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## **Another Church forced to close its doors on Farsi-speaking Christians**

Mohabat News (01.01.2014) - According to [Mohabat News](#), a source from Tehran reported that another church, St. Peter Church in Tehran, was added to the expanding list of churches where Farsi-speaking Christians are not allowed anymore.

According to the report, pastor of St. Peter Church, Pastor Sargis Benyamin, announced on Sunday, December 8, that Farsi-speaking attendees, who are in majority, are not allowed in the church anymore. This is while some of these Farsi-speaking members have been attending the church regularly for more than 20 years.

Just one week after the announcement, church's custodian prevented a few of the Farsi-speaking members from entering the church. Those prevented included Sunday school teachers, ministers and elders of the church. They were told they cannot enter the church building even for purposes other than attending the service.

Also, according to unconfirmed reports, Pastor Benyamin even announced that from now on, entire service, including sermons, will be held in a language other than Farsi, Iran's official language. Iranian churches are under pressure from government, more specifically Revolutionary Guard Intelligence, to stop their service in Farsi.

Earlier Ministry of Intelligence asked members of St. Peter Church to submit their ID cards and personal information to the ministry. This was done to intimidate church members and keep them from attending church services.

It is noteworthy that only a few Armenian and Assyrian families attend St. Peter church and Farsi-speaking Christians form majority of the congregation. Therefore, once all Farsi-speaking members are banned, it would not be unlikely that the church be closed down completely.

Some analysts believe that Assyrian Member of Parliament, Yonatan Betkolia, is behind this prohibition order. Past experiences have clearly shown his close cooperation with the Ministry of Intelligence. Through this cooperation he has been able to convince a number of Assyrian and Armenian pastors to close the doors of their churches on Farsi-speaking Christians.

Since 2011, pressure and restrictions on Iranian churches have increased dramatically.

Many Christians, especially newly converted Christians, have faced imprisonment, pressure and harassment in the past few years. Iranian intelligence and security forces have recently focused their efforts to close down more churches around the country. Among the already closed churches are the Assemblies of God [Church in Ahwaz](#), Farsi-speaking [church of Janat-Abad](#) and Central Assemblies of God Churches in Tehran. The Central AoG Church was the largest Farsi-speaking [Church in Tehran](#) which was completely closed down during the past presidential election campaigns in Iran.

Even a [Latin Catholic Church](#) in Tehran was forced to ban Farsi-speakers from attending, although only small parts of their services were held in Farsi. Government authorities threatened church officials and warned them against allowing Farsi-speaking Christians in their services.

There are other few churches across the country as well, that are ordered to prohibit Farsi-speaker attendance. They are also banned from registering new members.

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## **Iranian Christian converts arrested as they celebrated Christmas**

Mohabat News (29.12.2013) - According to [Mohabat News](#), Iranian security authorities raided a house, owned by Mr. Hosseini, where a group of Christians had gathered to celebrate Christmas on Tuesday, December 24. They arrested Mr. Hosseini, Ahmad Bazyar, Faegheh Nasrollahi, Mastaneh Rastegari, and Amir-Hossein Ne'matollahi.

The report received by Mohabat News stated: "These Christians had gathered to worship and celebrate birth of Jesus."

The Committee of Human Rights Reporters reported that armed plain-clothes security officers raided the house-church, insulted and searched those in attendance, thoroughly searched the house and seized all Christian books, CDs, and laptops they found. They also took the Satellite TV receiver.

The authorities also searched a neighboring house, because those present were observing the raid. They insulted and beat the father of the family and warned them not to speak with anyone about what they had witnessed.

There is still no update about the whereabouts or condition of these arrested Christians.

In recent years the authorities have intensified their pressure and threats against Christians around Christmas, and increased their surveillance of churches.

Many Christian converts have been arrested or faced other persecution around Christmas in recent years. [A large number of Christian converts](#) were arrested in Tehran in the past few years as part of pre-organized attacks by government authorities.

Christmas is an important time of the year for Christians around the world as they celebrate the birth of Jesus. However, with threats from the Islamic government, Christmas is a different experience for Iranian Christians.

It is worth mentioning that [Hassan Rouhani, the Iranian president, sent Pope Francis Christmas greetings](#) on December 25, at a time when his government continues to harass Iranian Christians and curtail their freedom.

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## **Reverend Vruir Avanesian sentenced to 3 ½ years in prison by the Revolutionary Court!**

***The Revolutionary Court of Tehran with the full awareness that Rev. Vruir Avanesian, one of the official ordained pastors of Assemblies of God Churches in Iran, is suffering from serious illnesses, sentenced him to 3 ½ years in prison.***

Mohabat News (12.12.2013) - According to reports obtained by [Mohabat News](#), the Revolutionary Court of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in its ongoing oppressive and intimidating anti-Christian campaign, targeting Christian leaders and pastors of Iranian Churches, sentenced Rev. Vruir Avanesian, an ordained Iranian minister of Armenian heritage, to 3 ½ years in prison.

Based on official court documents obtained by Mohabat News on December 5, 2013, including a signed order by the court judge, the court imposed a 3 ½ year sentence which was delivered to Rev. Avanesian. In these documents Rev. Avanesian was charged and found guilty of anti-government activities and promotion of ideas contrary to the sanctity of the Islamic Republic of Iran. He was also given 20 days to file a complaint in the court against the verdict and the imposed sentence.

[The initial court hearing](#) regarding the allegations against Rev. Vruir Avanesian was held on September 7, 2013 at the 26th judicial division of the Revolutionary Court of Tehran. This hearing was held behind closed doors and was closed to the public. It was decided at this hearing that until the announcement of the verdict of the court, Rev. Avanesian was to remain at home and avoid all contacts with other Christians.

### ***The critical medical condition of Rev. Avanesian***

It must be mentioned that Vruir Avanesian, a talented Christian singer and former secular artist who had been an ordained pastor of the Armenain and Farsi-speaking congregations of the Assemblies of God churches in Iran for more than 17 years, is currently suffering from serious heart disease and diabetes. He undergoes kidney dialysis three times week at Heshemi-Nejad hospital, a private clinic in Tehran, and has been retired from active ministry due his medical condition.

The court was fully aware of Rev. Avanesian's medical condition and issued a harsh sentence despite such prior knowledge of his health. It's noteworthy that on the very day that Rev. Avanesian was to be present at the court hearing, he was at the dialysis clinic and was unable to attend the proceedings.

### ***The reaction of the court judge to the medical condition of Rev. Avanesian***

The medical condition of Rev. Avanesian had deteriorated to the extent that at the end of the first court hearing when the court judge ordered Rev. Avanesian to return to the 26th judicial court on the following Sunday, he told the judge that due to a prior appointment at the hospital for dialysis he would be unable to attend the hearings. The court ordered him to produce documents and medical proof that would verify his claims of medical difficulties otherwise the court would render its verdict based on allegations presented to the court.

At a time when all Christians around the world celebrate the birth of Christ and the festivities of Christmas and the new year, such a sentence is imposed on a 61 year old

man with serious medical condition. The court is fully aware of the fact that Rev. Avanessian will not be able to withstand the harsh conditions of imprisonment.

Rev. Avanessian and a group of Iranian Christians had gathered at a private residence to celebrate Christmas and the birth of Jesus Christ and were [arrested on December 27, 2012](#) through an orchestrated and coordinated effort of various government security forces.

According to several government sources this campaign of terrorizing and arresting Armenian-Iranian Christian leaders and pastors who are actively involved in the evangelization of Farsi-speaking Iranians had been planned for quite some time. In recent months several of these Armenian leaders and pastors who have been ministering to Farsi-speaking Christians have been summoned or arrested by the security forces of the Ministry of Information and have been warned and ordered to completely stop all their ministry activities or leave the country within 90 days. The [closure of the Central branch of the Assemblies of God Church in Tehran](#), the largest Farsi-speaking church in Iran, was perhaps the beginning of this renewed campaign.

### ***The Promise of President Rohani remains unfulfilled***

One of the most important presidential campaign promises of Hasan Rohani, the current President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, was the [improvement of the conditions of the ethnic and religious minorities of Iran](#). This promise has so far remained unfulfilled and in the first 100 days of his presidency, no significant improvements have been observed in this matter.

President Rohani, who advocates respect and observance of the rights of all citizens in Iran, has never acknowledged nor accepted the existence of the Farsi-speaking Christian minority who now make up the largest Christian population inside Iran. These new Christian converts are facing extreme personal repression and social restrictions.

According to published reports, the arrest and detainment of new Christian converts in various cities in Iran continues. Some have been tried and sentenced to very harsh and long term prison sentences or exiled to remote places inside the country. The largest Farsi-speaking church in Iran, due to unbearable pressures from the security forces of the Ministry of Information, was shut down and no opportunity for the re-opening of the church has been given to the church officials. Some of the leaders and pastors have also been ordered to leave the country and immigrate to other countries. The printing and the possession of any Bible continues to remain a crime punishable by prison and other harsh treatments by the government.

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## **Security forces raided one of Baha'is university classrooms**

***Security guards raided classrooms of Baha'i students who are deprived of education and forced them not to attend these classes again.***

Mohabat News (02.12.2013) - security guards raided a Bahai's house named Shamim Shabro who held classes for students who are deprived from education.

Students, who have been deprived from education because of their faith in Baha'ism, have been secretly studying for an undergraduate level.

One of the students said to HRANA:"our class scheduled to be 12 to 3 in the afternoon and Moein Abadi was supposed to be the teacher, but shortly after the start of the class, security guards brutally broke into the house, inspected everybody and confiscated all of the cell phones".

"They took every person's details, photos and forced some of the students to sign a written declaration that they would never attend virtual classrooms again. They also were told that they will be summoned to the court later", the source added.

In response to question about the number of Baha'i students in Iran, the source said "it is not easy to know the exact number of students deprived from education, but certainly there are more than 1500 of Baha'is who have been banned from education and even in current year they have not been allowed to participate in the entrance exam of the university contrary to Mr Rouhani's speech that there is nobody deprived from education in Iran."/Hrana

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## **Four Christians sentenced to 80 lashes for drinking communion wine**

CSW (23.10.2013) - A court in the Iranian city of Rasht has sentenced four members of the Church of Iran denomination to 80 lashes each for drinking wine during a communion service.

The verdict, dated 6 October, charges Behzad Taalipasand, Mehdi Reza Omid (Youhan), Mehdi Dadkhah (Danial) and Amir Hatemi (Youhanna) with drinking alcohol and possession of a receiver and satellite antenna. They received the verdict on 20 October and have ten days to appeal the sentence.

Behzad Taalipasand and Mehdi Reza Omid (Youhan) [were detained](#) on 31 December 2012 during a crackdown on house churches by the Iranian government.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), said, "The sentences handed down to these members of the Church of Iran effectively criminalise the Christian sacrament of sharing in the Lord's Supper and constitute an unacceptable infringement on the right to practice faith freely and peaceably. We urge the Iranian authorities to ensure that the nation's legal practices and procedures do not contradict its international obligation under the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to guarantee the full enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief by all of its religious communities."

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## **Release Pastor Saeed Abedini immediately: European Parliament joins leaders calling for Iran to free pastor**

The Christian Post (11.10.2013) - The European Parliament passed a resolution Friday calling for Iran to release Pastor Saeed Abedini, who has been imprisoned in the country for over a year for his Christian faith.

The American Center for Law and Justice has launched the largest campaign in its history to have Abedini released by sending thousands of letters to Iran's president Hassan Rouhani. The legal group announced Friday that in addition to this campaign, it has also successfully convinced members of the European Parliament to issue a resolution requesting Abedini's release. This effort was championed both by the ACLJ and its European affiliate, the European Centre for Law and Justice.

The resolution states that the European Parliament "[i]s deeply concerned about the fate of Pastor Saeed Abedini, who has been detained for over a year and was sentenced to eight years of prison in Iran on charges related to his religious beliefs," according to a press release composed by the ACLJ's Executive Director Jordan Sekulow.

The press release also states that the fate of Pastor Abedini is of great concern to members of the European Parliament, and the resolution reportedly has broad cross-party support. "The fate of Pastor Saeed Abedini in Iran is also a matter of deep concern to MEPs, who called on the government to exonerate and release him immediately."

The resolution went on to call on the Middle Eastern country to ensure the right to religious freedom for all of its citizens, as well as the right for one to change their religion for whatever reason.

Several influential political and religious figures have called for Abedini's release in recent months. In late September, President Barack Obama spoke with President Rouhani regarding Abedini's imprisonment, expressing his concern that the pastor has been held for over a year for his religious beliefs. Additionally, renowned evangelical leader Billy Graham addressed a letter to President Rouhani requesting Abedini's release.

Graham wrote that he believed releasing Abedini would "have a positive impact in our nation, and might well be perceived by our leadership as a significant step in reducing tensions."

Abedini marked his one-year anniversary at Evin Prison in Tehran in late September. The pastor was arrested in 2012 and later sentenced to eight years imprisonment for allegedly threatening national security. His wife Naghmeh, and two children live in the U.S. and are being legally represented by the ACLJ.

The ACLJ has continued to assert that Abedini is being punished for his Christian faith, and has sent numerous petitions to the country signed by hundreds of thousands of people around the world calling for Abedini's release. The ACLJ said in early October that although it remains cautiously optimistic of the recent international attention brought to Abedini's case, the real victory will come when the Christian pastor is released and reunited with his family.

"Now is a critical time to act for Pastor Saeed as his case has been raised to the highest levels of both the U.S. and Iranian governments," the ACLJ said at the time, as previously reported by The Christian Post. "The world is watching."

