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Christmas arrests in Iran: 11 still detained

Article 18 (15.01.2015) - As the US Secretary of State meets his Iranian counterpart in a bid to revive stalled talks over Iran's nuclear programme, human rights experts are keen that issues of freedom of religion are not overlooked.

This week, the UK Foreign Office has said that it's raised its concern with the Iranian government over the arrest and detention - in Iran's notorious Evin prison - of the former leader of the Assyrian Pentecostal Church in Tehran, as well as two others, whose whereabouts remains unknown.

The 60-year-old pastor Victor Beth Tarmez and the two Christian converts who were his guests were arrested when Iranian state security agents raided Tarmez's home during a Christmas celebration he was hosting on the evening of December 26; the gathering was considered to be "unauthorized and illegal."

Mansour Borji, from the Article18 committee of the Hamgaam ('taking steps together' in Dari) Council of Iranian churches told World Watch Monitor that Tarmez' family is concerned for his health as he's a diabetic. Borji also said details of the actual charge on which Tarmez is detained are still unclear.

Borji told WWM that Tarmez was forced to speak Farsi with his family on a very brief phone call from prison, instead of using their shared native language Assyrian, so that guards could monitor what was said.

All Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief

The British Foreign Office has written: "The UK government is deeply concerned by the Iranian regime's ongoing persecution of religious minorities - including Christians. ... The UK and the international community expect Iran to live up to the right to freedom of religion and belief as set out in the Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights."

During the raid

According to [Mohabat News](#), an Iranian Christian news site, the agents temporarily arrested all 14 in the house at the time. Then they filmed all the detainees, forcing them to "introduce themselves to the camera and say why they were there and why they thought they were being arrested" and then asked them to "fill out an eight-page form printed on papers with the logo of the Ministry of Intelligence". Among those arrested were Christian converts with a Zoroastrian [ancient Iranian religion] background, who refused to fill out the forms arguing that this was a written interrogation and could result

in a criminal record for them. They said they had not broken any law and should not be subject to interrogation."

The agents also confiscated the pastor's belongings including his computer and Bibles. They also searched the guests, seizing their identification cards and mobile phones.

Pastor Tarmez repeatedly intimidated since 2009

Tarmez is an Assyrian pastor officially recognized by the Iranian government; until 2009, he also worked as General Superintendent in Shahr-Ara Assyrian Pentecostal Church.

He had been holding Farsi-speaking services for years at Shahr-Ara. Then, [as reported on this website](#), in March 2009, the Assyrian Member of the Iranian Parliament Yonathan Betkolia announced that, by order of the Islamic Revolutionary Court, the church would be closed because it offered a Farsi-language service attended by converts from Islam. While the church was temporarily closed after Tarmez refused to stop Farsi-language services, it was later re-opened (after he had been demoted from leadership) with a new church leader, and services continued in Assyrian only.

The number of Assyrian Christians in the country is estimated at between 10,000 and 20,000.

Since 2009 Tarmez has continued his religious activities.

Borji told WWM that 2009 was the start of government pressure against churches which hold Farsi-language services. (Most recently, [we reported on the closure in May 2013 of the Assemblies of God](#) church in Tehran).

Borji explained to WWM: "Over the past five years, we have witnessed arrests of several Christians and Christian converts during Christmas holidays: the government is very sensitive about these days... Also in the last 5 years, seven churches that offered worship services in Farsi language were closed down or forced to cease their Farsi services.

More Christmas arrests of Iranian Christians

Borji also confirmed to WWM that eight other Christians were arrested on Christmas Day at a house church in Tehran province and have since been transferred to an unknown location.

They are Mehdi Kian, Ali Sadraddin, Mohammad Kazemi, Azin Faroudi, Mohammad Hossein Moridian, Maryam Narimani, Alireza Nasiri and Brother Matin.

Another organisation, Middle East Concern, reported that over the Christmas period a total of 24 arrests of Christians were recorded, although it added that, separately, five other Christians have recently been released from prison, some on bail and with conditions. One, Amin Khaki, had been held since March 2014.

Iran No. 7 on World Watch List

Iran ranks No. 7 on the 2015 World Watch List, two positions higher than the previous year.

The list ranks the 50 countries where living as a Christian is most difficult, and is created annually by Open Doors International, a worldwide ministry to Christians who live under pressure because of their faith

Open Doors said the ranking changed because of an increased deteriorating situation for Christians in Iran. It says "According to the Iranian state, only Armenians and Assyrians can be Christian. Ethnic Persians are by definition Muslim, and, therefore, ethnic Persian Christians are considered apostates. This makes almost all Christian activity illegal, especially when it occurs in Persian (Farsi) languages - from evangelism to Bible training, to publishing Scripture and Christian books, or preaching in Farsi".

Baha'i girl denied burial

Iran Wire (12.11.2014) - When 12-year old Mahna Samandari died in October, her family arranged for her to be buried in Tabriz, where the family lived. But because Samandari was Baha'i, the authorities in the East Azerbaijan capital rejected the grieving family's burial requests on the grounds of her religion. After 21 days, her body remains in the city morgue and the family's requests for Mahna Samandari to be granted a proper burial continue to be ignored.

IranWire spoke to one of Mahna Samandari's relatives about the ordeal.

What happened after Mahna died and when did the authorities refuse to issue a burial permit?

Mahna died on October 21 in hospital, due to an illness. At the insistence of her family, her body was transferred to her home so that the Baha'i rites for the dead could be performed. On the way to the house, the ambulance driver noticed that the family was Baha'i. He refused to continue, but finally, he yielded to the pleas of the family and delivered the body to their home.

After washing the body, reciting prayers and shrouding her according to Baha'i tenets, the family took Mahna's body to the city's public cemetery, Vadi-e Rahmat ["Valley of Mercy"]. But the cemetery officials stated that they didn't issue permits for the burial of non-Muslims in their cemetery. Since then Mahna's body has been at the morgue.

Is there a precedent for this? Have other Tabriz Baha'is been treated this way?

After the Islamic Revolution, the Baha'i cemetery was closed down and since then, Baha'is have been buried in Vadi-e Rahmat, a public cemetery. But, starting in 2014, cemetery officials refused to bury Baha'is. Since then more than 20 Baha'is have died in Tabriz; none have been issued a burial permit. The excuse the officials give is that they cannot bury the deceased Baha'is next to Muslims because it would amount to propaganda for them.

They only issue permits if the deceased Baha'i is buried without a coffin and according to Islamic sharia law. Because they don't have access to another burial place, the Baha'is place the body at the morgue, hoping the officials will provide them with a place to bury their dead. Unfortunately, after a few days they get the news that the body had been buried in the Baha'i cemetery in the city of Miandoab or in Urmia [both in West Azerbaijan, 167 and 147 kilometres from Tabriz respectively] without the family's knowledge and without administering proper religious rites.

According to the tenets of Baha'ism, the time distance between the places of death and burial cannot be more than one hour. Since both Miandoab and Urmia are more than one hour away from Tabriz, it seems that the authorities want to insult the religious beliefs of the relatives of the deceased Baha'is. The Baha'is of Tabriz have complained to various local and national legal authorities to redress the wrongs and to receive land for a cemetery of their own. But so far they've received no answers.

What has Mahna's family done regarding the body of their daughter?

Burying Tabriz Baha'is has been problematic for the past few years, but keeping the body of a handicapped Baha'i adolescent in the morgue for 21 days is unprecedented and exceptional. Mahna's parents are both disabled and pursuing the issue of their daughter's body is very difficult for them. Mahna's mother is deaf and her father has a bad leg and needs to walk with a stick. Despite this, they have repeatedly visited the offices of Vadi-e Rahmat cemetery. But the only answer they've received has been "there's no need to come here. If something happens we will let you know."

They've even tried to meet with the provincial governor or his deputy, but neither has agreed to meet them. When Mahna was alive, the governor had commended her for her paintings, so the Samandari family thought he would help them to bury their daughter. A few days ago they went to the Bar Association to appoint a lawyer, but no lawyer agreed to take on the case because it has "security" ramifications.

What did Mahna Samandari die from?

Mahna was suffering from a rare disease. It wasn't genetic, but it was progressive. Her legs stopped growing when she was a baby and after a while she lost the use of them. Little by little, she stopped growing and towards the end she was confined to a wheelchair. In her final days the disease spread to her internal organs as well. Her lungs stopped working, which was the cause of her death.

Despite the disease, Mahna was a hopeful and cheerful girl. She was young but the problems brought about by her illness never defeated her and she found a way around them. For example, when her legs stopped working she started using her hands. She loved to study and to paint. When her hands were no longer working she would hold the pen between her lips and continued painting. She was awarded a prize for her paintings, and the provincial governor wrote her a letter of commendation. She studied at a school for the handicapped and was a distinguished student.

Iranian court sentenced three non-Trinitarian preachers to 18 years in prison and exile

In a surprising ruling, Iranian Revolutionary Court sentenced three members of the non-Trinitarian group, Church of Iran, to long term imprisonment and exile

Mohabat News (03.11.2014) –

http://www.mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9358:iranian-court-sentenced-three-non-trinitarian-preachers-to-18-years-in-prison-and-exile&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279 – A Revolutionary Court in Karaj, capital of Alborz province, sentenced three members of a non-Trinitarian group to long term imprisonment and exile. The length of this sentence has shocked many of these men's fellow group members.

