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IRAN | Christians Await Sentencing Following Trial

Three Iranian Christians, who were arrested during a series of raids on Christian homes in the city of Rasht on May 13, were tried Sept. 10.

Yasser Mossayebzadeh, Saheb Fadaie and Mehdi Reza Omid (Youhan) appeared before the 10th Chamber of the Revolutionary Court and were charged with "actions against national security" and drinking wine during a Communion service. The penalty for a guilty verdict is flogging. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) was informed that the hearing took only 10 minutes.

The three men were arrested May 13 in a series of raids on Christian homes by security service (VEVAK) agents that also targeted the home of Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, who was arrested along with his wife, Fatemeh Pasandideh. It is still unclear whether the pastor's case is included in this trial.

Mehdi Reza Omid (Youhan) has been flogged in the past. On Dec. 31, 2012, he was arrested along with three other Christians during a crackdown on house churches. The group was charged with drinking alcohol, in connection with taking wine during communion, as well as with possession of a receiver and satellite antenna, and he received 80 lashes on Oct. 30, 2013.

The private consumption of alcohol by non-Muslims is not illegal in Iran. A local source has speculated that the renewal of prosecutions for drinking alcohol in connection with Communion services indicates a desire on the part of the Iranian authorities to create Shari'a-compliant churches as part of the ongoing policy of restricting or controlling religious practices.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) said, "The actions of the Iranian authorities effectively criminalize the Christian sacrament of Communion and constitutes an unacceptable infringement on the right to practice faith freely and peaceably. We urge the Iranian authorities to ensure that the nation's practices and legal procedures do not contradict its constitutional commitments recognizing the Christian faith, or its international obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to guarantee the full enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief to all of its religious communities."