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## **Resolution of the European Parliament on persecution against Christians**

European Parliament (10.10.2013) -

European Parliament resolution of 10 October 2013 on recent cases of violence and persecution against Christians, notably in Maaloula (Syria) and Peshawar (Pakistan) and the case of Pastor Saeed Abedini (Iran) (2013/2872(RSP))

*The European Parliament,*

- having regard to its resolutions of 15 November 2007 on serious events which compromise Christian communities' existence and those of other religious communities<sup>(1)</sup>, of 21 January 2010 on recent attacks on Christian communities<sup>(2)</sup>, of 6 May 2010 on the mass atrocities in Jos, Nigeria<sup>(3)</sup>, of 20 May 2010 on religious freedom in Pakistan<sup>(4)</sup>, of 25 November 2010 on Iraq: the death penalty (notably the case of Tariq Aziz) and attacks against Christian communities<sup>(5)</sup>, of 20 January 2011 on the situation of Christians in the context of freedom of religion<sup>(6)</sup>, of 27 October 2011 on the situation in Egypt and Syria, in particular of Christian communities<sup>(7)</sup>, and of 13 December 2012 on the annual report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World 2011 and the European Union's policy on the matter<sup>(8)</sup>,
- having regard to its recommendation to the Council of 13 June 2013 on the draft EU Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief<sup>(9)</sup>,
- having regard to the EU Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief,
- having regard to the statement of 23 September 2013 by Catherine Ashton, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the Commission, condemning the attack on the Christian community in Peshawar, Pakistan,
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 21 February 2011 on intolerance, discrimination and violence on the basis of religion or belief, as well as the Council conclusions of 16 November 2009 underlining the strategic importance of freedom of religion or belief and of countering religious intolerance,
- having regard to Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948,
- having regard to Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966,
- having regard to the UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion and Belief of 1981,
- having regard to the reports of the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief,
- having regard to Rules 122(5) and 110(4) of its Rules of Procedure,

A. whereas the European Union has repeatedly expressed its commitment to freedom of religion, freedom of conscience and freedom of thought, and has stressed that governments have a duty to guarantee these freedoms throughout the world; whereas political and religious leaders have a duty at all levels to combat extremism and promote mutual respect among individuals and religious groups; whereas the development of human rights, democracy and civil liberties is the common base on which the European Union builds its relations with third countries and has been provided for by the democracy clause in the agreements between the EU and third countries;

B. whereas, according to international human rights law and Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in particular, everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; whereas this right includes freedom to change one's religion or belief, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest one's religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching; whereas, according to the UN Human Rights Committee, the freedom of religion or belief protects all beliefs, including theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs;

C. whereas several UNHRC resolutions call on 'all States, within their national legal framework, in conformity with international human rights instruments, to take all appropriate measures to combat hatred, discrimination, intolerance and acts of violence, intimidation and coercion motivated by religious intolerance, including attacks on religious places, and to encourage understanding, tolerance and respect in matters relating to freedom of belief or religion';

D. whereas according to various reports, government repression and social hostility against individuals and groups from various religious or belief backgrounds are on the increase, in particular in Pakistan, Arab Spring countries and parts of Africa; whereas in some cases the situation facing Christian communities is such as to endanger their future existence and, if they were to disappear, this would entail the loss of a significant part of the religious heritage of the countries concerned;

### ***Maaloula, Syria***

E. whereas on 4 September 2013, militants from Jabhat al-Nusra, a group with ties to al-Qaeda, launched an assault on the Syrian village of Maaloula;

F. whereas Maaloula is a symbol of Christian presence in Syria and has been home to different religious communities who have lived in peaceful coexistence for centuries; whereas every September Syrians of all religions have participated in the Day of the Cross festival in this town; whereas Maaloula is one of the three towns and villages in the country where Aramaic is still spoken by the local population;

G. whereas the violent clashes in Maaloula are the first attacks specifically targeting a notable Christian community since the beginning of the violent crisis in Syria; whereas at least four people – Michael Thaalab, Antoine Thaalab, Sarkis Zakem and Zaki Jabra – were killed in these clashes while others – Shadi Thaalab, Jihad Thaalab, Moussa Shannis, Ghassan Shannis, Daoud Milaneh and Atef Kalloumeh – were kidnapped or disappeared; whereas since fighting began in the town, most of its 5 000 residents have fled to neighbouring villages or to Damascus; whereas events in Maaloula are evidence of the further sectarianisation of the Syrian conflict;

H. whereas the Convent of St Tekla (Mar Takla) has historically been home to nuns and to orphans of both the Christian and Muslim religions; whereas around 40 nuns and orphans have stayed in Maaloula despite the intense fighting and are trapped in the convent under deteriorating conditions due to the lack of water and other supplies;

### ***Peshawar, Pakistan***

I. whereas on 22 September 2013, in a double suicide bomb attack on the All Saints Church in Kohati Gate, a suburb of Peshawar, at least 82 people were killed and over 120 injured;

J. whereas the Islamist group Jundullah with links to Tehrik-i-Talibaan Pakistan claimed responsibility for the attack, saying it would continue with attacks on Christians and non-

Muslims because they are enemies of Islam and would not stop until US drone attacks in Pakistan cease; whereas Tehrik-i-Talibaan Pakistan denied any involvement in the blast and having any links with Jundullah;

K. whereas Pakistan's Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, condemned the attack, saying that targeting innocent people is against the teachings of Islam;

L. whereas Christians, who represent about 1,6 % of the population in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, suffer from prejudice and sporadic bouts of mob violence;

M. whereas the majority of Pakistani Christians lead a precarious existence, often fearful of allegations of blasphemy, a subject which can provoke outbursts of public violence;

N. whereas on 9 March 2013, Muslims in Lahore torched more than 150 Christian homes and two churches in response to an allegation of blasphemy;

O. whereas Pakistan's blasphemy laws make it dangerous for religious minorities to express themselves freely or engage openly in religious activities;

### ***The case of Pastor Saeed Abedini, Iran***

P. whereas Saeed Abedini, an Iranian-American pastor imprisoned in Iran since 26 September 2012, was sentenced on 27 January 2013 by a revolutionary court in Iran to an eight-year prison term on charges of disturbing national security by creating a network of Christian churches in private homes; whereas it is reported that Saeed Abedini has suffered physical and psychological abuse in prison;

Q. whereas the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran asserts that Christians should not face sanctions for manifesting and practising their faith, and therefore remains concerned that Christians are reportedly being arrested and prosecuted on the grounds of vaguely worded national security crimes for exercising their beliefs;

1. Strongly condemns the recent attacks against Christians and expresses its solidarity with the families of the victims; expresses once again its deep concerns about the proliferation of episodes of intolerance, repression and violent events directed against Christian communities, particularly in the countries of Africa, Asia and the Middle East; urges the governments concerned to ensure that the perpetrators of these crimes and all persons responsible for the attacks, as well as for other violent acts against Christians or other religious minorities, are brought to justice and tried by due process;

2. Strongly condemns all forms of discrimination and intolerance based on religion and belief, and acts of violence against all religious communities; stresses once again that the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is a fundamental human right;

3. Reiterates its concern about the exodus of Christians from various countries, especially Middle Eastern countries, in recent years;

### ***Maaloula, Syria***

4. Is worried about the current situation facing Christians in Syria; condemns the actions of Jabhat al-Nusra and associated militants in Maaloula and the surrounding area; notes that until now Christians and Muslims used to coexist peacefully in this village, even during the conflict, and agreed that the town must remain a place of peace; recognises that the attack on Maaloula is only one aspect of the Syrian civil war;

5. Emphasises that the monasteries of Maaloula have to be protected in order to preserve life, religious activities and architectural treasures, and to allow Christians and Muslims to live peacefully together;
6. Calls for immediate support and humanitarian assistance to the nuns and orphans trapped in the Convent of St Tekla (Mar Takla); calls on all sides involved in the conflict to allow access to the convent to humanitarian groups;
7. Is concerned about the consequences of these attacks and the possible risks to the Christian community; is aware that Christian and other communities are being caught in the crossfire and are being forced to take sides in a war that continues to sectarianise;
8. Stresses that all actors have a duty to protect all the different minorities present in Syria, including Shias, Alawites, Kurds, Druzes and Christians;

### ***Peshawar, Pakistan***

9. Strongly condemns the attack on the All Saints Church in Peshawar and the other recent terrorist attacks;
10. Welcomes the widespread condemnation of the attacks by political players and sections of Pakistan's civil society;
11. Urges the Government of Pakistan to do everything in its power to bring the perpetrators of the attack on the All Saints Church in Peshawar to justice; calls for stronger action to ensure the protection of all Pakistani citizens – regardless of their religion or belief – and to bring to justice all groups and individuals responsible for inciting and carrying out acts of terror;
12. Calls on the Government of Pakistan to take action to protect victims of religiously motivated mob violence, to actively address religious hostility by societal actors, to combat religious intolerance, acts of violence and intimidation, and to act against the perception of impunity;
13. Is deeply worried about the growing danger for Christians in Pakistan, given the recent rise in attacks on this minority, such as the persecution of hundreds of Christians by Islamic zealots in March in Lahore over allegations of blasphemy against Islam;
14. Is deeply concerned about the general situation facing religious minorities in Pakistan, and especially the Christian churches, which have received threats from the Taliban and other extremist groups;
15. Expresses its deep concern that the controversial blasphemy laws are open to misuse that can affect people of all faiths in Pakistan; expresses its particular concern that use of the blasphemy laws, which were publicly opposed by the late Minister Shahbaz Bhatti and by the late Governor Salman Taseer, is currently on the rise to target Christians in Pakistan;
16. Calls on the Government of Pakistan to carry out a thorough review of the blasphemy laws and their current application, in particular Sections 295 B and C of the Penal Code, which prescribe mandatory life sentences (295 B and C) or even the death penalty (295 C) for alleged acts of blasphemy;

17. Recalls that freedom of religion and minority rights are guaranteed by Pakistan's constitution; encourages all Pakistanis to work together to promote and ensure tolerance and mutual understanding;

18. Welcomes the measures taken in the interest of religious minorities by the Government of Pakistan since November 2008, such as establishing a five per cent quota for minorities in the federal job sector, recognising non-Muslim public holidays and declaring a National Minorities Day;

### ***The case of Pastor Saeed Abedini, Iran***

19. Is deeply concerned about the fate of Pastor Saeed Abedini, who has been detained for over a year and was sentenced to eight years of prison in Iran on charges related to his religious beliefs;

20. Calls on the Government of Iran to exonerate and immediately release Saeed Abedini and all other individuals held or charged on account of their religion;

21. Reiterates its call on Iran to take steps to ensure that full respect is shown for the right to freedom of religion or belief, including by ensuring that its legislation and practices fully conform to Article 18 of the ICCPR; points out that this also requires that the right of everyone to change his or her religion, if he or she so chooses, be unconditionally and fully guaranteed;

22. Welcomes the talk of moderation and religious tolerance from Iran's new president, Hassan Rouhani; believes that the EU should engage in a human rights dialogue with Iran;

23. Reiterates its call on the Council, the Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission to pay greater attention to the subject of freedom of religion or belief and to the situation of religious communities, including Christians, in agreements and cooperation arrangements with third countries, as well as in human rights reports;

24. Welcomes the adoption by the Council on 24 June 2013 of the EU Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief; urges the Commission, the EEAS and the Member States to fully implement these guidelines and to make full use of any tools and suggestions presented therein;

25. Supports all initiatives aimed at promoting dialogue and mutual respect between communities; calls on all religious authorities to promote tolerance and to take initiatives against hatred and violent and extremist radicalisation;

26. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the European External Action Service, the Vice-President of the European Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, the governments and parliaments of the Member States, the Secretary-General of the UN, the UN Human Rights Council, UN Women, the Government of Syria, the Syrian National Council, the Government and Parliament of Pakistan, and the Government and Parliament of Iran.

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## **Human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh released**

International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (18.09.2013) – An hour after her release from prison, human rights lawyer and prisoner of conscience Nasrin Sotoudeh told the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, “When they took me out of the prison, they told me, ‘You are free.’ Last night they told four others. They told me that my furlough was approved, but when I came out of the prison door, they told me ‘You are free.’ This is why I didn’t sign the furlough form in which prisoners promise to return after three to four days.”

Nasrin Sotoudeh also told the Campaign that the other imprisoned lawyers must be released as soon as possible, because they are only in prison because they carried out their professional duties. “We wish for everyone to be released, because their imprisonment was a result of that heavy political atmosphere, without a doubt. I was honored to have Mr. Abdolfattah Soltani as my lawyer; he did a lot of hard work for my case. Three of my lawyers were prosecuted, and Mr. Soltani received the heaviest sentence with 13 years in prison along with exile at Borazjan prison. Of course he is still [imprisoned] in Tehran now. According to all international standards, lawyers are immune in carrying out their professional duties, and this is a principle that has been totally ignored and violated in the case of lawyers in Iran. We really want attention to this principle,” she told the Campaign.

Reza Khandan, Nasrin Sotoudeh’s husband, told the Campaign, “My wife was told that she has been released, but she doesn’t know exactly whether this was a conditional release or a pardon. Of course she would have qualified for conditional release, but political prisoners aren’t usually granted conditional release. Usually, when she came to furlough leave, she was informed of how many days she would be on leave, but they just told her ‘You are free’ and brought her home in their car and left.”

Nasrin Sotoudeh, lawyer and human rights activist, repeatedly embarked on hunger strikes to protest her conditions, and was transferred to solitary confinement. Sotoudeh has been in prison since September 2010. She was sentenced to 11 years in prison, 20 years’ ban on her legal practice, and 20 years’ ban on foreign travel on charges of “acting against national security, collusion and propaganda against the regime, and membership in the Defenders of Human Rights Center.” An appeals court later reduced her sentence to six years in prison. She was also separately sentenced to cash fines for failing to observe the Islamic hejab, or head-covering.

The release of Nasrin Sotoudeh and several other political prisoners takes place as Iranian President Hassan Rouhani prepares to travel next week to attend the UN General Assembly’s 68th session in New York. In past years, international media have questioned Iranian officials about the conditions of political prisoners and the suppressive atmosphere inside Iran during their New York trips.

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## **Murderers of Iranian Baha’i must be brought to justice, says Baha’i International Community**

Baha’i International Community (29.08.2013) - The murder of a well-known Baha’i on Saturday in the southern Iranian city of Bandar Abbas should be treated as a hate crime and must be investigated immediately, said the Baha’i International Community today.

“There is little doubt that the killing of Mr. Ataollah Rezvani was motivated by religious prejudice,” said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Baha’i International

Community to the United Nations. "Therefore, it is essential that the government at the highest levels investigate this without delay under its international obligations.

"In recent years, clerics and the authorities in Iran have sought to create an atmosphere of anti-Baha'i hatred, using the pulpit and state-sponsored media.

"The newly instituted government of President Hassan Rouhani now has a clear choice. It can continue as his predecessors have, allowing such incidents to take place with impunity, indicating to the world that nothing has changed. Or it can show the world that it is committed to upholding justice and human rights for all Iranians."