This is an initial ruling, meaning convicts, Messrs. Behnam Irani, Reza Rabani and Abdolreza Ali Haghnejad have 20 days to appeal. Their sentence translates into 18 years in jail and exile to Zabol and Minab, in southern Iran.

Behnam Irani had already been sentenced to one year in prison and also had a suspended five year prison term from an earlier court. In addition to these, he was convicted of a new charge and received another six year sentence. The ruling states that he has to spend the six year term in Zabol prison.

Mr. Irani had been arrested in 2006 and a court gave him a suspended five year prison term for "action against national security". Later, in 2009, he was sentenced to one year in prison for "propagating against the regime". He has already served this one year

prison term and is currently serving his suspended five year term. If the appeals court approves this new sentence, he will serve a total of 12 years in prison.

He has been in prison since 2010.

Reports state that Seyyed Abdolreza Ali Haghnejad (Matias), and Reza Rabani (Silas), were each sentenced to six years in prison as well.

Abdolreza Ali Haghnejad was arrested on August 18, 2011 and Reza Rabani was arrested in December 2013, both for evangelism. They are currently in custody in Rajaei-Shahr prison in Karaj.

Knowledgeable sources report that according to their sentence, they will be serving their prison term in Minab, a small town in Bandar Abbas.

The trial of these three was held on September 31, 2014, in the Revolutionary Court of Karaj. Legal activists believe that during their trial, the judiciary procedural code was not observed at all.

Although the trial began with charges of "enmity with God and corruption on earth" against these three men, by the end, the court convicted them of "acting against national security and organizing a group to over-throw the regime". The judge, Mr. Asef Al-Hosseini, based his ruling on article 498 of the Islamic penal code.

The Iranian Christians have no affiliation of any sort, with the non-Trinitarian group, known as Church of Iran. However, like always, they renounce all arbitrary allegations against members of this group, laid by the Islamic regime's judicial and security authorities. Iranian Christians, call for their release and ask Iranian authorities to clear all charges against these three men.

Iranian man executed for heresy

Mohabat News (23.10.2014) –

http://www.mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9242:iranian-man-executed-for-heresy&catid=35:inside-iran&Itemid=278 - Mohsen Amir Aslani was hanged in a prison near the city of Karaj west of Tehran on Sept. 24, according to the Human Rights Activists News Agency, which is based outside Iran, for "corruption on earth and heresy in religion."

Iranian opposition news websites have said Aslani, 37, had given religious classes where he propagated a new interpretation of the Koran. He was also accused by the authorities of insulting the Prophet Jonah.

The Iran Wire website reported that in one of his classes he told his audience that Jonah could not have emerged from the whale's belly, and it was this statement that led to his charge of insulting the Prophet Jonah.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has expressed alarm at a reported increase in executions in Iran. Iran has one of the highest levels of executions in the world, second to China, according to Amnesty.

Some human rights activists and others fear that hardliners who oppose pragmatic President Hassan Rowhani and his negotiations with Western powers over the country's nuclear program are pushing the executions to weaken him.

Iran officially executed 373 people in 2013. But according to Cornell University's Deathpenaltyworldwide.org database, there were between 624 and 727 last year, up from an estimated 314 to 580 in 2012.

The U.S.-based Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre puts the total number of executions at 531 for this year.

On Thursday, in an open letter to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, 18 physics Nobel laureates called for the "immediate and unconditional" release of Iranian physicist and prisoner of conscience, Omid Kokabee, according to a statement by the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran.

He is suffering serious health problems, according to the campaign.

Kokabee, who was arrested while on a visit to Iran from the United States in 2011 where he was studying, was charged with "communicating with a hostile government," and receiving "illegitimate funds."

In an open letter from Evin prison, in April 2013, Kokabee wrote that his imprisonment was the result of his refusal to heed pressure by Iranian intelligence agents to collaborate on a military research project.

Iran charges three Christians with capital offenses because of their religion

Freedom House (05.09.2014) <http://freedomhouse.org/article/iran-charges-three-christians-capital-offenses-because-their-religion#.VBBQFbnlqP9> - In response to the decision by Iran's Ministry of Justice to charge three Christians with capital offenses because of their religious beliefs, Freedom House issued the following statement:

"Reza Raban, Abdolreza Haghnejad, and Bahman Irani are Iranian converts to Christianity who were prominent members of a growing church network in northern Iran but now face serious, unfounded charges," said Charles Dunne, director of Middle East and North Africa programs at Freedom House. "Without any legal grounds, the Islamic Revolutionary Court in the city of Karaj has charged them with *moharebeh* (enmity against God) and *mofsed-e-filarz* (spreading corruption on earth). If convicted, they could face the death penalty simply because of their faith. We believe the Iranian government should immediately drop the charges and release these three defendants as well as all other prisoners serving jail sentences in Iran because of their religious belief or non-belief."

Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism are the only religions in addition to Islam recognized by Iran's constitution. The government nevertheless continues to impose severe restrictions on these religious communities and refuses to recognize others.

Iran is rated Not Free in *Freedom in the World 2014*, *Freedom of the Press 2014*, and *Freedom on the Net 2013*.

A group of non-trinitarian Christians arrested in Esfahan

Mohabat News (07.09.2014)

http://www.mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9119:a-group-of-non-trinitarian-christians-arrested-in-esfahan&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279 - Following the arrest of a non-Trinitarian Christian, Mohammad Taslimi, on Monday, September 1, 2014, several more members of the group were arrested on two consecutive days. They were all transferred to the security ward of Dastgerd prison in Esfahan.

Sources from Esfahan told Mohabat News, security authorities raided the residence of a couple, Hamid-Reza Borhani, and Zeinab Akbari on Tuesday September 2, thoroughly searching the place, and arresting the couple. They were both transferred to Alef-Ta (security) ward of Dastgerd prison immediately.

The report continues, following the above incident authorities arrested another member of the non-Trinitarian group, Sepideh Morshedi and transferred her to the same prison.

In another incident, on Monday September 1, the same day Mohammad Taslimi was arrested, security authorities raided Ms. Moluk Darvishi's house in her absence. Since she was not home, the authorities could only search the house and leave a message with her family that she needed to report to Dastgerd prison the following day. Her fellow non-Trinitarian group members, who identify their group as "Church of Iran", did not make available any further information on her. However, Human Rights activists in Iran reported that intelligence officers arrested her the next day.

In total, security authorities have arrested five members of the non-Trinitarian group in Esfahan. Knowledgeable sources from Esfahan told Mohabat News that Mohammad Taslimi, 41, joined the non-Trinitarian group, "Church of Iran", 10 years ago. Apparently he served as the coordinator for the group's worship meeting and through arresting him, authorities were able to access information about the rest of the group members which led to their arrest.

Mohammad Taslimi is married and is a father of two. He had been arrested earlier as part of another campaign against Iranian Christians in Esfahan. At the time, he was summoned to the intelligence office of Esfahan where authorities interrogated him for three hours. He was then released after signing a disclaimer. This time it seems authorities have pressured him to provide them with information about other members of the groups.

The above mentioned non-Trinitarian group follows the teachings of an American cult leader, William M. Branham, who died in 1965. William Branham who began as a Pentecostal Christian, formed a cultic doctrine and claimed that he was the last prophet of God on earth!

There is a small group in Iran who follow the teachings of William Branham and its members are mostly in Karaj, Rasht, Shiraz and Esfahan. Its members call it "Church of Iran". However, they have no relation with the official churches in Iran whatsoever.

Behnam Irani is a member of the same group, who has been in prison for the longest time. He was sentenced to 6 years in prison and is currently serving his sentence in Karaj prison.

Iranian authorities raid a house church in Tehran: Arrest of two Christian converts

Mohabat News (28.08.2014)

http://www.mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9077:iranian-authorities-raid-a-house-church-in-tehran-arrest-two-christian-converts&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279 –

According to Mohabat News, reports from Tehran indicate that following the recent propaganda campaign against Iranian Christians, two Christian converts identified as Mehdi Vaziri and Amir Kian were arrested as they gathered for prayer and Bible study.

Confirmed reports from Tehran state that Iranian security authorities arrested the two Christian men on August 12, 2014, at 6 P.M. in a house near Azerbaijan Street in Tehran.

A knowledgeable source told Mohabat News, "The raid happened when the owner of the house, where the house-church service was being held, went out to guide two new believers to their gathering. When the authorities attacked, he was still out and because authorities still watch his house, he cannot return there".

Families of the two men arrested in this attack made every effort to inquire about their whereabouts with no success for several days. They eventually found out that the men are being held in Ghezel-Hesar prison.

At the time of writing this report, there has been no further update on how they were arrested or what charges have been laid against them. However, since they were arrested as they attended a house-church service, it is most likely that they may be charged with action against national security, spying for foreigners or offenses of a similar nature.

Mehdi Vaziri, 28, is a graphic designer, and **Amir Kian**, 27, is a music graduate.

According to Iran's law, which is based on Sharia law, converting from Islam to Christianity is considered apostasy.

