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IRAN | Five Christians Arrested at Picnic

Five Iranian Christians were arrested by Intelligence Ministry (VEVAK) agents Aug. 26 at a picnic in an area 90 miles east of Tehran.

Amin Afshar Naderi, Hadi Asgari, Amir Saman Dashti, Mohammad Dehnavi, and Ramil Bet-Tamraz were arrested while picnicking with their wives in a private garden in Firouzkooch. In a comment to the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, Mansour Borji, spokesperson for the Council of United Iranian Churches (HAMGAAM), said VEVAK agents also confiscated three bibles and assaulted Naderi after he asked whether they had a warrant to enter the private garden. He emphasized that "the arrested individuals were not conducting a religious meeting and had gathered only for a good time."

The detainees are currently being held in Evin Prison in Tehran. Four are reported to be converts to Christianity.

Ramil Bet-Tamraz is the son of Victor Bet-Tamraz, a prominent Assyrian pastor and former leader of Shahr-Ara Pentecostal Church, who was arrested on Christmas Eve 2014 along with Naderi and others, and was accused of illegally printing and distributing bibles for missionary activities. According to Borji, both men were later released on bail.

In a comment to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) Borji added, "The crackdown on Protestant Christians in Iran has continued under President Rouhani and in fact has worsened in the last few months. Any gathering of Christians, including social gatherings, such as birthday or engagement parties, is also perceived by Iranian security officials as a potential underground church activity and threat against national security." Borji also pointed out that some of the recently arrested Christians, "including the five arrested in Firouzkooch, are former members of the official churches which were forced to shut down and cease their services in Farsi language."

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "The fact that these men were arrested while enjoying a day out with their wives illustrates the unacceptable level of harassment endured by Iran's Christian community. In addition, the unwarranted assault on Mr. Naderi following a valid request for a warrant indicates that Christians continue to be mistreated with impunity. Their

arrest while enjoying normal social interaction justifies the conclusion that in reality these men were detained solely on account of their faith. We call for their unconditional release and once again urge the international community to press Iran to release all prisoners of conscience and to respect the right to freedom of religion or belief, as articulated in its constitution and international treaties to which it is signatory."