Reports from Iran indicate that Mr. Rezvani was shot in the back of the head, by assailants who apparently forced him to drive to a isolated location near the railway station on the outskirts of Bandar Abbas. His body was discovered on Sunday after he failed to return home.

His killing comes after a series of incidents that were apparently designed to force him and his family to leave the city. Recently, he had come under pressure from agents of the Ministry of Intelligence, who instigated his dismissal from a job in water purification. More recently, he had begun to receive menacing telephone calls from unknown persons. This came against a backdrop of attacks on Baha'is from the pulpit by local clerics in the past several years.

Since 2005 in Iran, at least nine Baha'is have been murdered or died under suspicious circumstances, and another 52 have been physically assaulted, both by government agents and plainclothes or unidentified attackers – all without prosecution.

"Mr. Rezvani had been well-known and respected by ordinary citizens in Bandar Abbas as a man of honesty and helpfulness," said Ms. Dugal, noting that he is survived by a wife and two children.

"Yet sinister forces sought to drive him from the city he sought only to serve, leading ultimately to his untimely death," she said.

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## **Iranian Sunnis to be executed for their religious beliefs**

Today's Zaman (23.08.2013) - An Iranian court has sentenced 17 Iranian Sunnis, including religious scholars, to death because of their religious beliefs, leading a rights group to launch a campaign to save them.

The condemned have been awaiting execution in Tehran's Gohardasht Prison, also known as Rajai Shahr, west of Tehran since early June. The Sunni prisoners have been convicted of "acting against national security," and "moharebeh" (enmity against God), which is punishable by death in Iran. The prisoners are said to have confessed to these crimes under torture, according to information from the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran.

The human rights organization says that Iranian Sunnis face grave religious discrimination in the country.

Among the Sunni prisoners sentenced to death by Branch 28 of the Tehran Revolutionary Court are Ahmad Naseri, Talib Malaki, Hamed Ahmadi, Adrees Neimati, Jahangir Dehghani, Jamshid Dehghani, Sadiq Mohammadi, Shahram Ahmadi, Varia Ghaderifard,

Behrooz Shanzari, Farzad Shanzari, Mokhtar Rahemi, Pooria Mohammadi, Bahman Rahemi, Kamal Malaie, Mohammad Gharebi and Mohammad Yavar Rahemi.

A Sunni news outlet in Iran is circulating a petition to stop the executions. <http://sonsofsunnah.com/2013/08/22/petitions-for-17-sunni-muslim-political-prisoners-in-iran-sentenced-to-death/#more-2427>

Arrests of members of Iran's Sunni minority have intensified since 2009, and are focused on towns home to Sunnis like Javanrood, Javansar, Saghez, Baneh, Bukan, Sardasht, Mahabad and Piranshahr, according to information from the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran.

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## **Mohammad-Hadi Bordhar arrested for Bible distribution in Iran**

Huffington Post (21.08.2013) - An Iranian Christian convert has been sentenced to 10 years in prison for distributing Bibles in his home country, the Vatican missionary news agency Fides reported on Wednesday.

Mohammad-Hadi Bordhar was arrested in Iran in December and reportedly said he wanted to "evangelise by handing out 12,000 pocket bibles".

He was accused of "crimes against state security".

Fides said he had already been arrested in 2009 and found guilty of apostasy but had since been released.

The Catholic news agency quoted non-governmental groups saying that interest in Christianity among young Iranians is worrying the authorities and that churches have been shut down.

The agency said Iran's new president, Hassan Rouhani, has raised hopes with his rhetoric about civil rights.

The Christian minority in Iran is tiny, estimated at less than one percent of the population.

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## **Three Iranian-Azeri Christians arrested; their fate unknown**

Assist news (13.08.2013) - Following the increasing pressure on Iranian Christians from the Islamic regime of Iran, a number of Christian converts were arrested in Tabriz.

According to a story by Mohabat News, as pressure increases on the Iranian Christian community, three Christian converts, Farshid Modares-Aval, Mohammad-Reza Pirri, and Yashar Farzin-No, were arrested on July 20 in a raid by security authorities.

After arresting them, authorities searched their homes and seized a number of their personal belongings.

News sources reported that the three men were transferred to the Ministry of Intelligence's detention center in Tabriz prison. Security and judicial authorities have not yet provided any reason for their arrest to their families.

Lack of communication about their health and situation caused the families of those imprisoned to reach out to security and judicial centers for information.

However, Mohabat News said, none of the authorities would provide a concrete answer.

In many cases, Mohabat News commented, when families of detainees go to the authorities about the plight of their loved ones, they just hear promises for their early release if they keep silent and do not publicize the case.

Eventually when nothing happens, families decide to speak out and publicize their stories in the media.

According to reports received, Mohabat News said, the three Christian men have been beaten during interrogation. Mohammad-Reza Pirri's beating was so brutal that he had to stay in the prison hospital for four days.

Although Iranian law enforcement has always tried to relate house churches to foreign governments and often describes them as political groups intending to overthrow the Islamic regime, Mohabat News said there is no evidence to support these claims.

The crackdown against Christians in Iran is mostly targeted towards what the Islamic regime describes as "evangelical and extremist" Christians, and thus "a threat against the Islamic regime."

However, in reality all these arrested Christians are members of small Christian groups who gather in their houses for worship and Christian celebrations, out of sight of the authorities who do not allow these meetings. The only reason for these gatherings is to worship God – with no political agenda involved.

Mohabat News said some time ago, a website called "Ya Lasarat," affiliated with Ansar-e Hezbollah Islamic militant group, published an article against Christians and what they called "the threat of evangelical Christians and house churches." The article expressed concern over the growth of Christianity in Iran, especially in Tabriz.

Following this, Majid Abhari, Counsel at the Social Committee of Islamic Parliament of Iran, expressed his concern over the growth of Christianity in Azeri-Speaking regions and emphasized that the growth of house churches must be stopped.

Mohabat News said he also mentioned the confiscation of 6,500 Bibles at a roadside checkpoint near one of the Azeri-speaking towns.

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## **Pastor Saeed Abedini fainting from pain in 'disturbing turn of events'**

The Christian Post (13.08.2013) - American Pastor Saeed Abedini's health has taken a turn for the worse and he is fainting from severe amounts of pain, according to his family in Iran who were able to visit him in Evin Prison, where he is serving an eight year sentence.

"Unfortunately, we have learned that Pastor Saeed's internal injuries are causing him increased pain," the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), which represents Abedini's wife and two children in the U.S., revealed in a post on Monday.

"Pastor Saeed has been suffering from internal bleeding – the results of intense beatings he has sustained in prison for his faith."

Earlier this summer, Abedini's health was thought to be improving, with his family noting that he was in "good spirits" following his release from solitary confinement, and that some of his medical symptoms had waned.

Arrested in 2012 and later sentenced to eight years in prison supposedly for endangering national security, the Christian pastor has been beaten in jail and has been pressured to renounce his faith in Christ, though he has refused to do so. An international campaign backed by hundreds of thousands of people worldwide has called for his release, though so far Iranian authorities have refused to grant such a request.

Officials have also denied Abedini important medical care for the severe pain he has been feeling in his abdomen, causing the ACLJ to accuse the Islamic republic of "inhuman treatment of prisoners of conscience."

The pastor was finally allowed treatment at a local hospital where he was prescribed medication, but it has not been enough, and his pain has increased, the Christian law group said, revealing that on one occasion he had even fainted from "immense anguish."

"This is a disturbing turn of events. It serves as a renewed reminder of the dangerous conditions Pastor Saeed faces in one of the world's worst prisons," the ACLJ continued, and urged official to provide Abedini the important medical care that he need.

The law group pointed out that the pastor is being kept in prison because of his Christian faith, and noted that his is one of many persecution stories currently taking place in the Islamic Republic.

In a recent interview, Naghmeh Abedini, the pastor's wife, spoke out about the torture and beatings her husband has been subjected to while in prison, and announced an upcoming prayer vigil in September to mark the anniversary of his imprisonment.

"He has been dealing with a lot of pain and internal bleeding since he was taken to solitary confinement which has been horrific in itself...two times, attempts to break him and have him recant his faith. He's gone through a lot the last year," Naghmeh Abedini said.

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## **Christian sentenced to ten years in prison on political charges**

ICN (07.08.2013) - Mostafa Bordbar, a Christian convert, has been sentenced to ten years in prison for being part of an "anti-security organisation" and "gathering with intent to commit crimes against Iranian national security".

The verdict was delivered to his lawyer on 31 July by a Judge from Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran, following his trial on 9 June. Christian Solidarity

Worldwide (CSW) has been informed that Mr Bordbar is currently being held in Evin prison.

Mr Bordbar was arrested on 27 December 2012 along with 50 other Christian converts who had gathered to celebrate Christmas in a house in northern Tehran. They were detained, interrogated for several hours and were forced to hand over personal details, including Facebook and e-mail addresses and passwords. Most of the group were released; however, Mr Bordbar and Vruir Avanesian, an Armenian-Christian Pastor, were arrested.

Mr Bordbar had been arrested several years earlier in his hometown of Rasht for converting to Christianity and attending a house church. Branch 1 of the court in Rasht found him guilty of "apostasy" (abandoning Islam), but he was released after posting a bail of 200 million Iranian Rials. Despite this, the conviction of apostasy remained on his record. When Mr Bordbar subsequently attempted to set up a company, he was refused permission on the basis of this criminal record.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW is deeply concerned at reports of Mostafa Bordbar's harsh sentence. Although he was convicted of crimes of a seemingly political nature, it is clear that as with other Christians who have been recently imprisoned in Iran, this is nothing more than a means of justifying manifestly excessive or unjust sentences. CSW urges the Iranian authorities to release Mostafa Bordbar and all those who have been imprisoned on account of their faith. We also urge the Iranian authorities to ensure that religious minorities are free to exercise their right to adopt any faith of their own choice, a right that is enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Iran is party.

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## **Fatwa issued against Baha'i community**

CSW (02.08.2013) - The Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khameni, issued a fatwa (religious edict) against the Baha'i community on 31 July, calling on Iranians to avoid Baha'is and labelling them a 'deviant and misleading sect.'

The edict comes days before president-elect Hassan Rouhani assumes office, illustrating that despite the president-elect's promises to rule with moderation and ensure the rights of religious minorities, ultimate power in Iran rests with the Supreme Leader.

Despite the Baha'i community being the largest religious minority in Iran, numbering over 300,000, it is not officially recognised and is refused legal status. Since 1979, over 200 of its leaders have been killed or executed, and thousands more imprisoned.

Baha'is are barred from accessing further education and employment in the public sector, with over 10,000 having been dismissed from university and government jobs. In 2008, seven Baha'i leaders were arrested and were each sentenced to 20 years imprisonment in 2010 for 'forming an illegal cult'. According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), as of February 2013, at least 110 Baha'is are being held in prison solely because of their religious belief, twice the number held in early 2011.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), said, "We are extremely concerned by this new fatwa against the Baha'i community, particularly since previous fatwas have resulted in an intense crackdown on them. There was cautious optimism following the election of Hassan Rouhani, who has promised a more moderate approach than his predecessor. However, this news raises questions as to whether he will

be able to do so, since ultimate power clearly resides elsewhere. The fatwa also calls into question the possibility of any early improvements in the plight of Iran's religious minorities. CSW urges the Supreme Leader and president-elect to uphold the rights of the Baha'i community as equal citizens and to guarantee freedom of religion or belief for all religious communities, in line with Iran's international obligations

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## **Ayatollah Ali Khamenei issues edict against Baha'i faith in Iran**

AP (01.08.2013) - Iran's supreme leader is urging Iranians to avoid all dealings with members of the banned Baha'i sect in a possible prelude to further crackdowns on the minority.

Iran already bans the Baha'i, a religion founded in the 1860s by a Persian nobleman considered a prophet by followers. Muslims consider Muhammad the final prophet.

The fatwa, or religious edict, by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is his latest against the group. It supports similar fatwas in the past by other clerics.

An Iranian news website, Tasnim, reported Wednesday that Khamenei called the Baha'i "deviant and misleading."

Baha'i followers are frequently under pressures from Iranian authorities, which has prompted outcry among international human rights groups.

Iran allows non-Muslims such as Christians and Jews to worship, but has strict laws against seeking converts.

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## **Sufi activists convicted in unfair trials**

### ***Peaceful activists facing years in prison***

Human Rights Watch (25.07.2013) - [Iran](#)'s judiciary should abandon charges and quash the verdicts against 11 members of a Sufi sect convicted in unfair trials and informed of their sentences in July 2013. Those in detention should be freed immediately and unconditionally.

The evidence suggests that all 11 were prosecuted and convicted solely because of their peaceful activities on behalf of the largest Sufi order in Iran or in connection with their contributions to a news website dedicated to uncovering rights abuses against members of the \_\_\_\_\_ the \_\_\_\_\_ order.

"The Sufi trials bore all the hallmarks of a classic witch hunt," said [Tamara Alrifai](#), Middle East advocacy director at Human Rights Watch. "It seems that authorities targeted these members of one of Iran's most vulnerable minorities because they tried to give voice to the \_\_\_\_\_ defense \_\_\_\_\_ of Sufi \_\_\_\_\_ rights."

On July 18, four of the defendants learned that Branch 2 of the Revolutionary Court in Shiraz had sentenced them to prison terms ranging from one year to three years,

followed by periods of internal exile, which bars them from living in their hometowns. The four are out on bail.

On July 10, a revolutionary court in Tehran announced prison sentences against seven Sufis ranging from seven-and-a-half to ten-and-a-half years. They were banned from social, legal, and journalistic activities related to the Sufi order for five years after their release. All are in Tehran's Evin Prison.

The [Majzooban-e Noor website](#), to which some of the defendants contributed, said the defendants in the Tehran case have refused to file appeals in protest against numerous pre-trial irregularities and ill-treatment in detention by Intelligence Ministry agents. The four defendants in the Shiraz case plan to file appeals.