Latest UN reports suggest, at least 49 Christian are imprisoned in Iran for faith-related charges. This is only the number of publicized cases and is by no means the real number of Iranian Christian prisoners. There are many more Christian prisoners whose cases are not publicized in order to protect them and their families from threats posed by their interrogators. They are strongly warned against contacting media representatives and international investigators.

Increased pressure on the Iranian Christian community and the closure of the [largest Farsi-speaking Church in the country](#) right in the middle of last year's presidential election has caused a new wave of emigration of Iranian Christians. Today, Iranian Christians are scattered across the world.

Recently, Bulgaria's State Agency for Refugees told Fox News, "the Iranian Christian community is growing in Sofia."

He added, "[Now there are 100 to 200 people from Iran here,](#)" he added. "They are running because of the existing regime in Iran, where they are being persecuted because of their religion."

Iran's house-church movement started after the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran, mostly by Christian converts from an Islamic background. The Islamic government prosecutes those Muslims who decide to convert to Christianity.

In the meantime, the wide spread growth of Christianity among Iranians is a major concern of Iran's senior Islamic leaders. They try to focus government pressure against Christians through various means to stop the growth of house-churches across the country.

Iranian Pastor Haghnejad pressured for false confession whilst in solitary confinement

CSW (20.08.2014) - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has learned that Pastor Abdolreza "Matthias" Ali-Haghnejad, who faces charges of "Moharebeh" (warring against God), was briefly held in solitary confinement. Meanwhile, another Christian, Fatemeh Torkajouri, has been tried in absentia.

Pastor Haghnejad, a leader of the Church of Iran denomination in Karaj, is reported to have spent a week in solitary confinement in a Ministry of Intelligence and National Security (VEVAK) detention centre in Karaj, where he faced pressure to falsely confess that his church is involved in anti-government political activity. He was initially detained on 5 July, after Iranian security forces raided his home in Karaj, and was charged with "Moharebeh" on 3 August following a two-hour interrogation by Judge Mohammad Yari of the Sixth Branch of the Revolutionary Tribunal.

CSW has also learned that the trial in absentia of Fatemeh Torkajouri on charges of "action against national security" took place in Tehran on 6 August. A verdict is yet to be issued; however, her family is reported to be facing increasing pressure from the Iranian authorities to ensure her return.

Fatemeh Torkajouri was arrested on 18 August 2010, and spent an estimated two months in Evin Prison before leaving Iran in 2011. She is the wife of Church of Iran pastor Behrouz Sadegh-Khandjani, who was detained in 2010 on charges of blasphemy and suffered mistreatment while in prison. He was eventually released on bail and also left the country in 2011.

Iranian human rights organisations are reporting that Ward 350 of Evin Prison, which housed political prisoners, has been closed down following a violent raid by security services that took place on the evening of 12 August. According to reports, security agents beat and injured several prisoners and destroyed or confiscated property. A similar violent raid on the ward took place in April 2014.

Following the recent raid, former inmates were either transferred to other wards within Evin Prison, or to prisons elsewhere. Amongst the latter is Farshid Fathi, an Assemblies of God (AoG) church leader, who has reportedly been moved to Rajai Shahr Prison in Karaj.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW is disturbed to hear of the continuing harassment of Pastor Matthias and the undue pressures being placed on the family of Fatemeh Torkajouri. Attempts by the Iranian authorities to justify the charge levelled against the pastor by eliciting a false confession merely underline the fact that his detention is unwarranted and unjust. Moreover, Iran's continuing insistence on classifying normal Christian behaviour in national security terms is giving rise to confused and convoluted verdicts of questionable legality, for example a group of Christians convicted in Shiraz in 2013 was found guilty of acting against "cultural national security." *Hundreds of Iranian journalists, lawyers, political activists and ethnic and religious minorities have been sentenced to lengthy prison sentences, lashes and even execution on false charges and without due process, and Iranian human rights groups recently identified six judges who regularly hold trials behind closed doors lasting only a few

minutes and without essential legal procedures, intimidate defendants, breach judicial independence by acting as prosecutors themselves and deprive prisoners of access to lawyers. It may be time for the international community to consider targeted sanctions against identified judges who are found to have been responsible for major miscarriages of justice that breach the fair trial principles outlined in the Iranian constitution and in international statutes to which the nation is party."

Increase in arrests highlights continuing persecution of Baha'is

Baha'i World News Service (19.08.2014) <http://news.bahai.org/story/1015> -

The arrest last week of five Baha'is in Tehran signals a rising tide of detainments and imprisonments of Baha'is in Iran in recent months.

Since June, at least 14 Baha'is have been arrested, a trend that exemplifies a pattern of systematic persecution of Iranian Baha'is by the government, this despite its claims to uphold international standards of human rights. In Yazd, 20 Baha'is who had originally been acquitted of charges leveled against them in 2012 learned in August 2013 that their cases had been re-opened and all 20 sentenced to prison, notwithstanding the judge's admission that they were being treated unjustly. The Baha'is appealed the case and, in a flagrant miscarriage of justice, the sentences against all 20 were upheld. The deputy head of the Justice Administration told the lawyers of the Baha'is that: "The accused are members of a hostile sect who have no citizenship rights."

More than 100 Baha'is are currently in prison on false charges related entirely to their religious beliefs, while thousands more are subjected to various forms of discrimination and harassment, including denial of access to university and increasingly severe economic repression.

The latest arrests in Tehran, for example, appear to be related to ongoing efforts to prevent Baha'is from earning an adequate living. The five were arrested after agents from the Ministry of Intelligence raided the optical shop where they work on 11 August 2014. In February 2014, an optical shop owned by a Baha'i in Tabriz was closed down by the authorities on the grounds of "market saturation", but Muslim owners of optical shops in the same location experienced no such difficulties. It is understood that "market saturation" has only been used in the cases of Baha'is. Clearly the government is disallowing Baha'is in some cities to own certain types of business on the grounds that too many Baha'is are engaged in it.

Arrested were shop owners Aladdin (Niki) Khanjani and Babak Mobasher, along with three employees, Naser Arshi-Moghaddam, Ataollah Ashrafi and Rouhollah Monzavi. Mr. Khanjani is the son of Jamaloddin Khanjani, one of the seven Baha'i leaders who are currently serving 20 year prison sentences on false charges including espionage.

Agents also confiscated their computers and other electronic devices and took a large amount of goods and products from their shop.

A sixth employee, who is not a Baha'i, was also arrested but then released that afternoon.

"A number of pro-government websites accused the five of smuggling eyeglasses but the fact that agents released the only person who is not a Baha'i taken during the raid proves that their arrest and detention is based solely on religious persecution," said Diane Ala'i, the representative of the Baha'i International Community to the United Nations in

Geneva.

"Altogether, this sudden spike in the arrest and detention of Baha'is highlights the fact that the government continues to persecute Baha'is throughout Iran in a wide range of ways, from blocking their access to higher education, to economic sanctions, to the day-to-day harassment of Baha'is when they seek to worship together."

Ms. Ala'i said this broad-based oppression ignores all standards of justice.

"For example, 20 Baha'is who had been arrested two years ago, later tried in Yazd on spurious accusations, and who were out on bail pending an appeal were told in April that their extreme sentences - totaling 58 years for the group - had been upheld.

"This ruling came despite the fact that the judge who had originally presided over the case expressed sympathy for the defendants in open court, but was then apparently instructed to simply uphold the long sentences for their alleged crime of 'propaganda against the regime'.

"Indeed, the judge reportedly agreed in principle that the activities in question were simply those required to meet the needs of the community, such as performing marriages and divorces, seeing to children's education, overseeing funerals, and helping the poor and needy.

"Subsequently, the Baha'is sought redress through the Justice Administration and were told by the Head of that agency, 'This is exactly what you deserve. In fact we were too lenient. You do not even count to be considered for anything, let alone your citizenship rights,'" said Ms. Ala'i.

Other incidents involving the arrest and detention of Baha'is in recent months include:

* On 5 August, government agents in Shiraz arrested four Baha'is. Vahid Dana, Saeid Abedi, and Bahiyyeh Moeinipour were arrested at their homes, while Adib Haqazhuh was arrested at his workplace. To date, no information has been received about their whereabouts or status.

* On 27 July, a Baha'i in Vilashahr was arrested and beaten after refusing to work on a secret computer program for the Revolutionary Guards.

* On 8 July, Saghi Fadaie was summoned to the Ministry of Intelligence office in Mashhad. After a few hours she was taken to her home, where agents searched her belongings and took her into detention.

* On 2 June, three Baha'is were arrested in Mashhad. Their names are May Kholousi, Dori Amri, and Shayan Tafazoli.

A new wave of forced emigration of Iranian Christians

Mohabat News (16.08.2014)

http://www.mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9026:a-new-wave-of-forced-emigration-of-iranian-christians&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279 - According to a Fox News report, the new round of arrests in Iran is targeted at Christians involved in the House-Church movement, especially their leaders. This has forced a large number of Iranian Christians to leave their homeland for

places including Bulgaria's capital, Sofia, a former Soviet Union bloc country that now holds European Union status.

Nikolai Chirpanliev, president of Bulgaria's State Agency for Refugees, told Fox News, "the Iranian Christian community is growing in Sofia."

