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IRAN | Capital Charges Faced by Three Christians Dropped

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has learned that Pastor Matthias Haghnejad, Pastor Behnam Irani and Deacon Silas Rabbani from the Church of Iran denomination, who were facing capital charges that now appear to have been dropped, were tried for other alleged offenses at the 1st Branch of the Revolutionary Tribunal in Karaj on Sept. 30.

CSW was informed that Moluk Ruhani, Zainab Akbari and Hamidreza Borhani, three Christians who were among a group of six arrested in Isfahan in early September, have been released.

Pastor Haghnejad, Pastor Irani and Deacon Rabbani, who are being held separately in Ghezal Hesar Prison, were recently charged with Mofsed-e-filarz, or spreading corruption on earth, a vague charge that carries a death sentence. Additionally, the two pastors were charged with Moharebeh, enmity against God, which can also carry the death penalty, while Behnam Irani received 15 other charges.

Sources state that the Moharebeh and Mofsed-e-filarz charges appear to have been dropped and that all three were tried for “action against national security” and “creating a network to overthrow the System.” The men now await a verdict from Judge Asel Al-Hosseyn, who tried their cases.

The dropping of the capital charges against the three Christians comes a week after a 37 year-old Muslim man, Mohsen Amir-Aslani, was executed for Mofsed-e-filarz and heresy after describing the biblical story of Jonah as an allegory. According to local sources, the Head of the Judiciary, Sadegh Larijani, disregarded a Supreme Court decision to release him after the trial judge appealed for the death penalty to be carried out. While a high-ranking judge has claimed Amir-Aslani was executed for rape, the authorities have yet to produce substantive evidence to support this allegation.

Elsewhere, three of six Christians arrested in Isfahan in early September were released. Moluk Ruhani, Zainab Akbari and Hamidreza Borhani were released in late September, while Mohammed Taslimi and Parsa Dadkhah remain incarcerated. The whereabouts of Moluk Ruhani’s sister, Sepideh Morshedi, are unknown.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “While we applaud the dropping of the capital charges levelled against Pastors Haghnejad and Irani, and Deacon Rabbani, it is completely unacceptable that they have faced trial once again on unwarranted charges and that their unjust prison terms may be extended even further. Moreover it is difficult to conceive of how imprisoned men from a severely repressed community could pose a danger to such a powerful system. We also express our deepest condolences to the family of Mr. Amir-Aslani, whose execution is emblematic of the arbitrary nature of the Iranian judicial system and the flagrant

disregard of the nation's highest judicial authority for the rule of law and justice. Some in the West are calling for renewed relations with Iran in the face of the threat posed in Iraq and Syria by ISIL; however, it is worth noting that Mr. Amir-Aslani was one of six people executed on the same day that the UK Prime Minister met with President Rouhani at the United Nations. It is highly debatable whether a country that severely represses its own religious and ethnic minorities and conducts an average of two executions a day can contribute meaningfully towards resolving a conflict that is itself fuelled by religious sectarianism and an intolerance of indigenous minority communities.”