Branch 2 of Shiraz's Revolutionary Court convicted the four defendants of membership in an "anti-government" group intent on endangering national security, a reference to the website, and of disseminating "propaganda against the state." According to the judgment, the court sentenced Saleh Moradi to three years in prison and three years of internal exile in Hormozgan province, Farzaneh Nouri to two years in prison and three years in Khuzestan province, Behzad Nouri to two years in prison and three years in Bushehr province, and Farzad Darvish to a year in prison and three years in Sistan and Baluchistan province.

Branch 15 of Tehran's Revolutionary Court convicted the seven others of "membership in a sect endangering national security," "propaganda against the state," "insulting the Supreme Leader," "disturbing the public mind," "establishing and membership in a deviant group," and "disrupting the public order," the judgment said. The court sentenced Hamid-Reza Moradi to ten-and-a-half years, Reza Entesari to eight-and-a-half years, and Amir Eslami, Afshin Karampour, Farshid Yadollahi, Omid Behrouzi, and Mostafa Daneshjoo each to seven-and-a-half years.

Eslami, Yadollahi, Daneshjoo, and Behrouzi write for the web site and are lawyers who defended clients affiliated with the Nematollahi Gonabadi Sufi order.

The Nematollahi Gonabadis consider themselves followers of Twelver Shia Islam, the official state religion in Iran. The Iranian government, however, considers them members of a "deviant group," and has increasingly harassed, arrested, and prosecuted them. At least seven other members of the order are in Evin Prison and Shiraz's Adel Abad Prison on politically motivated national security charges related to their website activities.

Farhad Nouri, the son of Farzaneh Nouri and an administrator for the website, told Human Rights Watch that of the four defendants sentenced in Shiraz, only Moradi and Behzad Nouri contributed to the site, and the others were apparently targeted because they were affiliated with the Nematollahi Gonabadi order.

Family members of some of the defendants said that the group sentenced in Tehran boycotted the court proceedings and did not attend their trial because the court prevented them from meeting with their lawyers or reviewing the Intelligence Ministry's case against them both before and during their trial, and intelligence agents physically and psychologically abused them during pretrial detention.

In January, the seven defendants wrote a [letter](#) to the chief judge of Branch 15 of the court, Judge Salavati, calling the court illegitimate and submitting numerous reasons why they chose not to appear or defend themselves. The mother of one of the detainees and the wives of two others told Human Rights Watch that the defendants would not appeal the lower court's decision because they view the entire process as illegitimate.

The wife of one defendant said that her husband and the other defendants also lodged a complaint against the judge for irregularities and abuses they experienced in detention.

She said that the judge then ordered prison guards to cut off family visits and transfer the defendants to solitary confinement in the Intelligence Ministry-controlled Ward 209 of Evin Prison for nearly three months, during which they were harassed and beaten. The family members said that the defendants were returned to Ward 350 in mid-April and have since been allowed family visits.

The website said the judge also prevented Daneshjoo and Hamid-Reza Moradi from leaving Evin Prison to receive critical treatments for blocked arteries and asthma that doctors had ordered.

Both Iranian law and international law require prison authorities to provide basic necessities to all prisoners and to treat them with dignity and respect. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Iran is a party, prohibits inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. In 2004, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention criticized Iran's systematic use of solitary confinement and noted, "[S]uch absolute solitary confinement, when it is of a long duration, can be likened to inhuman treatment within the meaning of the Convention Against Torture." The UN Basic Principles on the Treatment of Prisoners state that, "Efforts addressed to the abolition of solitary confinement as a punishment, or to the restriction of its use, should be undertaken and encouraged."

Article 14 of the ICCPR requires Iran to ensure the right to a fair trial of anyone brought before the criminal courts. This includes the right "to have adequate time and facilities for the preparation of his defence and to communicate with counsel of his own choosing" Article 18 of the ICCPR requires Iran to secure the right to freedom of conscience or religion to everyone within its jurisdiction. Article 27 requires Iran to ensure the right of all members of religious minorities to profess and practice their own religion.

"There is plenty of evidence suggesting that the judiciary prosecuted these defendants solely because of their peaceful activities on behalf of their Sufi order," Alrfai said. "In light of these serious irregularities, there is no justifiable reason to keep these defendants behind bars."

***For background information, please see below.***

### ***Background***

Farhad Nouri told Human Rights Watch that Intelligence Ministry agents initially arrested his mother, Farzaneh Nouri, in September 2011 to pressure her to reveal her son's whereabouts. He said his mother spent approximately three weeks in solitary confinement in an Intelligence Ministry detention facility and was eventually released on bail, then charged and prosecuted. Nouri said his mother had absolutely nothing to do with the Majzooban-e Noor website and had been targeted to pressure him to turn himself in. "Her only crime is that she's my mother," he said.

Farhad Nouri escaped Iran on September 11, 2011, and is seeking asylum in neighboring Turkey.

Maryam Shirini, Eslami's wife, said the seven defendants lodged a [formal complaint](#) against Judge Salavati for various procedural irregularities and rights violations since their arrest. In the letter, the defendants referred to "being subjected to physical beatings and insults during arrest and interrogation," preventing the defendants and their lawyers from reviewing the case files, preventing the defendants from meeting with their lawyers, "detention in solitary confinement cells and security wards for nearly four months," and "use of blindfolds and handcuffs during interrogation," among other due process violations.

The family members said they believe that their relatives were prosecuted and convicted because they worked for the Majzooban-e Noor website, providing information on rights violations against members of the Nematollahi Gonabadi order. Jamileh Shahbazian, Entesari's mother, said that her son, a photojournalist, began working for the Majzooban-e Noor site after authorities fired him from several state media jobs because of his affiliation with the order. She said the authorities "want to not only deprive [Sufis] of the right to freedom of expression but also the right to a fair trial."

Daneshjoo's wife told Human Rights Watch that her lawyer husband and his lawyers told her that the authorities have deprived all the defendants of access to their lawyers and the right to review their own case files. She said she feels the authorities convicted her husband of "propaganda against the state" in part because he had given media interviews on behalf of clients who are members of the order. She also said that the charge of "insulting the Supreme Leader" related to an [open letter](#) to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on the website in 2010 in which the authors accused the authorities of targeting members of the order in an "organized fashion," including destroying their houses of worship, denying them the right to conduct rituals, firing them from government posts, and arbitrarily arresting and detaining them.

Unlike the other six defendants, before his prosecution on charges related to the web site, Daneshjoo had been serving a seven-month prison sentence for "publishing lies" and "disturbing the public mind" in connection with his defense of members of the order. That prison term ended in December 2011. Before he could be released, judicial authorities consolidated his case with that of the other six defendants and transferred him to Evin Prison.

Security and intelligence forces arrested the six other Majzooban-e Noor site administrators and lawyers between September 3 and 11, 2011, in Tehran and Shiraz. The arrests followed clashes between plainclothes and paramilitary Basij militia and members of the order in the city of Kavar, 30 kilometers south of Shiraz. Accounts on Majzooban-e Noor say that pro-government forces arrived in Kavar on August 27, and began harassing members of the order. On September 1, the reports said, the forces attacked Sufi homes and businesses, which led to clashes, dozens of injuries, and the death of at least one Sufi resident.

Following the clashes, security forces have arrested more than 200 members of the order, Farhad Nouri said. More than 50 remain either in detention or under prosecution, and several dozen face serious national security charges, including for *moharebeh*, or "enmity against God," for allegedly carrying arms and taking part in violence against security forces. Under Iran's penal code, the crime of *moharebeh*, which can carry the death penalty, is often used against people alleged to have used or threatened violence in a way that threatens public security.

Alireza Roshan and Mostafa Abdi, two other Majzooban-e Noor administrators arrested following the Kavar clashes, are also in Evin Prison. In a separate action, Branch 26 of Tehran's Revolutionary Court sentenced Roshan to one year in prison on national security charges, upheld on appeal. Abdi has not yet been convicted.

At least five other Nematollahi Gonabadi members are detained in Adel Abad prison allegedly in connection with the Kavar clashes. They are Kasra Nouri, Seyed Ebrahim Bahrami, Mohammad-Ali Sadeghi, Mohammad-Ali Dehghan, and Mohsen Esmaili. In April, a revolutionary court convicted Nouri of various national security crimes in connection with his activities with the website and sentenced him to four years and four months in prison.

Nouri and Saleh Moradi, who was just sentenced to three years in prison and had

previously spent 22 months in pre-trial detention before being conditionally released on June 11, initiated a hunger strike in January in solidarity with the group of seven defendants in Evin Prison who were sent to solitary confinement. They ended the hunger strike in April, after the seven were transferred back.

Followers of the Nematollahi Gonabadi order claim at least five million members throughout the country, though no official statistics are available. Since 2005, Iranian security and intelligence forces have increasingly targeted this group, members say.

During a visit to Qom in October 2010, Ayatollah Khamenei spoke of the "need to combat false and misleading beliefs." High-level Iranian officials, including leaders of the clerical establishment, have expressed concern at what they see as the rising popularity of what they see as "deviant" faiths or beliefs, including the Nematollahi Gonabadi order Baha'is and evangelical Protestant churches, especially among youth.

In 2006, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad empowered the General Cultural Council to carry out policies aimed at confronting "deviant groups," especially those of a spiritual or religious nature. The General Cultural Council is an arm of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, an executive agency charged with promulgating regulations in public sector employment and education.

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## **Eight members of Church of Iran sentenced to jail on political charges**

CSW (18.07.2013) - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has learned that eight members of the Church of Iran in Shiraz were sentenced to jail on 16 July after being found guilty of "action against the national security" and "propaganda against the order of the system".

Mohammad Roghangir was sentenced to six years, Massoud Rezaie to five years, Mehdi Ameruni and Bijan Farokhpour Haghighi to three years, Shahin Lahooti and Soroush Saraie to two and half years each, while Eskandar Rezaie and Roxana Forughi were both sentenced to one year in prison.

Seven of them were arrested on 12 October 2012 during an evening raid by the security services on a house in Shiraz where a prayer service led by Mr Roghangir was underway. Massoud Rezaie was arrested six days later.

They were all subsequently released on bail after paying substantial amounts. The group is expected to appeal their convictions.

In a statement, the National Council of the Church of Iran said, "In accordance with the Gospel, the Church is apolitical. While individual Christians are entitled to hold political opinions, the Church does not.

These charges are entirely without foundation. However, as loyal citizens we will continue to pray for our leaders and for peace and reconciliation in our nation."

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "It is both disappointing and deplorable that the Iranian regime persists in detaining religious minorities on political charges, as has occurred once again in this case. These Christians in no way constitute a threat to the state. We call for their unconditional release and urge the government to end the practice of characterising legitimate religious activities as national security crimes, and to uphold the right of all religious minorities to freedom of religion and belief, as contained in

Article 18 of International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Iran is signatory. We also call on the incoming presidency to bring an end the harassment of religious minorities and to ensure that every Iranian citizen is able to enjoy the rights and freedoms to which they are entitled under national and international law, including the right to freedom of religion or belief.

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## **Iran hauls off Christian pastor, shuts down church in new sweep**

Fox News (28.05.2013) - Government agents shut down Iran's largest Persian-language Pentecostal church Monday, just one week after one of its pastors was arrested and hauled away midway through a worship service.

The closing of Central Assemblies of God church in Tehran is the latest case of the Islamic Republic's leadership cracking down on Christians ahead of the June 14 presidential election to replace President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Leaders appear especially wary of groups deemed dangerous to their power base, including growing Christian churches, according to Iranian Christians and rights groups who spoke to BosNewsLife, a news agency that specializes in the plight of Christians in Middle Eastern nations.

"These incidents appear to be an attempt to stop worship services from being conducted in Farsi, the language of the majority of Iranians," George Wood, general superintendent of the AoG in the U.S., told the service. "Services are allowed in Armenian, a minority language that most Iranians do not speak or even understand."

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## **Pastor arrested as Farsi language Church considers closure**

CSW (21.05.2013) - Reverend Robert Asserian, a pastor at the Central Assemblies of God (AoG) Church in Tehran, was arrested this morning while conducting a prayer meeting at the church. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has also received reports

that the church may be forced to close by the end of June due to continued pressure from the Iranian Intelligence Ministry.

Security forces are reported to have raided Rev. Asserian's house this morning and confiscated some of his belongings, including his computer and books. They then proceeded to the church where he was leading a prayer meeting. He was arrested and taken to an unknown location.

The Iranian human rights organization Article 18 reports that on Sunday 19 May, church leaders informed the congregation that they would soon make an important decision about the future of the church. A local source stated that: "The pressure has become unbearable, they [the authorities] constantly threaten the church leaders and their families with imprisonment, unexplained accidents, kidnapping and even with execution. We cannot go on like this." A final decision is expected later this week.

Pressure on Iranian Christians has intensified in recent years, with churches and their members being targeted. The AoG Church in Tehran was one of few churches that offered services in Farsi. In 2009, they were ordered to end Farsi services on Friday, a day off for Iranians, and were only permitted to hold services in Farsi on Sundays. However, sources have confirmed that the Iranian authorities have now ordered the ending of Farsi services on Sunday, giving church leaders the option of conducting Sunday services in Armenian or facing closure. This news has caused church leaders to evaluate their options, with serious consideration being given to closure.

CSW's Advocacy Director, Andrew Johnston, said, "We are deeply concerned for the welfare of Rev. Asserian and urge the authorities to make his whereabouts known. The continued and sustained pressure by the Iranian regime on churches in Tehran has boxed them into a corner to such an extent that they can no longer function. We renew our call for the Iranian government to honour its national and international obligations, in particular Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which guarantees freedom of religion or belief, and the right, either alone or in community with others, and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

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## **Christians returned to jail after high upholds sentence for conversion**

CSW (10.05.2013) - An Iranian Assemblies of God (AOG) pastor, his wife and two church workers have been returned to jail after their one year sentences for converting to Christianity and "propagation against the Islamic regime through evangelism" were upheld by a High Court on 1 May.

Pastor FarhadSabokrooh, his wife ShahnazJayzan and church workers NaserZaman-Dezfuli and DavoudAlijani were initially arrested in December 2011, after authorities in the southern town of Ahwaz [raided their church's Christmas celebrations](#) and detained everyone in the building, including children attending Sunday School.

