency targeting religious and ethnic minorities. There is growing concern for Assemblies of God leader Farshid Fathi, who was transferred unexpectedly Aug. 19 from Evin Prison in Tehran to Rajai Shahr Prison in Karaj. He is in a ward with murderers and drug addicts where narcotics are used openly and fighting between inmates occurs regularly. CSW also received reports that at least five Christians were arrested in Isfahan, central Iran, this week. Bibles, computers and mobile phones belonging to Mohammad Taslimi, Hamidreza Borhani and his wife Zainab Akbari, Moluk Ruhani and her sister, named only as Sepideh, were taken at the time of their arrest.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “We are deeply concerned by the new charges against Pastor Irani, especially the charge of spreading corruption on Earth, which bears unsettling similarities to the one faced by Pastor Matthias. Such charges are tantamount to an indictment of Christianity itself and mark a renewed escalation in Iran’s campaign against Persian Christians under the Rouhani presidency. It is also deplorable that a prisoner of conscience like Farshid Fathi is currently held with hardened criminals. We urge the Iranian government to transfer him to an appropriate ward as a matter of urgency and put it on notice that it will be held accountable for his safety. We also call on the government to drop the unwarranted charges against Pastors Irani and Haghnejad, and to release them, along with the five Christians arrested this week and others who have been unjustly detained on account of their faith and in contravention of international covenants to which Iran is party, that guarantee freedom of religion or belief.”