"Now there are 100 to 200 people from Iran here," he added. "They are running because of the existing regime in Iran, where they are being persecuted because of their religion."

The House-Church movement in Iran started in response to pressures by the Islamic regime on official churches, more specifically pressures on Christian converts attending so called "official churches". The Islamic regime of Iran prosecutes anyone who converts from Islam.

The latest UN statistics suggest that at least 49 Christians are imprisoned in Iran on the basis of their religious belief.

The Islamic regime of Iran has become increasingly concerned with the spread of Christianity among Iranians, to the extent that many senior Islamic officials have raised their voice against the phenomena. Iranian Islamic leaders have repeatedly warned their comrades against the growing number of young Christian converts in religious cities of the country.

Despite efforts by the Islamic regime to defame Christianity and Christians and libel Iranian Christian leaders, Christianity is growing rapidly, and some even believe a spiritual revival is taking place in Iran.

Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, the Iranian Supreme Leader has also shown concerns over the growth of House-Churches across the country. In remarks made in a recent trip to Qom, Ayatollah Khamenei said the Islamic regime is strongly determined to suppress false mysticisms and House-Churches.

Suppression of Iranian official churches has been rampant since 2011. In order to keep Iranian Christian converts out of official churches, the Iranian government has closed down several Farsi-speaking churches across the country. The most prominent of all was the government's order to the Central Assemblies of God (AoG) church in Tehran to ban all Farsi-speakers from attending their services. The Central AoG church was the largest Farsi-speaking church in Iran.

Regardless of all government endeavors to suppress Christianity in the country, Iranians, especially those in religious cities, continue to show interest in knowing about Christ through their calls to Iranian evangelical media and visiting their websites.

Threatening anti-Baha'i posters distributed in Yazd

BWNS (18.06.2014) / <http://news.bahai.org/story/1010>— A highly inflammatory and threatening flier calling Baha'is "godless" was distributed in the city of Yazd, Iran, last week on the eve of an important Shiite holy day.

The anonymously authored leaflet was posted on walls and also placed on the homes and cars of Baha'is, said Diane Ala'i, the representative of the Baha'i International Community to the United Nations in Geneva.

"The distribution of this poster was obviously timed to inflame religious passions against Baha'is, who are a minority in Yazd and throughout Iran," said Ms. Ala'i. "The basic message of the poster is that it is a religious duty to attack Baha'is and to destroy their properties.

"The targeting of Baha'i homes and vehicles is also equally ominous, sending a message: 'We know who and where you are,'" she added.

The distribution of the flier in this mid-sized central Iranian city came on 12 June 2014, on the eve of Shabe-barat [the "night of deliverance"], which honors the birth of Imam Mahdi and is an important holy day for Shiite Muslims.

The flier claims that according to Sharia law, the "blood" of Baha'is "is worthless," and that "every Muslim individual must stand up against any activity by this movement and combat them even at the cost of his own life."

A similar version of the poster had been delivered to at least five Baha'i homes in Yazd last January. That flier was signed by "Hizbu'llah" (the Party of God).

Ms. Ala'i said it was the government's duty to denounce such acts publicly and to find and prosecute the perpetrators of such hateful messages, and to protect Baha'is as citizens of Iran.

"Unfortunately, the government has for too long allowed the perpetrators of such attacks to act with impunity. In recent years, there have been literally hundreds of attacks or threats against Baha'is and their properties, and no one has been prosecuted for such actions," she said.

Ms. Ala'i noted, for example, that three Baha'is were attacked in their home in Birjand in January by an anonymous intruder wielding a knife and that a Baha'i was shot and killed in Bandar Abbas last August. There have also been a number of incidents of the desecration of Baha'i cemeteries in recent months, such as efforts by the Revolutionary Guard to destroy an historic Baha'i cemetery in Shiraz.

"Unfortunately, the government has too often been a willing participant in the circulation of hate material against Baha'is. Top officials and government media outlets regularly spew anti-Baha'i propaganda – and the volume of such items has in fact increased dramatically this year," said Ms. Ala'i.

In January, said Ms. Ala'i, the Baha'i International Community had catalogued at least 55 anti-Baha'i articles on Iranian websites. That rose to 72 in February, 93 in March, 285 in April, and 366 in May.

"The government has created an atmosphere where those who harbor hatred against Baha'is can act with complete impunity," said Ms. Ala'i. "And without fear of prosecution, we are gravely concerned that life-threatening attacks against Baha'is are all too likely to continue."

To read the article online, view photographs and access links:

<http://news.bahai.org/story/1010>

For the Baha'i World News Service home page, go to:

<http://news.bahai.org/>

Waves of arrests of converts from shi'ism to sunnism

HRWF (15.08.2014) - In the last few weeks, a number of Arab Ahwazi Shiites who converted to Sunnism have been arrested and imprisoned.

25 February 2014: More than 20 converts to Sunni Islam were arrested at a Qur'an and Arabic study meeting in the Arab city of Ahwaz, southwestern Iran.

According to a report of Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), at least 20 Sunni men had gathered to study the Qur'an and the Arabic language in the house of one of the men in the Hay al-Thawra district in the evening of 25 February. Sources say that security forces surrounded the house at around 10pm, before arresting all those who were present. The men were taken to an unknown location.

The men had all converted from Shiism to Sunni Islam, reflecting a rising trend of Sunni conversion among the mainly Shia Ahwazi Arabs in Iran. The latest arrests follows news of the arrest of nine Ahwazi men for 'religious activism' earlier this year, after they also converted to Sunni Islam.

The names of some of the arrested ones is as following:

1. Hassan Abiyat
2. Abbas Abiyat
3. Jasem Toyrat
4. Seyyed Naser Vahed Mousavi
5. Ahmad Abiyat
6. Jafar Savari
7. Seyyed Mousa Mousavi
8. Seyyed Abbas Mousavi
9. Seyyed Reza Mousavi
10. Heydar Jalil Savari
11. Seyyed Mehdi Mousavi
12. Basem Savari

3 March 2014: According to a report of Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), 35-year old **Jafar Chaldawi**, a Sunni convert from Iran's Ahwazi Arab minority, was arrested on Monday 3 March by agents from the Ministry of Intelligence in the Hay al-Thawra district of Ahwaz, Khuzestan province.

6 March 2014: According to the same source, the 45-year old **Hadi Bayt-Shaykh-Ahmad**, a Sunni convert from Iran's Ahwazi Arab minority, was arrested at his home address on 6 March 2014. Human rights activist Karim Dahimi told the HRANA, "Hadi Bayt-Shaykh-Ahmad was an employee at a bank, and due to his conversion from Shiasm to Sunni Islam, he was arrested."

18 July 2014: Seven Sunni men from Iran's Ahwazi Arab minority were arrested on Friday after holding congregational Taraweeh prayers in the north of Ahwaz city, Khuzestan province of Iran. According to the report of Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), the men, who had all converted from Shi'ism to Sunni Islam, were arrested before dawn by security forces on 18 July 2014 and taken to an unknown location. The seven men, **Khudair Sharhani, Musa Zargani, Hossein Zargani, Mohsen Zargani, Mohammad Zargani, Hamid Zargani and Salem Zargani**, have not been allowed to contact their families and there is no news about their condition.

Shias regard Taraweeh prayers held in congregation as a religious innovation, and in recent years there have been reports of security forces attempting to prevent congregational Sunni Taraweeh prayers from being held in the Khuzestan province.

There has been a sharp increase in the number of Sunni converts arrested in the Khuzestan province. Earlier this year, four Sunni converts were sentenced to imprisonment and compulsory participation in Shia rituals by Branch 2 of the Revolutionary Court in Ahwaz, after being accused of "engaging in propaganda against the state's official religion [Shi'ism]."

20 July 2014: According to a report of Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), 23-year old **Hossein Saboori** and his 21-year old brother **Hassan Saboori** were arrested and taken to an unknown location by security forces on Sunday 20 July 2014 in the town of Taleghani (Al-Kora) in Mahshahr city, Khuzestan.

Security forces then proceeded to raid the Saboori family home, causing 'fear and panic' to the women and children in the house.

Ahwazi human rights activist Karim Dahimi told the HRA News Agency, "[Hossein Saboori] was a Sunni preacher and he would collect the youth of the Al-Kora area [Taleghani] and teach them Arabic language and the Qur'an."

The Saboori brothers were previously detained in May 2014 by the Ministry of Intelligence on charges of 'spreading propaganda against the state' in relation to their Sunni preaching activities.

Another Sunni preacher, 25-year old Sami Zebady Alboghobesh, was also arrested on Sunday in the market in Taleghani.

A Sunni religious activist, he had previously converted from Shi'ism to Sunni Islam, and actively participated in meetings held to teach the Arabic language.

Although the majority of the population in Khuzestan is Shia, a large number have converted to Sunni Islam in recent years, causing alarm in the Shia-led Iranian government about the growth of Sunni Islam in the area.

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24 July 2014: According to a report of Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), 35-year old **Saeed Haydari**, who recently converted from Shi'ism to Sunni Islam, was arrested on 24 July 2014 at his home in the town of Taleghani (Al-Kora) in Mahshahr city, Khuzestan. His arrest is believed to be directly related to his religious activities and his conversion to Sunni Islam.