According to Iranian agency Mohabat News, all four were charged with "converting to Christianity and propagating against the Islamic Republic through evangelism", and were each sentenced to one year in prison by the Revolutionary Court in Ahwaz. They were temporarily released, but were summoned to court on 1 May 2013 and re-arrested. Mr Alijani was transferred to Ahwaz's Karoon Prison to complete his sentence, while Pastor Sabokrooh, ShahnazJayzan and Mr Zaman-Dezfuli were taken to Sepidar Prison.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has also been informed that Mostafa Bordbar, a Christian arrested in Tehran in December 2012 and whose case details were obscure, is now confirmed to be detained in Ward 350 of Evin Prison, along with Church of Iran member Alireza Seyyedian and AOG Pastors Farshid Fathi and Saeed Abedini. Pastor Abedini, who had been [placed in solitary confinement](#) for taking part in a peaceful protest against prison conditions, has now been returned to Ward 350 after being taken to hospital this week following a further deterioration in his health.

Mohabat News reports that a Christian prisoner in Adel-Abad Prison in Shiraz is in urgent need of medical attention. Vahid Hakkani, who was arrested in February 2012 along with eight others during a raid on a prayer meeting, is reported to be suffering from internal bleeding and has been informed by prison doctors that he needs surgery urgently, but so far this has not occurred.

CSW has also learned that in April 2013, Ebrahim Firoozi, who was arrested for a second time in March 2013 and charged with launching and administering a Christian missionary website, distributing Bibles, cooperating with student activists and involvement in actions against national security, was temporarily released from Ward 350 of Evin Prison after 53 days in jail, following a bail payment of approximately 20,000 USD.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "Pastor Sabokrooh and others have been jailed for exercising their right to change their religion and to manifest their new faith both privately and in communion with others. This right is protected by Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which as a signatory, Iran is obliged to uphold. We continue to call on Iran to fulfill its legal obligations by guaranteeing freedom of religion or belief for all of its citizens. We also urge the authorities to ensure that as occurred in the case of Pastor Abedini, every prisoner in urgent need of medical attention is given access to medical facilities and appropriate treatment."

### **Notes to Editors:**

1. Church of Iran member Alireza Seyyedian, who was sentenced to six years in prison by Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court in 2011 for "propagating against the regime" and "acting against national security" after being baptized in Turkey, has been detained in Evin Prison since 2012.

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## **"Five Years Too Many" campaign begins**

Baha'i International Community (05.05.2013) - To mark the five year anniversary of the wrongful imprisonment of the seven Iranian Baha'i leaders, the Baha'i International Community is launching a campaign to call for their immediate release – and to draw attention to the deteriorating human rights situation in Iran.

"On 14 May, the seven innocent Baha'i leaders will have been behind bars for five full years, unjustly imprisoned solely because of their religious beliefs," said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Baha'i International Community to the United Nations.

"We are asking people of good will around the world to raise their voices in an effort to win their freedom and the freedom of other innocent prisoners of conscience in Iran," she said.

The campaign will run from 5 May through 15 May, under the title "Five Years Too Many." Around the world, Baha'i communities and others are planning public events that focus

on the plight of the seven, who face 15 more years in prison, and whose 20-year sentences are the longest of any current prisoners of conscience in Iran.

"The arrest of the seven Baha'i leaders on false charges, their wrongful imprisonment, and severe mistreatment while in detention are emblematic of the suffering of the Iranian Baha'i community as a whole – and, indeed, the situation of the hundreds of other innocent prisoners of conscience who have been incarcerated for their beliefs," said Ms.Dugal.

"Their long sentences reflect the Government's determination to completely oppress the Iranian Baha'i community, which is the country's largest non-Muslim religious minority."

Six of the seven Baha'i leaders were arrested on 14 May 2008 in a series of early morning raids in Tehran. The seventh had been detained two months earlier on 5 March 2008.

Since their arrests, the seven – whose names are FaribaKamalabadi, JamaloddinKhanjani, AfifNaeimi, SaeidRezaie, MahvashSabet, BehrouzTavakkoli, and VahidTizfahm – have been subject to an entirely flawed judicial process.

During their first year in detention, the seven were not told of the charges against them and they had virtually no access to lawyers. Their trial, conducted over a period of months in 2010 and amounting to only six days in court, was illegally closed to the public, demonstrated extreme bias on the part of prosecutors and judges, and was based on non-existent evidence.

Today the seven endure harsh conditions in two of Iran's most notorious prisons. The five men are incarcerated at Gohardasht prison in Karaj, a facility known for its overcrowding, lack of sanitation, and dangerous environment. The two women remain at Tehran's infamous Evin Prison.

The Baha'i International Community has created a special section on its website to focus on the campaign. It features articles and documents about the lives and situation of the seven Baha'i leaders, along with a blog that will report on activities and events in the campaign as they happen.

The URL for that site is <http://www.bic.org/fiveyears>.

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## **Pastor Imprisoned in Iran Given Ultimatum to Deny Christ or Remain in Prison**

***A pastor who was sentenced to eight years in an Iranian prison for planting house churches in the country says that officials in Iran have given him the ultimatum to either deny Christ or remain incarcerated.***

Maghreb Christians (16.04.2013) - The American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), which has been working for the pastor's release, reports that they have obtained a new letter written by SaeedAbedini, which outlines the pressure that he is facing behind bars.

"Deny your faith in Jesus Christ and return to Islam or else you will not be released from prison. We will make sure you are kept here even after your 8 year sentence is finished."

These are the threats that prison officials throw at me," the pastor writes. "My response to them is Romans 8:35-39."

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" the Scripture cited by Abedini reads. "As it is written, 'For Thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.' Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

"The reality of Christian living is that difficulties or problems do arise in our lives," he continues. "Persecution and difficulties are not new occurrences, but are seen often in the Christian life. It is through the suffering and tribulations that we are to enter the Kingdom of God."

The ACLJ outlines that while Abedini's physical strength is growing weak because of the brutal conditions in prison, his faith remains strong and is "what is keeping him alive."

As previously reported, 32-year-old Abedini, who resides in Idaho with his wife and children, has been incarcerated in Iran's notorious Evin Prison since late September for allegedly threatening the national security of Iran by planting house churches in the country a decade ago, and for attempting to turn youth in the nation away from Islam and toward Christianity. He had traveled to Iran to build an orphanage last fall, and was about to return to the states when he was taken into custody.

"When I saw my family for the first time behind the glass walls, I could see my mom four meters away. As she approached me and saw my face, she broke down and could not get closer. She was crying," he wrote in a letter released last month. "I understood what she felt because after weeks of being in solitary confinement in Evin Prison, I also got to see my face in the mirror of an elevator that was taking me to the prison hospital. I said hi to the person staring back at me because I did not recognize myself. My hair was shaven, under my eyes were swollen three times what they should have been, my face was swollen, and my beard had grown."

The ACLJ is asking for Christians around the world to [send a note of encouragement to Abedini](#) while he is incarcerated.

"We must let him know that we will never forget him and will never stop working for his release," it states, noting that 20,000 people have already submitted correspondence for the pastor. "This has already quickly become one of the largest letter writing campaigns ever."

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## **Pastor Abedini moved to solitary confinement**

CSW (01.05.2013) - Pastor SaeedAbedini, a convert to Christianity with dual United States/Iranian nationality who was [sentenced to eight years in prison](#) in January for "actions against the national security of Iran", has been placed in solitary confinement.

According to Mohabat News, Pastor Abedini had taken part in a peaceful courtyard protest over the mistreatment of inmates in Evin Prison, where he is currently being held. The protest reportedly angered prison officials, who subsequently put Pastor Abedini and

nine other prisoners in solitary confinement. Pastor Abedini had also signed a petition which criticised the lack of medical care for prisoners and the mistreatment of their families during visits.

Pastor Abedini is reportedly suffering severe internal bleeding as a result of receiving regular beatings in prison and there are concerns his kidneys may not be functioning properly. However, he has been refused medical treatment by prison authorities. Furthermore, family members were turned away from their weekly visit and informed that he was no longer permitted to receive any visitors.

Pastor Abedini was arrested in September 2012 while in Iran on a family visit. On 27 January, he was sentenced to eight years imprisonment by the Revolutionary Court Branch 26 in Tehran on charges of 'planting house churches that are intended to undermine national security.'

Although couched in political terms, the charges against Pastor Abedini are linked to his conversion from Islam to Christianity. Christians in Iran are increasingly facing such charges as a means of justifying arbitrary arrests and extreme sentences.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW is deeply concerned at reports of Pastor Abedini's deteriorating health, and that he is being held in solitary confinement despite urgently needing medical attention. His case is reminiscent of that of [Pastor Irani](#), who is also being denied adequate medical care for severe health challenges. We urge the Iranian authorities to provide immediate medical care for Pastor Abedini and Pastor Irani, and to release them and all other prisoners who in reality are being held on account of their faith. The freedom to profess one's faith is protected in the Iranian constitution as well as in various international treaties to which Iran is signatory, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). We therefore call on Iran to fulfil its legal obligations and uphold this right for all of its citizens."

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## **Massive bail required of Christian prisoners in Iran**

***Medical personnel refuse to treat Pastor Abedini, saying he is 'unclean,' according to letter.***

Morning Star News (30.03.2013) - Four Christian converts from Islam arrested last year for alleged evangelistic activities had to post enormous bail amounts in order to be released from an Iranian prison.

SoroushSaraei, Mohammad Roghangir, and MassoudRezaei were released at midnight March 19 after each posted \$80,000 in bail, according to the Iranian media website Mohabat News. The fourth, EskandarRezaie, was released this week and posted the same amount.

The four Christians and ShahinLahooti, who is still in jail, were detained for five months in Adel-Abad Prison in Shiraz, 920 kilometers (571 miles) south of Tehran. Information of their release did not reach international media until Wednesday (March 27).

The judge intentionally set the bail amount high to financially cripple the Iranian Christian community, KhatazaGondwe, Africa and Middle East director for Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) told Morning Star News.

None of the group members were assaulted while in prison, but they were singled out from other prisoners for their faith, Gondwe said.

"The five did not experience torture or other mistreatment while detained," Gondwe said. "However, their movements and prison privileges were limited. They were not allowed out for exercise, could not use the library, and contact with other prisoners was also limited."

No second hearing has been scheduled for the case, meaning that they could spend years in legal limbo. Evangelistic activity is considered a crime against the Islamic state, and pastors and others arrested under these charges have spent years awaiting a hearing.

Those who are released on bail face the option of fleeing the country, but at the risk of putting those who posted their bail into financial ruin. They also risk losing their homes by putting up property deeds as collateral.

"Some have stayed in jail for several months before a trial, others for a year if not more," said Gondwe. In regard to those who have received bail, "there seem to be a tendency to drive Christians out of the country. But now having paid bail, the person who paid it will lose it, and if it's something like a title deed for a house, it's doubtful they will be leaving."

The Christians are all members of the Church of Iran, a heavily persecuted denomination and a controversial group that many local Christians regard as being "non-Trinitarian."

The five men were detained since their arrest last October for allegedly "threatening national security" and evangelizing. They were transferred to Adel-Abad Prison, which houses hardened criminals and often lacks heating or health facilities, according to CSW.

Political prisoners also fill Adel-Abad, where as many as two dozen are crammed into a 250- square-foot cell. There Christian converts frequently suffer beatings from other inmates and are denied proper medical attention, as is the case with pastor BenhamIrani, who suffers from an acute blood infection and is barely able to walk.

Police originally arrested the five men and two others at a house prayer service led by Roghangir. It was part of a state-wide crackdown against non-Islamic religious groups, which the theocratic regime regards as a threat.

The arrests come amid a pattern of massive political arrests and executions, all part of a general repression leading up to presidential elections.

"This is the procedure these days with cases of converts, and I think there is a message being sent out with them," Gondwe said.

### ***Abedini's Condition Worsens***

As their case lingers, an international outcry is growing against another Iranian detained by the regime for converting to Christianity. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, the European Union, and half a million petitioners have called for the release of American-Iranian Pastor SaeedAbedini, 32.

Kerry called for the immediate release of Abedini in a statement on Friday (March 22) and criticized Iran for its refusal to allow consular access by Swiss authorities, the U.S. protecting power in Iran.

"I am disturbed by reports that Mr. Abedini has suffered physical and psychological abuse in prison, and that his condition has become increasingly dire," he said. "Such mistreatment violates international norms as well as Iran's own laws."

Policy experts and Abedini's family members, however, have criticized the State Department for what it believes to be half-hearted support of the pastor because of his evangelical Christian faith.

Nina Shea, Director of the Center for Religious Freedom and a Fellow at the Hudson Institute, told Breitbart News, a conservative Internet news portal, that the State Department and Kerry have not called sufficient attention to Abedini's case.

"The State Department's press release ... fails to mention that Abedini is a Christian pastor and that he is imprisoned for his Christian faith," Shea said. "Religious freedom is a basic human right, set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and one that is of special importance to the United States both in the Constitution, where it is enshrined as the first clause of the First Amendment, and as a pillar of foreign policy in the International Religious Freedom Act."

Abedini's wife, Naghmeh Abedini, criticized the State Department for not sending anyone to a March 15 Congressional committee that called for the release of the pastor. She expressed disappointment with the government for not lobbying more aggressively for her husband, a U.S. citizen.

Abedini has been incarcerated since his arrest in September and was sentenced on Jan. 27 to eight years in prison. He was charged with threatening "national security" by planting house churches.

He has traveled back and forth between the United States and Iran since becoming a U.S. citizen in 2010 after marrying his U.S. wife. He had made more than nine humanitarian trips to Iran since 2009 and was working on plans to establish an orphanage on his most recent trip.

Last week his family received a letter in which he described his treatment at Evin Prison, a facility that houses political prisoners alongside the nation's most dangerous criminals and that is notorious for harsh treatment and conditions.

According to the American Center for Law and Justice, Abedini wrote the letter weeks ago on the margins of newspaper scraps. In it he relates a story in which the medical staff told him they would not treat him after he received severe beatings for his Christian faith.

"In our religion we are not supposed to touch you," a nurse said to him. "You are unclean."

"She did not treat me and that night I could not sleep from the intense pain I had," Abedini wrote. "According to the doctor's instructions, they would not give me the pain medication that they would give other prisoners because I was unclean."

An estimated 100,000 Christian converts practice their faith underground in Iran, a religious dictatorship since its 1979 revolution, and conversion from Islam to Christianity is punishable by death. The country is 98.6 percent Muslim, according to *Operation World*, with the overall number of Christians estimated at 384,897, or .51 percent of the population.

