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## IRAN | Christian Released Early From Prison

Christian Solidarity Worldwide was informed that Suroush Saraie, a member the Church of Iran, was released from prison 14 months early.

Suroush Saraie, who was released Nov. 11, had been held in Adel Abad Prison in Shiraz since July 5, 2014, following a raid by the security services on the home of a Church of Iran pastor.

Saraie was initially arrested Oct. 12, 2012 along with six other Christians during a raid on a prayer meeting and found guilty of “action against the national security” and “propaganda against the order of the system.” He received a 2 ½-year sentence on July 16, 2013, which was later upheld on appeal.

Saraie’s early release is a welcome development in an otherwise bleak human rights situation that has taken a downward trajectory since President Hassan Rouhani ascended to power in 2013. Political opponents, journalists, activists and members of religious minorities continue to be imprisoned, with converts to Christianity and members of the Baha’i faith particularly targeted. Sufi Dervishes and members of the Sunni community also suffer harassment and imprisonment. In an indication of a renewed crackdown, 14 Christians were arrested in the city of Varamin, south east of Tehran. In addition several prominent journalists have been detained and, according to a BBC report, have been accused on state television of being “agents of U.S. infiltration.”

There has also been a spike in executions under Rouhani, with Iran executing more people per capita, including women, political activists and religious minorities, than any other country. In a report presented to the General Assembly in October, the UN Special Rapporteur for Iran, Ahmed Shaheed, called for a moratorium on the death penalty for all crimes not considered serious under international law and expressed concerns regarding the deterioration in the freedoms of expression, association, peaceful assembly, access to information, religion or belief for minorities and women’s rights.

President Rouhani is due to visit Italy Nov. 14-15 where he will also be meeting with Pope Francis. The Vatican news agency Fides reported that a meeting was convened at the St. George Armenian Church in Tehran on Nov. 10 in advance of this visit. It was attended by representatives of recognized Christian denominations and other permitted minority religious communities, including Jews and Zoroastrians, and by politicians representing these groups in the Iranian parliament.

According to Fides, Armenian parliamentarian Karen Khanlari said the meeting was convened in

response to foreign media and nations which he alleged presents "a distorted vision regarding the condition of religious minorities in Iran." Khanlari went on to claim these forces were "taking advantage of religious minorities as an argument to put pressure on Iran," that "religious minorities enjoy full civil rights" and that their needs are taken into account by the political authorities through official channels that are always open. In his speech, Ciamak Morsadegh, who represents the Jewish community in the National Consultative Assembly, insisted that Iranian law "guarantees the rights of all," while the Bishop of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Sebuh Sarkisian, contrasted the plight of Christians in Iran favorably with that of Christians elsewhere in the Middle East, adding that religious minorities must "find the best way to address and solve problems related to their condition in Iran."

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "While we welcome Suroush Saraie's early release, we note that he should never have been detained and charged with security crimes for simply exercising his right to freedom of religion or belief by gathering peacefully with fellow Christians. Contrary to the views expressed at the meeting at St. George's in Tehran, the Special Rapporteur's findings, which confirm CSW's research, indicate a worrying deterioration in the human rights situation in Iran. We therefore urge the Iranian authorities to release the many other prisoners of conscience who are unjustly detained and to ensure that constitutional guarantees for religious freedom become a reality for all of Iran's religious communities."