The Iranian government has been alarmed by the rise of Sunni Islam among the Ahwazi Arabs in the traditionally Shia-majority Khuzestan province.

More than 6000 books mocking Sunni beliefs were also distributed in Ahwaz on 21 July, with information printed on the book indicating that they were published on behalf of the Iranian government.

Earlier this year, nine Sunni men were arrested in Qal'eh Chan'an, Khuzestan province for 'religious activism' after converting to Sunni Islam.

Waves of arrests of Baha'is

HRWF (15.08.2014) - In the last few days, a number of Baha'is have been arrested in several Iranian cities and imprisoned.

Baha'is arrested in Tabriz

HRANA News Agency - <https://hra-news.org/en/category/religious-minorities> - According to a report of Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), six Baha'is were arrested in Tabriz on 12 July, and have been detained by the Ministry of Intelligence.

Five of them were released on bail in the first days of August. Shabnam Issakhani was released after posting bail of 50 million tumans (14,000 euros; 19,000 US dollars). The same amount was required from Farzad Bahadari, while his wife Samin Rasouli and their children, Sahar and Nassim Bahadari had to provide 20 million tumans each.

A source told HRANA that the raid on the Bahadari house was conducted "commando style" by a unity known as the Ashura Intelligence Arm.

Rashin Saberi, who was also arrested and interrogated on July 12, was released following her interrogation.

Four Baha'is arrested in Shiraz

HRANA News Agency (07.08.2014) - <https://hra-news.org/en/category/religious-minorities> - Agents from the Shiraz city police arrested three Bahai men and one woman: Adib Haqqpazhouh, Sa'id `Abadi, Wahid Dana and Mrs. Bahiyyeh Ma`navipour on August 5th.

According to the report of Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), the reasons for their arrest, and their place of detention, are unknown.

Mr. Adib Haqqpazhouh was arrested previously, on December 30, 2010, and was later released on bail.

Five Baha'is arrested in Tehran

HRANA News Agency (12.08.2014) - <https://hra-news.org/en/category/religious-minorities> - Babak Mobasher and his father-in-law Alaeddin Khanjani were arrested around 6 a.m. yesterday when agents from the Ministry of Intelligence raided their home.

According to the report of Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), Alaeddin Khanjani is the son of Jalaluddin Khanjani, one of the imprisoned "Yaran" (national facilitators for the Bahai community in Iran, while Babak Mobasher is the husband of Leva Khanjani, a Bahai excluded from tertiary education, who was freed from Evin prison after serving most of a two-year sentence on June 24, 2014.

Only the home of Mr. Khanjani but also his office and warehouse was raided, and that four employees were arrested, one whom was later released because he was a Muslim.

All the cash, gold personal jewellery, and other items in storage belonging to the business were confiscated.

The group responsible for this action is said to be affiliated with those responsible for the arrest of the Yaran seven years ago.

HRANA gives the names of the four employees as Nasr Arushi Moqaddam, Ata'llah Ashrafi, Ruhollah Manzui and Javad Salehi.

For the Bahá'ís imprisoned in Iran, freedom and human rights seem remote

By Nazil Ghanea

New Statesman (06.06.2014) - May 2014 marked six years since seven adults were taken from their homes and thrown into the notorious Evin prison in Iran. One is the mother of a dear friend whose gifts are treasured in my home.

Who are these prisoners? The charges against the seven included espionage and propaganda against the Islamic order. They are mothers and fathers, one is a school principal, another an agricultural engineer, a businessman, a psychologist. What matters though is that they are Bahá'ís, members of the country's largest non-Muslim religious minority and persecuted by the government for decades. The fabricated charges against them, the illegal closed trial that led to a twenty-year jail sentence – the longest given to any prisoners of conscience in the country – were all set up to punish them for their role in coordinating the affairs of the Bahá'ís in Iran, affairs which are numerous in a religious community that operates through such networks of elected and appointed lay people.

The most moving protest on this anniversary was the large group of prominent Iranians within Iran that risked life and limb to stand up against the unjust imprisonment of the seven by visiting their family members. This group included human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh – joint winner of the 2012 Sakharov Prize honoring those who have dedicated their lives to the defence of human rights and freedom of thought – and Ayatollah Masumi Tehrani, a senior Muslim cleric who recently gifted a piece of art to the Bahá'ís as an expression of hope for a future Iran committed to respect for the human rights of all.

There remains, however, a very sharp contrast between this cohesion amongst Iranian defenders of human rights and the actions of the Iranian authorities. When a European Parliament delegation visited Tehran last December for the first time in six years, Iran angrily criticised them for “secretly” meeting with so-called secessionists including Sotoudeh. When the EU's foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton visited Iran in March, she too was harshly criticised for meeting with a group of leading Iranian women activists, including Sotoudeh. A European Parliament resolution on 3 April 2014 condemning Iran's “continued, systematic violation of fundamental rights” led to Iran's Parliament cancelling a planned visit with EU parliamentarians.

As calls for respect of human rights were being heard from Iran, Iran's revolutionary guards proceeded with their latest attempt at oppression by excavating a historically important Bahá'í cemetery in Shiraz, the southern Iranian city of my birth. Some 950 graves of Bahá'ís that include those of 10 women – the youngest just 17 – executed for refusing to forcibly deny their religious belief, now risk being destroyed forever. Many thousands from around the world will forever be denied the possibility of remembering the 10 Bahá'í women at their resting place. Thousands of family members will be denied the basic dignity of saying prayers for their dead and my daughters will never be able to see the graves of their great-grandparents.

Which of these shall I share with my 8 and 11 year old? The profound joy of principled camaraderie amongst Iranian upholders of justice, or the attack on their dead ancestors? I've shared both, trusting that they will gain an insight into the choice we all ultimately face of sacrificing for the greater good or sinking to the depths of hatred. All this, with patient optimism that the former is conquering the latter and the future of Iran is bright.

Dr Nazila Ghanea is Assistant Professor of International Human Rights Law at the University of Oxford and serves as a member of the OSCE advisory panel on freedom of religion or belief. She writes this piece in her personal capacity

35 Gonabadi Dervishes sentenced to a total of 85 years of discretionary imprisonment

Mazjooban Noor (29.05.2014) / <http://www.majzooban.org/en/sufi-news/5706-35-gonabadi-dervishes-sentenced-to-a-total-of-85-years-of-discretionary-imprisonment.html>

- The First Branch of General Court in Kavar sentenced 35 Gonabadi Dervishes residents of Kavar county in Fars Province to a total of 85 years of discretionary imprisonment and paying blood money.

As reported by Majzooban Noor, 113 people consisting of Basij personnel and clergymen had filed lawsuits against the Dervishes accusing them of "involvement in a skirmish and causing physical harm" and "violation of public order".

According to this report, each of the first 5 defendants were sentenced to 4 years of imprisonment (first to fifth) and paying blood money while the sixth to the twelfth defendants, the thirteenth to the thirty-third, and The thirty-fourth and fifth defendants were sentenced to 3, 2, and 1 year of imprisonment, respectively, as well as paying blood money.

This sentence was pronounced in the presence of the first 15 defendants but the rest were sentenced in absentia. It is worth noting that the first 3 defendants had previously been sentenced to permanent exile by the Revolution Court of Shiraz. These decrees have to do with the skirmishes which took place in Shahrivar in 1390 (September, 2011) in Kavar. Subsequent to this event, a number of seminarians, Basij members, and self-willed forces, persuaded by 4 clerics, named Alireza Shahbazi, Mohammad Reza Ghanbari, Ali Akbar-Abadi, and Ali Gha'emi, staged a rally which involved offensive remarks and accusations against Gonabadi Dervishes which led to martyrdom of a Gonabadi Dervish, named Vahid Banani.

The names of the Dervish defendants and the length of their imprisonment are as follows:

- 1-Hamid-Reza Arayesh; 4 years in prison
- 2-Mohammad-Ali Shamshirzan; 4 years in prison
- 3-Kazem Dehghan; 4 years in prison
- 4-Sayed Ebrahim Bahrami; 4 years in prison
- 5-Mohammad-Ali Dehghan; 4 years in prison
- 6-Omid-Ali Akbari; 3 years in prison
- 7-Mehrdad Keshavarz; 3 years in prison
- 8-Mohammad-Ali Sadeghi; 3 years in prison
- 9-Amir-Hamzeh Dehghan; 3 years in prison
- 10-Manouchehr Zare; 3 years in prison

11-Abouzar Malekpour; 3 years in prison
12-Behyar Rajabi; 3 years in prison
13-Reza Pishkar; 2 years in prison
14-Mehdi Ghanbari; 2 years in prison
15-Ali Dehghan; 2 years in prison
16-Issa Dehghan; 2 years in prison
17-Mehdi Dehghan; 2 years in prison
18-Mehdi Marand; 2 years in prison
19-Ghasem Daghtan; 2 years in prison
20-Shahram Dehghan; 2 years in prison
21-Nasrollah Golshan; 2 years in prison
22-Khorshid Dashtaki; 2 years in prison
23-Zabihollah Gerdpour; 2 years in prison
24-Hamid Mehdizadeh; 2 years in prison
25-Ahmad-Reza Kouhi; 2 years in prison
26-Mohammad-Reza Zahediankish; 2 years in prison
27-Ali Ajdari; 2 years in prison
28-Sohrab Dehghan; 2 years in prison
29-Esmaeil Dehghan; 2 years in prison
30-Amanollah Cheraghi; 2 years in prison
31-Mohammad Arayesh; 2 years in prison
32-Abdol-Reza Arayesh; 2 years in prison
33-Karamat Moradi; 2 years in prison
34-Mohsen Esmaeili; 1 year in prison
35-Gholam-Ali Beirami; 3 months and 1 day in prison

UK calls on Iran to free jailed Bahá'ís and halt destruction of faith's cemetery

By Saeed Kamali Dehghan

The Guardian (15.05.2014) / <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/15/iran-concern-ongoing-destruction-cemetery-shiraz> - Britain has expressed serious concerns about the ongoing destruction of a historic cemetery in southern Iran, where members of the country's most persecuted religious minority are buried.