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## **Increasing violence against Iranian Baha'is engineered by government**

Baha'I World News Service (06.03.2013) - In a report released today, the Baha'i International Community documents hundreds of incidents of torture, physical assault, arson, vandalism, cemetery desecration and the abuse of schoolchildren directed against the Iranian Baha'i community since 2005 – all carried out with utter impunity.

"The entire situation puts the Baha'is in an impossible position because they must ask for justice and protection from the same authorities who are systematically inciting hatred against them and from a judicial system that treats virtually every Baha'i who is arrested as an enemy of the state," said Diane Ala'i, the Baha'i International Community's representative to the United Nations in Geneva.

"This report shows that attacks on Baha'is are engineered by government agents and actively encouraged by the authorities and the Muslim clergy in Iran – and that attackers are well aware that they will go unpunished," added Ms.Ala'i.

Titled "Violence with Impunity: Acts of aggression against Iran's Baha'i community," the 45-page report provides case studies and statistics that document a rising tide of violence against Baha'is – and the complete absence of prosecution for attackers.

Focusing on the seven year period from 2005-2012, the report says there have been at least 52 cases where Baha'is have been tortured or held in solitary confinement while in detention. It likewise documents another 52 incidents where Baha'is have been physically assaulted – sometimes at the hands of officials and sometimes at the hands of plainclothes or unidentified attackers.

The report also describes some 49 acts of arson against Baha'i homes and shops, and at least 42 incidents of cemetery desecration. There have also been at least 30 cases of vandalism directed against Baha'i properties, more than 200 instances of threats made against Baha'is, and some 300 incidents of abuse directed against Baha'i schoolchildren.

"Many of the attacks documented in the report – such as the cases of torture or assault during arrests and imprisonment – are undertaken directly by government agents," said Ms.Ala'i. "Other attacks, such as arson, cemetery desecration, and vandalism, often come in the middle of the night, by unidentified individuals.

"But in all cases, these violators need to be brought to justice, as is required by the international laws to which Iran is a party. The government's unwillingness to prosecute for these crimes, then, is yet another element in their overall campaign of religious persecution against the Baha'i minority," said Ms.Ala'i.

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## **Persecution of Baha'is in Iran extends across all stages of life**

Baha'I World News Service (18.03.2013) - The attacks against Baha'is in Iran represent one of the clearest cases of state-sponsored religious persecution in the world, said Heiner Bielefeldt, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.

Speaking 6 March 2013 in Geneva at a side event during the 22nd session of the Human Rights Council, Mr.Bielefeldt discussed the release of a new report by the Baha'i

International Community, which documents rising violence against Iranian Baha'is and the utter impunity enjoyed by attackers.

"It's really one of the most obvious cases of state persecution," he said, noting that the repression faced by Baha'is spans "all areas of state activity, from family law provisions to schooling, education, and security."

He asked participants at the side event – which drew some 50 representatives from governments, the UN, and non-governmental organizations – to visualize the impact such wide-ranging persecution has on an individual as he or she moves through the stages of life.

"Imagine what that means for a child, in school, maybe even kindergarten, sometimes even in the preschool phase, of young life. To be exposed to the stigma, to be told there is something wrong with your family, that you have to change, you have to adapt," said Mr. Bielefeldt.

"Then, as the child gets to the age of higher education, now the problem is how to get access," he continued. "We have lots of cases of Baha'is who have been expelled from universities and other sectors of higher education."

"Imagine what it means if a person wants to gather position in life, to get a job. There is not the slightest possibility for a Baha'i to take a position in any public sector [job]. But even in the private sector, there is mobbing and stigmatization."

"How can a person start a family life, if in family law there is no official space for Baha'is to conclude valid marriages?" he asked, noting that this deficiency affects concerns ranging from inheritance to rights of custody.

Attacks do not even end with death, he added. "There is the experience of desecration of cemeteries... [of] cemeteries being also bulldozed down by someone."

Pointing to the report, titled "Violence with Impunity: Acts of aggression against Iran's Baha'i community," Mr. Bielefeldt said that the increasing violence against Iranian Baha'is – and the degree to which attackers escape prosecution for their crimes – is clear.

"Not only do Baha'is have to expect a lack of protection – government agencies are very often inimical, hostile forces."

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## **Iran puts five Christians on trial for their faith**

Fox News (11.03.2013) - Five Iranian Christian converts who were detained late last year will reportedly begin trial in Iran's Revolutionary Court this week, according to a human rights group following the case.

The five men were among seven arrested in October when security forces raided an underground house church in the city of Shiraz during a prayer session. They will be tried at the Revolutionary Court in Shiraz's Fars Province on charges of disturbing public order, evangelizing, threatening national security and engaging in Internet activity that threatens the government, according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide, a religious persecution watchdog group.

"Judging from recent cases, it is likely that, at the very least, those detained may face lengthy prison sentences," said CSW spokesperson KiriKankhwende.

According to Kankhwende, the crackdown against Christian converts and house churches parallels a general increase in repression against many, including journalists, religious and cultural minorities and others as the government is leading up to June's presidential elections.

The five imprisoned men, Mohammad Roghangir, SurushSaraie, EskandarRezaie, ShahinLahooti and MassoudRezaie are members of the Church of Iran denomination, one of the country's largest house church movements.

"There has been a noticeable increase in the harassment, arrests, trials and imprisonments of converts to Christianity, particularly since the beginning of 2012," Kankhwende said. "Any movement that differs from or offers an alternative to orthodox Shia Islam, and any persons who chooses to follow an alternative belief system, are interpreted as a challenge to the very state itself."

The underground church network has been rapidly growing in Iran as a place where converts from Islam to Christianity can pray as they are forbidden to attend services at formal churches.

Alongside the growing network of home churches has been the increase in violent crackdowns and raids on these communities and arrests made on Christian converts, among them the internationalized case of Pastor YoucefNadarkhani, held for almost three years on charges of apostasy and more recently American Pastor SaeedAbedini who is currently serving an eight-year sentence for evangelizing and threatening national security.

"House churches are growing because the converts have nowhere else to go," said Tiffany Barrans, international legal director at the American Center for Law and Justice,

"When you're a convert to Christianity in Iran, you can't go worship at the church on the corner, because conversion is not acceptable. If they were allowed to go to an official place of worship, there wouldn't be a house church movement," Barrans said.

"Essentially they have created the house church problem and now use it to persecute its own people."

Barrans and the ACLJ are also the U.S.-based family attorneys for Pastor SaeedAbedini, held in Iran's notoriously brutal Evin prison since September 2012 as his wife and two young children fear for him at their home in Idaho.

More than a decade ago, Abedini worked as a Christian leader and community organizer developing Iran's underground home church communities for Christian converts who are forbidden from praying in public churches. He was arrested in 2005, but released after pledging never to evangelize in Iran again. When he left his wife and two kids in Idaho last summer to return to Iran to help build a state-run, secular orphanage, Iranian police pulled him off a bus and imprisoned him.

After months of imprisonment without any notice of charges, Abedini was sentenced at the beginning of this year to eight years in prison, as his family and attorneys continue to pressure the State Department and other public and private groups to facilitate his release.

Under Shariah, or Islamic law, a Muslim who converts to Christianity is on a par with someone waging war against Islam. Death sentences for such individuals are prescribed by fatwas, or legal decrees, and reinforced by Iran's Constitution, which allows judges to

rely on fatwas for determining charges and sentencing on crimes not addressed in the Iranian penal code.

All religious minorities in Iran, including Bahais, Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians, have faced various forms of persecution and political and social marginalization throughout the regime's 30-year reign. But the government saves its harshest retribution for those who have abandoned Islam.

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## **Five Christians receive exorbitant bail demands**

CSW (12.03.2013) - Five members of the Church of Iran denomination appeared before a judge at the 14th Branch of the Revolutionary Court in Shiraz, Fars Province on 10 March and were handed exorbitant bail terms.

Mohammad Roghangir, SurushSaraie, EskandarRezaie, ShahinLahooti and MassoudRezaie are charged with disturbing public order, evangelising, action against national security and an internet activity against the system.

Their trial was expected to commence on 10 March; however, during their court appearance, Judge Sadati set bail for Mohammed Roghangir at US\$ 200,000, while the others were asked for US\$ 80,000 each. No date was set for the continuation of the trial.

The five men were among seven people arrested on 12 October 2012 during an evening raid by the security services on a house in Shiraz where a prayer service led by Mr.Roghangir was underway. They were initially held in Plaque 100, the Intelligence Ministry's notorious detention centre, before being transferred to Adel-Abad Prison, where they are held separately from other prisoners.

Andrew Johnston, Advocacy Director at Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), said, "CSW is concerned that the Iranian authorities continue to characterise legitimate religious activities as crimes against the state. In addition to our concern at these charges, we also deplore the exorbitant bail demands, which are increasingly common and appear to be designed to economically cripple families and congregations. We continue to call for the release of all prisoners of conscience, without recourse to extortionate payments, and in line with Iran's undertakings under Article 18 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights."

For further information or to arrange interviews please contact KiriKankhwende, Press Officer at Christian Solidarity Worldwide on +44 (0)20 8329 0045 / +44 (0) 78 2332 9663, email [kiri@csw.org.uk](mailto:kiri@csw.org.uk) or visit [www.csw.org.uk](http://www.csw.org.uk).

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## **Branhamist Christians in prison**

HRWF (13.03.2013) - Twelve members of the Church of Iran (also named Branhamist Christians\*) were arrested and detained in 2012, according to a report of Human Rights Without Frontiers entitled "Freedom of Religion or Belief Prisoners List/ World Report 2012" to be published by the end of March:

**Mohammad (Vahid) ROGHANGIR, Suroush SARAIE, Roxana FORUGHI, Eskandar REZAIIE, Bijan HAGHIGHI, Mehdi AMERUNI and Shahin LAHOOTI**

**Date & Place of Arrest:** 12<sup>th</sup> October 2012 in a house in the city of Shiraz in Fars Province

**Place of detention:** Intelligence Ministry's detention centre, Pelak (Plaque 100). Some were transferred to Adel-Abad prison in Shiraz.

**Charges:** Unknown

**Date of release:** BijanHaghighi, was released on 25<sup>th</sup> October after posting bail bond amounting to US\$ 25,000. Roxana Furughi and Mehdi Ameruni were released respectively on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2012 and in the last week of November after posting bail of a similar amount.

### **Afsar BAHMANI and Massoud REZAIE**

**Date & Place of Arrest:** 18<sup>th</sup> October 2012 in the city of Shiraz in Fars Province

**Place of detention:** Intelligence Ministry's detention centre, Pelak (Plaque 100). MassoudRezaie was transferred to Adel-Abad prison in Shiraz.

**Date of release:** AfsarBahmani was released 24 hours after her arrest, reportedly on health grounds.

### **BehzadTAALIPASAND and Mohammed-Reza OMIDI**

**Place of residence:** Rasht

**Date of Arrest:** 31<sup>st</sup> December 2012

**Charges:** Action against national security

**Place of detention:** A Ministry of Intelligence and Security detention facility

### **Behnam IRANI**

**Date of Arrest:** April 2010

**Charges:** Crimes against national security

**Place of detention:** Prison of Karaj since May 2011

**First court decision:** After being released on bail a first time a few months later, he turned himself in after authorities issued a warrant for his arrest.

**Last court decision:** January 2011, he was sentenced to one year imprisonment.

**Other information:** Authorities then told him he must also serve the five-year sentence handed down in 2008.

(\***Branhamism**" is a term someone created to refer to the distinctive doctrines of William M. Branham (1909–65), a prominent Pentecostal healing evangelist in the decade following World War II. A central teaching of these believers is the idea that Branham was the final major prophet to the Christian church as a fulfillment of Malachi 4:5-6 and Revelation 10:7, and had a divinely appointed ministry of restoring the true apostolic faith to the church which had been lost by denominationalism. Major teachings include the Godhead, the baptismal formula, the serpent seed doctrine, the role of women, moral decay, marriage and divorce, and eschatology.

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## **Imprisoned Pastor SaeedAbedini: 80 Congressmen urge John Kerry to intervene**

The Christian Post (15.02.2013) - U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry is being urged by more than 80 Senators and Representatives to "exhaust every possible option" to try and secure the release of American pastor SaeedAbedini, who is currently being held in prison in Iran.

"This is a significant bi-partisan effort to secure the freedom of a U.S. citizen who faces incredible torture and life-threatening punishment in one of Iran's most brutal prisons – simply because of his Christian beliefs," said Jordan Sekulow, executive director of the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), in a statement on Thursday.

"This letter from a politically broad spectrum of members of Congress underscores the real issue here: the U.S. government must protect its citizens and exercise every diplomatic tool available to secure the freedom of Pastor Saeed. We are very grateful for this Congressional support and urge Secretary Kerry to act without delay. Pastor Saeed's life hangs in the balance. Secretary Kerry's personal involvement in this case is critical to securing the freedom of this American."

Sekulow refers to the bipartisan Congressional call signed by more than 80 Senators and House Reps who have been made aware of Pastor Abedini's plight and have called upon the State Department to fight for the Iranian-born pastor's release.

Abedini is currently serving an eight year sentence in Evin Prison in Tehran, after an Iranian court convicted him of endangering national security and arresting him in September 2012. In reality, ACLJ says that the pastor had been spending his time since converting to Christianity in 2000 by making trips back and forth between Iran and America, where his wife and two children live, helping underground Christian churches and building an orphanage for underprivileged children.

The law organization says that Abedini was convicted after a quick "sham" trial where his lawyer was barely allowed 24 hours to prepare the defense with his client.

"When I heard this from my husband, I cried. It broke my heart. Behind those walls he feels helpless and relies on us to be his voice. It is so easy to feel forgotten in the walls of the prison. Please help me make sure he is never forgotten," Naghmeh Abedini shared about her last conversation with her husband earlier in February, who has said he is being beaten and mistreated behind bars.

"Every American citizen traveling or living abroad should have the assurance that the U.S. government will come vigorously to his or her defense if they are unjustly detained or imprisoned," reads the letter, signed by the U.S. lawmakers.

"We respectfully request that you continue to use every diplomatic avenue possible, in cooperation with our allies and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, to secure Mr. Abedini's unconditional release and personally and publicly condemn his arbitrary detention in a statement."

