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IRAN | Lawyer for Christians Denied Access Before Second Trial

The lawyer representing Pastor Behnam Irani, Pastor Matthias Haghnejad and Deacon Silas Rabbani was denied access to his clients ahead of their appeal hearing today.

Irani, Haghnejad, and Rabbani had capital charges against them dropped and each received six-year sentences in October. Their appeal, also known as a trial of second instance, will take place today in the Sixth Branch of Karaj Revolutionary Court.

Their lawyer, Vahid Moshkani Farahani, said he is only allowed to meet with his clients on the day of the trial. Multiple requests to meet with them beforehand were rejected. He also expressed concern about the welfare of Irani, who is unwell and has been deprived of adequate medical care.

The three Christians were ordered to serve their six-year sentences in remote locations; with Haghnejad and Rabbani imprisoned in Minab in the Persian Gulf, and Irani ordered to serve his sentence in the southern city of Zabol.

The additional six-year sentence handed to Irani means he will serve a total of 12 years in prison. He was initially arrested in December 2006 and sentenced in 2011 to six years imprisonment for “action against the state” and “action against the order.” His health has deteriorated while in prison.

The six-year sentences handed down to the Christians are an exceptional punishment. Similar sentences are usually limited to two years. The sentences are indicative of a surge in repression under the Rouhani presidency targeting religious and ethnic minorities that has occurred despite his earlier promise to uphold the rights of religious minorities.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “It is unacceptable that these men have been denied access to their legal counsel ahead of the court hearing. We remain concerned about the lack of due process in their case and the exceptional nature of their punishment. They have committed no crime and are effectively being punished for their faith. We are deeply concerned for their wellbeing and in particular for Pastor Irani’s health, which has deteriorated significantly during his unjust detention. We urge the Iranian authorities to release these men and the many others who are being held in contravention of the international covenants guaranteeing freedom of religion or belief to which Iran is party.”