Iran's elite revolutionary guards have begun demolishing the Bahá'í cemetery in Shiraz, in the southern province of Fars, which is seen as an attempt to delete a dark episode from the history of mistreating Bahá'ís in the Islamic republic.

The Bahá'í faith, which accepts all religions as having valid origins, was founded in Iran in the 19th century by its prophet, Bahá'u'lláh. There are about 300,000 Bahá'ís believed to be living in Iran, and about 6 million worldwide.

At least 219 Bahá'í in Iran were executed because of their religious allegiance after the 1979 Islamic revolution, and some are believed to have been buried in Shiraz. Many were put to death because they refused to recant their faith. Nearly 200 square metres have been excavated and 50 lorries lined up to remove material, but it was not clear on Thursday whether Iranian forces had reached the point of unearthing tombs. In Persian, Bahá'ís refer to the cemetery as Golestan-e-Javid (eternal garden).

Britain's Foreign Office urged the Iranian authorities this week to stop the destruction and release seven leaders of the Bahá'í faith who have been imprisoned in Iran for the past six years, each serving a 20-year prison sentence.

The Foreign Office's minister for the Middle East, Hugh Robertson, said: "Six years ago today, seven leaders of the Bahá'í faith in Iran were imprisoned for 20 years each for practising their religion. I call on the Iranian authorities to release them as a matter of urgency. I was also deeply concerned to learn of the recent reports of the desecration of a Bahá'í cemetery in Shiraz, where approximately 950 Bahá'ís are buried."

He added: "We urge the Islamic Republic of Iran to abide by its international commitments to ensure all Iranians are free to practise their religion without fear of persecution."

Iran, which has Islam as its official religion, only recognises Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians as accepted religious minorities. It stepped up the persecution of its Bahá'í community following the 1979 Islamic revolution, accusing many of its members of having links with or spying for Israel, mainly because the Bahá'í governing body is based in Haifa. Iran has banned Bahá'ís since 1981 and deprived its members of many fundamental rights, including access to higher education and the right to own businesses.

At least 136 Bahá'ís are in prison in Iran, including the faith's seven leaders: Fariba Kamalabadi, Vahid Tizfahm, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi and Mahvash Sabet, Behrouz Tavakkoli and Saeid Rezaie.

Many Bahá'ís have been expelled from universities in Iran in recent years, including Paniz Fazl-Ali, who was banned from continuing her undergraduate degree last year. At least one Bahá'í couple are in prison solely for providing education to other members of the Bahá'í community.

A number of Bahá'í students who are denied higher education met Mohammad Nourizad, a prominent journalist and film-maker, earlier this month.

This week, a number of activists, including the celebrated lawyer, Nasrin Sotoudeh, marked the anniversary of six years' imprisonment in Iran of seven Bahá'í leaders. After assuming power as Iran's president, Hassan Rouhani appointed Ali Younesi, a former intelligence minister, to serve as his special assistant in minorities' affairs, in a move hailed by human rights activists, but there is no sign he is recognising Bahá'ís.

The systematic persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran has been led by the country's hardliners, especially the revolutionary guards, rather than the government. In a conciliatory move to Iran's Jewish community, Younesi visited a synagogue in Shiraz recently. It is not clear if the cemetery's excavation was a warning signal from the guards to the government about a softening in its stance towards minorities.

Iran's judiciary chief, Ayatollah Sadeq Larijani, denied in April that Bahá'í citizens were imprisoned on the basis of their religious faith.

Iran: Shahin Lahouti returned to prison

CSW (06.05.2014) - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has learned that musician Shahin Lahouti, a convert to Christianity, has been returned to prison after being released in December 2013.

Mr Lahouti, was initially arrested along with seven other Christians during a raid on a prayer meeting in October 2012. He was sentenced to two and a half years in prison on political charges, before being released on bail and on the condition he took no further part in Christian activities. Sources have recently informed CSW that Mr Lahouti's bail was revoked and that he was returned to prison approximately three weeks ago. Further details are not yet available; however, sources state that during his release Mr Lahouti had been under "pressure" from the authorities.

In other news, Silas Rabbani, a deacon of the Church of Iran in Karaj, was detained on 5 May. It has been reported that three VEVAK intelligence agents arrested him at his home at 11pm and informed his family that more arrests of Christians would follow soon.

CSW's Chief Operating Officer Andy Dipper said, "We are deeply concerned that Mr Lahouti has been returned to prison. His initial conviction and sentencing were unjust and traumatic for him, his bail conditions were unacceptable, and his re-imprisonment compounds this injustice. It is also disturbing to hear of the arrest of Mr. Rabbani and of the threat of additional arrests by the security services. We urge the Government of Iran to halt its harassment and imprisonment of religious minorities and to uphold freedom of religion or belief, as outlined in covenants to which Iran is party."

Destruction of historic Baha'i cemetery under way in Shiraz by Iranian Revolutionary Guards

BWNS (01.05.2014) / <http://news.bahai.org/story/993> - The Baha'i International Community was shocked to hear the news that Iran's Revolutionary Guards has begun excavation in a historically important Baha'i cemetery in Shiraz. The site is, among other things, the resting place of ten Baha'i women whose cruel hanging in 1983 came to symbolize the government's deadly persecution of Baha'is.

"Reports from Iran came in yesterday that the excavation has begun and graves are being destroyed. Some 40 to 50 trucks are lined up to remove the earth and accelerate

the work," said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Baha'i International Community to the United Nations.

"We are urgently calling on the international community to raise its voice in protest at this disturbing act.

"We also appeal directly to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani to halt this act of desecration."

Reports received so far indicate that workers for the Revolutionary Guards had completed an excavation some 1.5 meters deep and 200 square meters in area. The hole is near a number of very old gravesites in the western part of the cemetery but is not yet deep enough to have disturbed the remains, it is believed.

Ms. Dugal said the local Baha'is have made appeals directly to the Revolutionary Guards asking that it construct the proposed building on the areas of the site where there are no graves, and turn the areas with the graves into a green space, leaving the dead undisturbed.

"Appeals were made to various city and provincial authorities, including the commander in chief of the Revolutionary Guards, the municipality of Shiraz, the Friday prayer Imam, the governor of the city, Iran's prosecutor general and the head of the judiciary, with no results," said Ms. Dugal.

Owned and used by the Baha'is of Shiraz since the early 1920s, the site was confiscated by the government in 1983, at which time its grave markers were leveled and its main buildings destroyed. Its ownership has since changed. Three years ago, the provincial office of the Revolutionary Guards announced it had taken over the site, and a sign was posted indicating that it planned to build a "cultural and sports building" there.

Some 950 Baha'is are buried in the cemetery.

Among the prominent individuals at rest in the cemetery are the "ten Baha'i women of Shiraz", who were hanged on 18 June 1983 at the height of the government's campaign of execution against Baha'is. Between 1979 and 1988, more than 200 Baha'is were killed in Iran.

The ten women, who ranged in age from 17 to 57, were convicted of "crimes" such as being "Zionists" and the teaching of children's classes – the equivalent of "Sunday school" in the West. Their wrongful and dramatic execution drew condemnation from around the world. After their sentencing, for example, US President Ronald Reagan issued a plea for clemency for them and 12 other Baha'is who had been sentenced to death.

During their trial, the ten women were told that if they recanted their faith, they would be released. "Whether you accept it or not, I am a Baha'i," replied 28-year-old Zarrin Muqimi-Abyanih. "You cannot take it away from me. I am a Baha'i with my whole being and my whole heart."

The youngest among them, Mona Mahmudnizhad, only 17 at the time of her death, has been immortalized in songs and videos. Her conspicuous innocence and brave demeanor in the face of death made her, and the nine other women, international symbols of Iran's harsh repression of Baha'is.

Attacks on Baha'i cemeteries have been a common feature of the persecution of Baha'is in Iran in recent years. Between 2005 and 2012, at least 42 Baha'i-owned cemeteries were attacked in some manner.

These attacks, often carried out with implicit if not direct government support, have involved the firebombing of mortuary buildings, the toppling of gravestones, the uprooting of landscape shrubbery, the spray-painting of anti-Baha'i graffiti on cemetery walls, and the exhumation of bodies.