Earlier this week, the ACLJ's affiliate in Europe, the European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ), filed a statement in Strasbourg, France, asking the U.N. Human Rights Council to demand for the release of the pastor.

The ACLJ are still encouraging people to sign a petition in support of Pastor Abedini, to remind him that he is not alone in this long and uncertain struggle.

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**Pastor Saeed Abedini case reaching 'critical stage'; UN called to intervene**

The Christian Post (12.02.2013) - The United Nations Human Rights Council has been called to intervene in the case of American pastor, SaeedAbedini, who remains imprisoned in Tehran, Iran, after he was sentenced to eight years in prison following what has been widely labeled, an unjust trial.

The European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ), an affiliate of the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), filed a statement on Monday in Strasbourg, France, asking the U.N. Council to call for the release of the pastor, much like the U.S. State Department has done.

"Pastor SaeedAbedini, a Christian with dual United States–Iranian nationality, is currently imprisoned at Evin Prison in Tehran, the Islamic Republic of Iran, because he encouraged peaceful assemblies of Christians in private homes," the ECLJ reminded the U.N. in the written statement.

Pastor Abedini has been held in Tehran since September 2012, when he was arrested on one of his trips from America to Iran to work in a children's orphanage. Abedini, who converted to Christianity in 2000, was accused by the Iranian court of endangering national security by aiding underground Christian churches, and was sentenced to eight years in prison by a notorious "hanging judge."

The ACLJ, who are representing the pastor's wife, Naghmeh, and their two children back in the U.S., have been at the forefront of campaigning for Abedini, leading a petition that brought news of the pastor's plight to the U.S. State Department, and which led to new Secretary of State John Kerry calling for the pastor's release.

"As a Member State of the UN, the Islamic Republic of Iran is obligated to adhere to norms set forth in the UN Charter, such as those requiring members '[t]o achieve international cooperation [...] in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and [...] fundamental freedoms [...] without distinction as to [inter alia] religion,'" the ECLJ further noted in its statement to the U.N.

"Filing this written submission is a vital first step in our formal U.N. efforts to free Saeed," Jordan Sekulow, Executive Director of the ACLJ, who also serves as Senior Counsel of the ECLJ, said in a press release. "Next, we'll attempt to engage each of the 47 members of the Human Rights Council, in hopes that one or more of these states will raise Pastor Saeed's case in oral comments at the Council's next plenary session."

Sekulow added that the case was reaching a "critical stage."

Pastor Abedini's supporters are hoping that the latest push for his release will keep the spotlight on his case. The pastor has shared fears that his plight in prison might soon be forgotten, and has said that he is being beaten and prevented from speaking with his family.

"When I heard this from my husband, I cried. It broke my heart. Behind those walls he feels helpless and relies on us to be his voice. It is so easy to feel forgotten in the walls of the prison. Please help me make sure he is never forgotten," NaghmehAbedini shared about her last conversation with her husband earlier in February.

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## **Iran convicts and sentences American pastor Saeed to prison because of his Christian faith**

ACLJ (27.01.2013) - The American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), which focuses on constitutional and human rights law, said today's action by an Iranian court convicting and sentencing American Pastor Saeed Abedini for his Christian faith is a travesty that sadly underscores Iran's brazen violation of international law and a tragic reminder that Iran is one of the world's worst offenders of religious freedom.

In an unexpected development in Iran today and without family present, Judge Pir-Abassi of Branch 26 of the Iranian Revolutionary Court – known as the "[hanging judge](#)" – verbally convicted and sentenced Pastor Saeed to eight years in prison for threatening the national security of Iran through his leadership in Christian house churches.

"This is a real travesty – a mockery of justice," said [Jordan Sekulow](#), Executive Director of the ACLJ, who represents Pastor Saeed's wife and children living in the U.S. "From the very beginning, Iranian authorities have lied about all aspects of this case, even releasing rumors of his expected release. Iran has not only abused its own laws, it has trampled on the fundamentals of human rights. We call on the citizens of the world to rise up in protest. We call on governments around the world to stand and defend Pastor Saeed."

Pastor Saeed and his attorney were permitted to attend just one day of his trial, which began January 21st. They were barred from attending and participating in further proceedings. During his imprisonment, Pastor Saeed has been beaten and tortured raising serious concerns about his medical condition.

Pastor Saeed's conviction and sentence in the Iranian Revolutionary Court had to be approved at the very top – The Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei had to sign off.

The ACLJ represents Pastor Saeed's wife and children who reside in the U.S.

This statement from Pastor Saeed's wife, Naghmeh, after learning about today's court action:

"The promise of his release was a lie," said Naghmeh. "We should not trust the empty words or promises put out by the Iranian government. These false hopes amount to psychological torture. You don't want to trust them, but they build a glimmer of hope before the crushing blow. With today's development I am devastated for my husband and my family. We must now pursue every effort, turn every rock, and not stop until Saeed is safely on American soil."

ACLJ Executive Director Jordan Sekulow added:

"Here's the troubling reality: we have a U.S. citizen, who has been beaten and tortured since his imprisonment last fall, is now facing eight years in Evin Prison, one of the most brutal prisons in Iran. A harsh sentence in a notorious prison – likely facing life-threatening torture and abuse at the hands of the Iranian regime. Simply because of his Christian faith."

The ACLJ has been working with the U.S. Government and at the United Nations to generate support for Pastor Saeed. Both [the White House and the U.S. State Department](#) have condemned Iran and called for Pastor Saeed's release.

Pastor Saeed, 32, was granted U.S. citizenship in 2010 through marriage to his American wife. He and his wife, Naghmeh, have two children, a 6-year-old daughter and 4-year-old son. In 2008, Pastor Saeed became an ordained minister with the American Evangelistic Association. Naghmeh and the children reside in the western U.S. The Iranian government does not recognize his U.S. citizenship and for 3 years he travelled freely back and forth from Iran until this summer when he was put under house arrest. He was imprisoned in September.

The ACLJ is providing legal representation to his U.S.-based family and working with various contacts in Iran on his case. Further, the ACLJ launched an international campaign urging the United Nations, the U.S. State Department and Congress to get involved and demand Pastor Saeed's release. The ACLJ also has heard from [nearly 250,000 Americans](#) demanding Pastor Saeed's release.

Led by Chief Counsel [Jay Sekulow](#), the American Center for Law and Justice is headquartered in Washington, D.C. and has affiliated offices in Israel, Russia, Kenya, France, Pakistan, and Zimbabwe.

### ***Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l urges***

- ***the Iranian authorities to review the sentence handed down to Pastor Abedini and to abide by Article 19 of the ICCPR protecting freedom of religion and belief to which Iran is a signatory;***
- ***the European Union to adopt a resolution on freedom of religion or belief in Iran;***
- ***the international community to press the Iranian authorities to drop the charges against Pastor Abedini***

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## **Iranian-American pastor sentenced to eight years in prison**

CSW (28.01.2013) - Mr SaeedAbedinigalangashi, a convert to Christianity with dual United States/Iranian nationality, was sentenced to eight years in prison on 27 January for "actions against the national security of Iran." His lawyer told Mohabat News that the charges against him concern the planting of house churches that are "intended to undermine national security."

Mr Abedinigalangashi, also known as Mr Abedini, was arrested in September 2012 while in Iran on a family visit. His case was heard at the Revolutionary Court Branch 26 in Tehran on 21 January by Pir-Abbassi, a notoriously harsh judge who is on the Council of the European Union's list of Iranian officials and agencies against whom sanctions were instituted. There was no public access to the courtroom, and Mr Abedini had limited access to his legal representative. According to Mr Abedini's wife, his lawyer will appeal the charges within 20 days.

The accusation against Mr Abedini dates back to the year 2000, when he converted to Christianity. According to the official case file, which his lawyer only received in January 2013, despite the fact that his client has been detained since September 2012, the charge is based primarily on Mr Abedini's past leadership position in a house church network.

Mr Abedini was detained on 26 September 2012, after security officers raided his parent's home and was taken to Evin prison, where he was held in solitary confinement,

before being moved to a general prison within the political section of Evin Prison in November 2012. He is reported to have suffered physical assaults on several occasions, and has also been subject to psychological pressure.

On several occasions, Mr Abedini's family was promised he would be released on bail; however this did not materialise. The authorities had earlier demanded 400 million Tomans (equivalent to approximately USD\$330,000) for his release.

Andrew Johnston, Advocacy Director at Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, "CSW is deeply concerned by the lack of due process in Mr Abedini's case. There should be no doubt that while the charges against Mr Abedini are couched in political terms, in reality these charges stem from his conversion and from exercising the freedom to worship in communion with others in accordance with article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). We urge the Iranian authorities to uphold the rule of law, review the sentence handed down to Mr Abedini, and respect the principle of freedom of religion and belief, as outlined in the ICCPR, to which Iran is signatory."

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## HRWF International FORB Prisoners Watch List 2012

HRWF (29.01.2013) - In 2012, many people in Iran were arrested for converting from Islam to Christianity or for their missionary activities. Especially targeted were Protestants, Anglicans and the non-trinitarian Church of Iran. This list dated 31 December 2012 does not claim to be exhaustive; its main objective is to facilitate advocacy in favour of their release.

### Protestants

**Mojtaba BABA-KARAMI, Mehdi Chaghakaboudi, ShirinGhanbari , Azadeh SHARIFI and nine other Christians**

**Place of residence:** Kermanshah

**Date & Place of Arrest:** 21 February 2012 in Kermanshah

**Statement of the defendants:** Gathering for worship in a private house

**Place of detention:** Baba-Karami and Chaghakaboudi is detained in Hafezieh prison.

**Date of release:** Nine were released on 22 February 2012. Sharifi was released on 28 February 2012. No news from the three others by the end of 2012.

**Fariba NAZEMIAN, Mojtaba HOSSEINI, Homayoun SHOKOOHI, Mohamad-Reza PARTOEI and Vahid HAKKANI and 3 others** (belonging to house churches)

**Date & Place of Arrest:** On 8 February 2012, in the city of Shiraz in Fars Province

**Charges:** Creating illegal groups, participating in a house church service, propagation against the Islamic regime and defaming Islamic holy figures through Christian evangelizing

**Place of detention:** Nazemian, Shokoohi and Hakkani were detained in Adel-Abad prison.

**Statement of the defendants:** Worshipping in a private home

**Date of release:** The three whose names are unknown were released on bail after 36 days. On 18 October 2012, Nazemian was released on a 250 million Toman bail (approximately 204,000 USD).

**Pastor Farhad SABOKROH, his wife Shanaz JEIZAN , Naser Zamen-DEFZULI and Davoud ALIJANI** (belonging to Assemblies of God)

**Date & Place of Arrest:** 23 December 2011, Ahwaz in Khuzestan Province

**Charges:** Unknown

**Place of detention:** Karoun prison in Ahwaz

**Date of release:** ShanazJeizan was released on 1 December 2012, after submitting the deed of a house as bail. FarhadSabokroh and another member were released on bail after serving two months in prison.

**Pastor Vruir AVANESSIAN and Mostafa BORDBAR** (Armenian Christians belonging to the Assemblies of God)

**Birth Year/ Age:** Approximately 60 years old and Bordbar 26

**Family status:** PastorAvanessian is married and has children

**Date & Place of Arrest:** 27 December 2012 in the northern district of Tehran

**Charges:** Unknown

**Statement of the defendants:** Gathering at a residential home to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ and the occasion of Christmas in a private home

**Place of detention:** Evin Prison in Tehran

**Date of release:** By the end of year 2012, both were still in prison.

**Other information:** Pastor Avanessian is suffering severe health challenges.

**Ladan N. and Hooman H.**

**Birth Year/ Age:** Born respectively in 1986 and 1985

**Date & Place of Arrest:** 14 April 2012 in Tehran

**Charges:** Unknown

**Place of detention:** Evin Prison in Tehran

**Other information:** The parents of the two detainees have received letters of summons to appear in court to answer questions about the converts' activities.

**Pastor Saeed ABEDINI** (belonging to an Evangelical Church)

**Birth Year/ Age:** 32

**Family status:** Married with two children, a 6-year-old daughter and 4-year-old son

**Date & Place of Arrest:** 26 September 2012

**Charges:** Threatening the national security of Iran through his leadership in Christian house churches

**Statement of the defendants:** Managing the construction of a non-religious orphanage

**Place of detention:** Evin Prison in Tehran

**Other information:** Pastor Saeed, 32, was granted U.S. citizenship in 2010 through marriage to his American wife.

**Fariborz ARAZM**

**Birth Year/ Age:** 1967

**Family status:** Two children

**Date & Place of Arrest:** 17 November 2011, in RobotKarim, south of Tehran

**Charges:** Being in contact with missionaries and promoting the Christian faith among Iranian Muslims

**Place of detention:** Ward 350 in Evin Prison in Tehran

**Date of release:** 11 April 2012

**Other information:** Before his transfer to Evin Prison, Arazm was held in Rajaei-Shahr prison in Karaj, where he was kept in solitary confinement for 21 days.

**Masoud DELIJANI**

**Date & Place of Arrest:** 17 March 2011

**Charges:** Being a Christian, holding illegal house church gatherings, evangelizing Muslims and action "against national security"

**Place of detention:** Deizal-Abad, central prison of Kermanshah

**First court decision:** In July 2011, he was released on bail amounting to about US\$100,000 and rearrested two weeks later.

**Last court decision:** In February 2012, the Revolutionary Court of Kermanshah sentenced him to three years' imprisonment.

**Farshid FATHI**

**Family status:** Married with two children.

**Date & Place of Arrest:** 24 December 2010

**Charges:** Action against the regime's security, being in contact with foreign organizations and religious propaganda

**Place of detention:** Ward 350 of Evin Prison in Tehran since December 2010

**Last court decision:** In January 2012, the Revolutionary Court of Kermanshah sentenced him to six years' imprisonment.

**Pastor Mehdi FURUTAN**

**Date & Place of Arrest:** January 2011

**Charges:** Crimes against national security and blasphemy against Islam

**Place/ date of detention:** September 2011

**First court decision:** Acquitted on the blasphemy charge and released on bail a month later.

**Last court decision:** Sentenced to one year in prison.

**Pastor Noorollah GHABITIZADEH**

**Birth Year/ Age:** 47 years

**Date & Place of Arrest:** 24 December 2010 in Isfahan

**Charges:** Proselytizing Muslims

**Place of detention:** Transferred to Dastgerd prison in February 2012

**Duration of detention:** 577 days

**Date of release:** Early August 2012

**Maryam JALILI**

**Family status:** Married with two children

**Date & Place of Arrest:** 24 December 2009

**Charges:** Membership of an illegal group

**Statement of the defendants:** Gathering with other Christians to celebrate the birth of Jesus

**Place of detention:** Evin Prison in Teheran

**First court decision:** On 5 December 2011, she was sentenced to two and a half years' imprisonment.

**Leila MOHAMMADI**

**Birth Year:** 1982

**Place of residence:** Kianshahr town, East of Tehran

**Date & Place of Arrest:** 30 July 2011, at her home in Kianshahr town, east of Tehran

**Charges:** Broad anti-Islamic propaganda, deceiving citizens by formation of what is called a house church, insulting sacred figures and action against national security

**Place of detention:** Evin Prison in Teheran

**First court decision:** In January 2012, the Revolutionary Court in Moalem Street sentenced her to two years' imprisonment.

**Last court decision:** The case was sent to the high court of Tehran province to be reviewed.

**Pastor Yousef NADARKHANI**

**Birth Year/ Age:** 1978

**Family status:** Married with two sons

**Place of residence:** Rasht

**Date & Place of Arrest:** 13 October 2009 in Rasht

**Charges:** Apostasy, converting to Christianity and evangelising Muslims

**Statement of the defendants:** Converting from Islam to Christianity and questioning the Muslim monopoly of religious instruction for children, seen as unconstitutional by the pastor

**Place of detention:** Lakan prison in Gilan province

**First court decision:** In September 2010, he was sentenced to death for apostasy.

**Last court decision:** In September 2012, he was acquitted of apostasy charges but sentenced to three years' imprisonment for evangelising Muslims.

**Article of the criminal/civil/administrative code or law:** Shari'a law and authoritative fatwas

**Other information:** Released for a first time in September 2012, after being stated that he had already spent close to three years prison, the director of Lakan Prison claimed he had been released several days too early. The pastor then had to return to prison in December 2012 to spend the remaining 45 days!

### **Fariborz PARSI-NEJAD**

**Place of residence:** Isfahan

**Date & Place of Arrest:** 2 March 2012 in Isfahan

**Charges:** Unknown

**Place of detention:** Dastgerd prison in Isfahan

**Other information:** Authorities allegedly arrested more Christians on the same day in Isfahan, but this could not be confirmed by other sources.

### **Noorallah QABITIZADE**

**Birth Year/ Age:** 48 years

**Date & Place of Arrest:** 24 December 2010 in Dezful

**Charges:** Unknown

**Place of detention:** Dastgerd Prison in Isfahan

**Other information:** Noorallah Qabitzade was transferred three times to different prisons because he was outspoken about his faith while incarcerated.

### **Mitra ZAHMATI**

**Date & Place of Arrest:** April 2011

**Charges:** Membership of an illegal group

**Place of detention:** Evin prison in Tehran

**Last court decision:** On 5 December 2011, he was sentenced to two and a half years' imprisonment.

### **Anglicans**

**Hekmat SALIMI (St. Paul Anglican Church), Giti HAKIMPOUR (St. Luke's Anglican Church), Shahram GHAEDI, Maryam DEL-ARAM, Shahnaz ZARIFI, Enayat JAFARI**

**Birth Year/ Age:** Hekmat Salimi is 30, Giti Hakimpour, 78 and Maryam Del-Aram, 54

**Family status:** Shahnaz Zarifi has two children. Enayat Jafari is married and has a son.

**Place of residence:** Isfahan

**Date & Place of Arrest:** 22 February 2012 in Isfahan

**Charges:** No official charges

**Place of detention:** Hekmat Salimi and Enayat Jafari were detained at Dastgerd prison.

**Date of release:** Giti Hakimpour was released on 25 February 2012.

**Other information:** Authorities have allegedly arrested more Christians in Isfahan, but this could not be confirmed by other sources.

### **Branhamist Christians/ Church of Iran**

**Mohammad (Vahid) ROGHANGIR, Suroush SARAIE, Roxana FORUGHI, Eskandar REZAIE, Bijan HAGHIGHI, Mehdi AMERUNI and Shahin LAHOOTI**

**Date & Place of Arrest:** 12 October 2012, in a house in the city of Shiraz in Fars Province

**Place of detention:** Intelligence Ministry's detention centre, Pelak (Plaque 100). Some were transferred to Adel-Abad prison in Shiraz.

**Charges:** Unknown

**Date of release:** BijanHaghighi, was released on 25 October after posting bail bond amounting to US\$ 25,000. Roxana Furughi and Mehdi Ameruni were released respectively on 1 November 2012 and in the last week of November, after posting bail of a similar amount.

**Afsar BAHMANI and Massoud REZAIE**

**Date & Place of Arrest:** 18 October 2012, in the city of Shiraz in Fars Province

**Place of detention:** Intelligence Ministry's detention centre, Pelak (Plaque 100). MassoudRezaie was transferred to Adel-Abad prison in Shiraz.

**Date of release:** AfsarBahmani has been released 24 hours after her arrest, apparently on health grounds.

**Behnam IRANI**

**Date & Place of Arrest:** April 2010

**Charges:** Crimes against national security

**Place of detention:** Prison of Karaj since May 2011

**First court decision:** After being released on bail a first time a few months later, he turned himself in after authorities issued a warrant for his arrest.

**Last court decision:** January 2011, he was sentenced to one year imprisonment.

**Other information:** Authorities told him he must also serve the five-year sentence handed down in 2008.

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## **Pastor SaeedAbedini Set for 'Sham' Trial in Iran; Fears Death for Faith in Jesus**

Christian Post (15.01.2013) - Pastor SaeedAbedini, an American citizen born in Iran, is facing a quick trial in Tehran on Jan. 21 and has expressed fears that he might be given the death penalty for his Christian work.

The American Center for Law and Justice shared an update with The Christian Post about the pastor's case, and revealed that his attorney in Iran has been allowed to see the court file only very recently – to discover that the pastor's trial date is set for Monday, Jan. 21, less than one week from now.

"It is an outrage that Pastor Saeed's trial date and charge against him would be withheld from his legal counsel until less than a week before the trial itself. Not only is Iran violating Pastor Saeed's fundamental freedom of religion, but it is making a mockery of justice," Jordan Sekulow, Executive Director of the American Center for Law and Justice, said in a statement. The ACLJ is representing the pastor's family, his wife and two children, who are in the U.S.

Pastor Abedini's case was also recently transferred over to a notorious "hanging judge" in Iran, named in 2011 by the European Union as an individual subject to sanctions for human rights violations for sentencing a number of human right activists to death.

In a letter to his wife, Naghmeh, the 32-year-old pastor recently expressed his fears that he might indeed be facing the death penalty, and revealed some of the interrogation techniques that have been used against him in Evin Prison in Tehran.

"This is the process in my life today: one day I am told I will be freed and allowed to see my kids on Christmas (which was a lie) and the next day I am told I will hang for my

faith in Jesus," Pastor Abedini wrote. "One day there are intense pains after beatings in interrogations, the next day they are nice to you and offer you candy."

Pastor Abedini, who converted from Islam to Christianity at the age of 20 and later married Naghmeh, a U.S. citizen, has long been targeted by Iranian authorities for helping underground churches in Iran and for his charity work. He was first detained by Iranian officials in 2009, and released with a warning not to continue preaching. But in July 2011, he was once again arrested during one of his trips from America to Iran.

His lawyer has deciphered, however, that the only real charge authorities have managed to make against him is for "endangering" the national security of Iran in 2000, the year when he converted to Christianity. The ACLJ described it as "a typical charge brought by the radical Islamic regime against those it wishes to persecute for their religious beliefs. His court file indicated that this national security charge was directly related to his work starting a house church movement in Iran."

The law group claims that Iranian authorities have even confiscated more than \$105,000 from an Iranian bank account given to Abedini in donations for a local orphanage project.

The U.S. State Department recently revealed its "serious concerns" for the pastor's imprisonment, but stopped short of calling for his immediate release. The ACLJ has urged the State Department to take a stronger stand on the issue and offer better protection for Americans persecuted in other countries for their Christian faith.

More than 66,000 people have already signed a petition urging for Pastor Abedini's release from prison, and the ACLJ is hopeful that intense international pressure will eventually lead to his freedom, such as in Iranian Pastor YoucefNadarkhani's case.

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## **Christian converts face criminalization of their faith in Iran**

### ***New report finds severe restrictions on religious practice; arbitrary arrests and detentions common***

International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (16.01.2013) - The Iranian authorities should immediately end their systematic persecution and prosecution of Protestants and Christian converts, the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran said in a [new report](#) released today.

The 73-page comprehensive report, [The Cost of Faith: Persecution of Christian Protestants and Converts in Iran](#), documents a pattern of rights violations that extends to all walks of life for Protestant converts in Iran: they face severe restrictions on religious practice and association, arbitrary arrests and detentions for practicing their faith, and violations of the right to life through state execution for apostasy and extrajudicial killings.

"The egregious violations of Christians' rights, which include not only the inability to freely practice their religion, but also the threat of torture and death at the hands of state officials, go against all international law. The international community must let the Iranian government know this is unacceptable," said HadiGhaemi, Executive Director for the Campaign.

The report is based on interviews with 31 Christians throughout Iran from April 2011 to July 2012, drawing on extensive first-hand testimony by Iranian Christians, lawyers who have represented Christians in Iran, Christian rights advocates, and Iranian Christian journalists, as well as relevant Iranian court verdicts, religious edicts by Shi'a jurists and Iranian laws.

The report documents the systematic arbitrary arrest and detention of Christian converts. For example, FarshidFathi, a 33-year-old Christian leader from Tehran was detained in December 2010 as part of a Christmas crackdown on Christians and subsequently charged with "acting against national security," "contact with enemy foreign countries," and "religious propaganda." The Judiciary has sentenced him to six years in prison which he is currently serving.

Since 2005, authorities have arrested and prosecuted Protestants most often for security crimes against the state. Ahmed Shaheed, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran, noted in September 2012 that over 300 Christians have been arbitrarily arrested and detained throughout the country since 2010.

Christian detainees are often denied due process and basic rights. They are held in prolonged detention without formal charges, trials are held without access to counsel, or, if there is counsel, without access to court files, and ill treatment is common during detention.

Leading Iranian officials allege, without any substantiation, that Christian converts are part of a foreign inspired "soft war" against the state. Hojjat Al-Islam Abbas Kaebi, a member of the influential Assembly of Experts, in October 2010 claimed, "... the Zionists and Westerners have targeted [through Christian converts] our society's identity and people's religion."

In numerous interviews conducted by the Campaign, Christian converts reported a consistent pattern of abuses by the government. Freedom to practice religion is severely restricted: the government has refused to allow the construction or licensing of any new church since the 1979 Revolution, it restricts church attendance and has closed many churches, it has shut down Iran's main Persian-language bible publisher and restricts the distribution of bibles, and it monitors and harasses church groups.

The Campaign's research reveals that interrogators, prosecutors and courts consistently refer to standard Christian practices, such as membership in a house church, evangelical activities, and participation in a Christian conference, as criminal acts, and security officers routinely confiscate standard Christian items such as bibles, religious literature, and crosses during arrests.

The report also found clear and consistent evidence of the threat to life for Christian converts. One leading Christian pastor, HosseinSoodmand, was executed by the state for apostasy in 1990; other church leaders who were sentenced to death for apostasy, including Christian pastor YoucefNadarkhani, were subsequently acquitted only due to intense international pressure. The Campaign's research revealed numerous reports of security officials threatening Christian detainees with execution on apostasy charges, and numerous cases of suspicious deaths involving Christian leaders whose investigations were so lacking in due diligence that government complicity in the killings or the cover-ups is strongly suggested.

The report also documents the systematic discrimination of Christian Protestants and converts in employment, education, in laws governing marriage and family, and in Iran's penal code.

Under Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Iran is obligated to safeguard freedom of religion. While the Iranian government asserts that it respects the rights of its recognized religious minorities, in practice it does not do so.

"From apostasy charges that threaten the lives of converts to the imprisonment of church members involved in proselytizing, authorities have engaged in a pattern of human rights abuses that effectively criminalizes faith and manifestations of it," Ghaemi said.

The Campaign calls on the government of Iran to allow its Christian converts to freely practice their religion, without further threat or intimidation, as is required under international and Iranian domestic law.

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## **Pastor Nadarkhani released, imprisoned lawyer Mohammed Ali Dadkhah's health deteriorates**

CSW (07.01.2013) - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has learned that Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, who was re-imprisoned on Christmas Day, was released today.

In September 2012, Pastor Nadarkhani was acquitted of apostasy but received a three year sentence for evangelising Muslims. Since he had already spent close to three years in Lakan Prison in Rasht, the pastor was released after posting bail. However, in a highly irregular move, he was returned to jail on Christmas Day on the orders of prison authorities, who claimed he had been released too early due to the insistence of his lawyer, Mohammed Ali Dadkhah. Mr Dadkhah, a prominent human rights lawyer, was subsequently jailed for ten years and disbarred in September 2012 for "actions and propaganda against the Islamic regime" and keeping banned books in his home. He was also banned from practising or teaching law for ten years.

Mr Dadkhah is currently held in Tehran's notorious Evin Prison. Concerns have been expressed for his well-being following reports that he is suffering from memory loss and is under pressure to make a televised confession of guilt.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are pleased to learn of Pastor Nadarkhani's release. While we welcome this news, we remain concerned that like so many other Christians who have been unjustly detained, there is always a risk of re-arrest. We are also concerned to learn of Mr Dadkhah's condition and hold the regime responsible for the deterioration in his health. Moreover, official attempts to justify his imprisonment by attempting to coerce an "on air" confession are not only reprehensible, but are also clear indications that the charges levelled against him were spurious. CSW calls for the immediate release of Mr Dadkhah and for an end to the campaign of harassment of civil society. We also continue to call on the Iranian government to uphold the rule of law and allow the country's religious minorities to enjoy religious freedom as guaranteed under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is party."

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