To read the article online, view photographs and access links:

<http://news.bahai.org/story/993>

Iranian killer's execution halted at last minute by victim's parents

Convict had noose around his neck when victim's mother approached, slapped him in the face and spared his life

By Saeed Kamali Dehghan

The Guardian (16.04.2014) - The noose is removed from around the neck of Balal. Photograph: Arash Khamooshi /Isna

When he felt the noose around his neck, Balal must have thought he was about to take his last breath. Minutes earlier, crowds had watched as guards pushed him towards the gallows for what was meant to be yet another public execution in the Islamic republic of Iran.

Seven years ago Balal, who is in his 20s, stabbed 18-year-old Abdollah Hosseinzadeh during a street brawl in the small town of Royan, in the northern province of Mazandaran. In a literal application of qisas, the sharia law of retribution, the victim's family were to participate in Balal's punishment by pushing the chair on which he stood.

But what happened next marked a rarity in public executions in Iran, which puts more people to death than any other country apart from China. The victim's mother approached, slapped the convict in the face and then decided to forgive her son's killer. The victim's father removed the noose and Balal's life was spared.

Photographs taken by Arash Khamooshi, of the semi-official Isna news agency, show what followed. Balal's mother hugged the grieving mother of the man her son had killed. The two women sobbed in each other's arms – one because she had lost her son, the other because hers had been saved.

The action by Hosseinzadeh's mother was all the more extraordinary as it emerged that this was not the first son she had lost. Her younger child Amirhossein was killed in a motorbike accident at the age of 11.

"My 18-year-old son Abdollah was taking a stroll in the bazaar with his friends when Balal shoved him," said the victim's father, Abdolghani Hosseinzadeh, according to Isna. "Abdollah was offended and kicked him but at this time the murderer took an ordinary kitchen knife out of his socks."

Hosseinzadeh Sr has come to the conclusion that Balal did not kill his son deliberately. "Balal was inexperienced and didn't know how to handle a knife. He was naive."

According to the father, Balal escaped the scene of the stabbing but was later arrested by the police. It took six years for a court to hand down a death sentence, and the victim's

family deferred the execution a number of times. A date for execution was set just before the Persian new year, Nowruz, but the victim's family did not approve of the timing.

Hosseinzadeh said a dream prompted the change of heart. "Three days ago my wife saw my elder son in a dream telling her that they are in a good place, and for her not to retaliate ... This calmed my wife and we decided to think more until the day of the execution."

Many Iranian public figures, including the popular TV sport presenter Adel Ferdosipour, had called on the couple, who have a daughter, to forgive the killer. Although they did so, Balal will not necessarily be freed. Under Iranian law the victim's family have a say only in the act of execution, not any jail sentence.

In recent years Iran has faced criticism from human rights activists for its high rate of executions. The UN secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, accused Hassan Rouhani of doing too little to improve Iran's human rights, especially reining in its staggering use of capital punishment.

As of last week, 199 executions are believed to have been carried out in Iran this year, according to Amnesty, a rate of almost two a day. Last year Iran and Iraq were responsible for two-thirds of the world's executions, excluding China.

At least 369 executions were officially acknowledged by the Iranian authorities in 2013, but Amnesty said hundreds more people were put to death in secret, taking the actual number close to 700.

Iran is particularly criticised for its public executions, which have attracted children among the crowds in the past. Iranian photographers are often allowed to document them.

Bahareh Davis, of Amnesty International, welcomed the news that Balal had been spared death. "It is of course welcome news that the family of the victim have spared this young man's life," she said. "However, qisas regulations in Iran mean that people who are sentenced to death under this system of punishment are effectively prevented from seeking a pardon or commutation of their sentences from the authorities – contrary to Iran's international obligations."

She added: "It's deeply disturbing that the death penalty continues to be seen as a solution to crime in Iran. Not only is the death penalty the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment with no special deterrent impact, but public displays of killing also perpetuate a culture of acceptance of violence."

"Public executions are degrading and incompatible with human dignity of those executed. In addition, all those who watch public executions – which regrettably often includes children – are brutalised by the experience."

In October last year an Iranian prisoner who survived an attempted execution and was revived in the morgue was spared another attempt, though his family said he had lost mental stability and remained in jail.

In an unprecedented symbolic act senior cleric calls for religious co-existence in Iran

With so much bad news coming out of Iran in recent years, especially about the country's religious minorities, HRWF hails the courage and integrity of this senior Muslim cleric.

Bahá'í International Community (07.04.2014) - In a symbolic and unprecedented move, Ayatollah Abdol-Hamid Masoumi-Tehrani, a prominent Muslim cleric in Iran announced today that he has gifted to the Baha'is of the world an illuminated work of calligraphy of a paragraph from the writings of Baha'u'llah, the Prophet-founder of the Baha'i Faith.

This move comes in the wake of several recent statements by religious scholars in the Muslim world who have set out alternative interpretations of the teachings of Islam in which tolerance of every religion is, in fact, upheld by the holy Qur'an.

"This is a most welcome and hopeful development with possible implications for the coexistence of the peoples of the world," said Ms. Bani Dugal, Principal Representative of the Baha'i International Community at the United Nations.

Ayatollah Tehrani states on his website (see translation of statement) that he prepared the calligraphy of the verse as a "symbolic action to serve as a reminder of the importance of valuing human beings, of peaceful coexistence, of cooperation and mutual support, and of avoidance [of] hatred, enmity and blind religious prejudice."

Ayatollah Tehrani presents this exquisite gift to the Baha'is of the world, particularly to the Baha'is of Iran, who he says "have suffered in manifold ways as a result of blind religious prejudice." He further states that this act is "an expression of sympathy and care from me and on behalf of all my open-minded fellow citizens."

In response, Ms. Dugal stated: "The Baha'i International Community is deeply touched by this act of high-mindedness and the sentiments of religious tolerance and respect for human dignity that prompted it."

"This bold action by a senior Muslim cleric in contemporary Iran is unprecedented," said Ms. Dugal. "It is also remarkable in light of the ongoing and systematic persecution of the Baha'i community in that country by the Islamic government."

The intricate artwork must have taken several months to painstakingly prepare by hand. It features at its center, a symbol known to Baha'is as "The Greatest Name" – a calligraphic representation of the conceptual relationship between God, His prophets and the world of creation. The gift measures at approximately 60cm x 70cm and is illuminated in a classical style. Ayatollah Tehrani's other artworks include the illumination of the Qur'an, the Torah, the Psalms, the New Testament, and the Book of Ezra. His illumination of the Psalms is currently being held in the United States Library of Congress.

The excerpt that Ayatollah Tehrani chose to cite in the gift is taken from Baha'u'llah's Kitab-i-Aqdas – "Most Holy Book". It reads "Consort with all religions with amity and concord, that they may inhale from you the sweet fragrance of God. Beware lest amidst men the flame of foolish ignorance overpower you. All things proceed from God and unto Him they return. He is the source of all things and in Him all things are ended."

On previous occasions, Ayatollah Tehrani has with great courage publicly voiced concern about the ongoing and severe persecution of religious minorities, including the Baha'is in

Iran. Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, hundreds of Baha'is have been killed and thousands have been imprisoned. There are currently 115 Baha'is being held in prison solely on the basis of their religious beliefs. Baha'is in Iran are denied access to higher education, obstructed from earning a livelihood, prevented from burying their dead in accordance with their own burial rites, and subjected to the demolition and desecration and expropriation of their cemeteries, all because of their religion.

Ayatollah Tehrani's hope is that this gift "which will be kept by the Universal House of Justice [the international governing body of the Baha'i Faith], will serve as a reminder of the rich and ancient Iranian tradition of friendship and of its culture of coexistence."

Iran: Prison sentences for six Christians upheld on appeal

Six members of a group of eight Christians from Shiraz who were sentenced to various terms last years had their prison sentences upheld on 29 March, following an appeal.

CSW (03.04.2014) - On 16 July 2013, the Christians were charged with 'action against the national security' and 'propaganda against the order of the system'. Mohammad Roghangir was sentenced to six years in prison, Massoud Rezai to five years; Mehdi Ameruni and Bijan Farokhpour Haghighi received three year sentences, Shahin Lahouti and Suroush Saraie received two and half years, and Eskandar Rezai and Roxana Forghi each received a one-year sentence. However, charges against Roxana Forghi were dropped at the appeal on 29 March and Shahin Lahouti was released from prison in December 2013.

Seven of these Christians were initially arrested on 12 October 2012 when security forces raided a prayer meeting, while the eighth, Massoud Rezai, was detained a day later.

In other news, Mohabat News reports that Vahid Hakkani, a convert to Christianity, is currently on hunger strike in Adel-Abad Prison in Shiraz. Mr Hakkani began a hunger strike on the 20 March, after his appeal for conditional release was rejected. Mr Hakkani is reportedly on the second week of his hunger strike, despite suffering from digestive problems, for which he received surgery in the latter of part 2013. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) understands that his health is now deteriorating daily.

Mr Hakkani was part of a group of four converts who were sentenced by Branch 3 of the Revolutionary Court to three years and eight months imprisonment in June 2013 on charges of 'attending house church services', 'promoting Christianity', 'propagating against the regime' and 'disturbing national security'.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "Despite the promises of President Rouhani to ensure equality for all Iranians and to release political prisoners, it is disappointing to note that the Iranian regime continues to detain religious minorities on false political charges, as has occurred once again in this case. We call for the charges against the six Christians sentenced to be dropped, 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), which includes to right to change one's belief, and to which Iran is signatory. We also urge the regime to ensure the unconditional release of Vahid Hakkani, particularly in light of his deteriorating

health. Finally, we call on the Iranian authorities 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.”

Religious freedom highly restricted in Iran

By Vicki McKenna, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (31.03.2014) - Basic rights such as freedom of expression, association and assembly in Iran have been strictly curtailed under Mr. Rouhani. Moreover, religious intolerance and discrimination have increased tensions, with larger-scale restrictions applied across all spheres of society, according to panelists at a discussion on Religious Minorities in Iran under Rouhani’s Presidency.

The panel discussion took place in the European Parliament on Tuesday 18th March and was hosted by MEP László Tökés in collaboration with Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF), an independent non-governmental organisation which promotes human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

The seminar also marked the release of HRWF’s 2013 World Report on the Freedom of Religion or Belief. The report highlights several countries of particular concern, including Iran, and annexes a prisoners list which references hundreds of people who were detained in 2013 due to legal restrictions on their basic rights to freedom of religion or belief.

Iranian women in particular are victims of religious fanaticism on account of the Family Code which deprives them of their most basic rights regarding marriage, divorce, inheritance and child custody, said Majid Golpour, researcher and professor at Brussels’ Free University.

“Statistics show that between 2003 and 2013, more than 30,000 women were arrested in Iran. Official reports also points to nearly half a million warnings issued against women and 7,000 women then being forced to pledge to observe Islamic hijab laws,” he added.

Despite the rhetoric of religious freedom, in reality non-Muslims cannot engage in public religious expression. Proselytizing is even punishable by death. The Iranian government does not recognize groups such as the Sufi Muslims and Baha’is, who have no freedom to practice their beliefs, said Mr Golpour.

The discrepancy between the legal status of Christians in Iran and their practical reality was highlighted by Stephan Burger, EU Research and Advocacy Assistant for Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW).

Several provisions of the Iranian Constitution claim to protect Christians, including Article 13 which recognises minority religions and Article 23 which stipulates that no-one should be discriminated against for holding a minority belief. However, the application of supposed forms of sharia has enabled discrimination at multiple levels against various religious groups, including Christians. Anti-Christian rhetoric from senior official figures has also fuelled religious hostility, Mr Burger remarked.

The CSW representative made several key recommendations, calling upon the Iranian Government to uphold its obligations under international law, including the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief as contained in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). He also called for the immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners who are being held on the basis on their religious convictions.

The freedom to adopt or change one's religion is enshrined in international law, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the ICCPR. However, this freedom has been blatantly disregarded by Iran's government, said HRWF Policy Adviser Mark Barwick.

Mr Barwick underlined that this right has been suppressed by different mechanisms, such as the establishment of laws that forbid changing one's religion, more commonly known as apostasy.

Last year Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief were adopted by the European Union. "The challenge for the EU," commented HRWF director Willy Fautré, "is now to put in place effective implementation mechanisms which prioritise countries that grossly violate these freedoms, including the freedom to change one's religion or the right to worship, even in private, and provide for prison terms and even the death penalty in such cases."

Iranian Christian prisoner goes on hunger strike

A Christian convert prisoner goes on hunger strike, despite his poor health, to protest rejection of his conditional release appeal by the Revolutionary Court.

Mohabat News (30.03.2014) - According to Mohabat News, Mr. Vahid Hakkani, a Christian convert from Shiraz, went on a hunger strike on March 20, 2014, to protest rejection of his conditional release appeal by judicial authorities. He decided to go on a hunger strike despite his poor health.

(Shiraz in Fars province, 934 KMs south of Tehran, the capital)

Mr. Hakkani is suffering from a digestive system problem. His family managed to receive a permit to transfer him to hospital for surgery after posting bail. He was then transferred to Faghihi hospital in Shiraz and underwent surgery.

He has entered the second week of his hunger strike, while his health is deteriorating every day. There is also the possibility that prison authorities will transfer him to solitary confinement because he refuses to stop his hunger strike.

Families of Christian prisoners in Adel-Abad prison in Shiraz have done everything in their ability to receive a conditional release permit for their loved ones. Although Iranian laws allows for conditional release permits for prisoners who have already served half of their sentences, the Revolutionary Court of Shiraz refuses to issue permits for the four Christian prisoners in Adel-Abad.

Vahid Hakkani, Homayoun Shokouhi, Mojtaba Seyyed-Ala'din Hossein, and Mohammad-Reza Partoei (Kourosh), are the four Christians serving their sentences in "Ebrat" (edification) ward of Adel-Abad prison.

The four Christian men were sentenced in branch 3 of Revolutionary Court at a time when Iran's Presidential Election was underway. The men were sentenced to three years and eight months each for "attending house church gatherings, evangelism, contacting foreign Christian ministries, and disturbing national security". The sentence was submitted to their lawyer the same day.

Earlier, "Ebrat" (edification) ward of Adel-Abad prison was dedicated solely to prisoners of conscience, but now holds convicts of burglary, murder, and fraud as well. This has worsened the conditions for prisoners of conscience. "Ebrat" ward has now become a place where prisoners from other wards are sent for punishment.

With the election of Hassan Rouhani as Iran's president new hopes were raised for improvement of religious freedom for non-Islamic faiths in the country. So far, Rouhani's administration has failed to live up to its promises.

Ahmed Shaheed, UN Human Rights Council Special Rapporteur on Iran, released a report on March 22, describing the last Persian year as tough for Iranian religious minorities. The report says, as of January 3rd, 2014, at least 307 religious minorities were in Iranian prisons, including 136 Baha'is, 90 Sunni Muslims, 50 Christians, 19 Dervishes, and two Zoroastrians.

UN report blasts Iran for persecution of Christians, other religious minorities

By Benjamin Weinthal

Fox News (21.03.2014) - The election last year of self-professed moderate President Hassan Rouhani has not brought Iran's Christians any relief, according to a new United Nations report which finds the Islamic Republic's Bible believers more persecuted than ever.

The detailed report finds Iran has continued to imprison Christians for their faith and designated house churches and evangelical Christians as "threats to national security." At least 49 Christians were among 307 religious minorities being held in Iranian jails as of January 2014, noted the UN, which also blasted the regime for its hostility to Jews, Baha'is, Zoroastrians and Dervish Muslims, the UN report stated.

"These are indicators that President Rouhani has no influence over hard-liners, who remain fully in charge of the judiciary and security apparatus, government entities that are responsible for the most severe abuses against religious minorities," Dwight Bashir, deputy director for policy at the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, told FoxNews.com.

Among the Christians held in Iranian prisons is American citizen and Christian pastor Saeed Abedini, who is serving an eight-year prison term for alleged crimes related to his faith. President Obama has called for Abedini's release, even as his administration has negotiated a disarmament deal with Iran.

"This report is as an important reminder about the true nature of the Iranian regime," Sen. Mark Kirk, (R-III), told FoxNews.com. "We can't pretend we are negotiating with Western moderates - we are negotiating with Islamic radicals who persecute Christians,

Baha'is, other religious and ethnic minorities and women, while denying all of its citizens basic human rights -- including the freedom of speech and assembly."

In 2013, Iranian authorities arrested "at least 42 Christians, of whom 35 were convicted for participation in informal "house churches," in association with churches outside the Islamic Republic of Iran, perceived or real evangelical activity and other standard Christian activities."

Iran's opaque justice system imposed prison sentences on Christians ranging from one to ten years.

"Under the law, religious minorities, including recognized Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians, also face discrimination in the judicial system, such as harsher punishments," said Shaheed, who is an internationally recognized expert on human rights.

While the persecution detailed in the report includes wrongful imprisonment and even death sentences, it also takes more subtle forms. Ahmed Shaheed, UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, said Iranian Christians have reported having viruses planted on their computers after visiting Christian websites.

Iran's regime issued a flurry of angry responses to Shaheed's report.

"The enemies' ploy is a vicious circle, which changes according to the political situation," Mohammed Javad Larajani, head of Iran's High Council for Human Rights, told the state-controlled Tehran Times. Larajani has in the past been an advocate of the stoning of women as punishment and called for Israel's destruction near the Holocaust memorial in Berlin in 2008.

Saba Farzan, a German-Iranian journalist and director of political studies at the Institute for Middle Eastern Democracy, told FoxNews.com: "The situation of Christians and other religious minorities in Iran is very dire because the Iranian regime is a Sharia state."

"This dictatorship oppresses viciously all these precious groups with the abhorrent justification of Islamic law [Sharia] and by that it violates Iran's constitution and a long-lasting tradition within Persian culture of peaceful tolerance and respect toward fellow Iranians with diverse religious backgrounds," Farzan said.

Such treatment of Christians belies Rouhani's stated policies, noted Morad Mokhtari, an Iranian who converted to Christianity in 1988 in Tehran and works as a human rights researcher at the New Haven-based Iran Human Rights Documentation Center. Mokhtari told FoxNews.com that in Rouhani's December Draft Citizen's Rights Charter, the document states "Holding and attending religious rituals of the religions identified in the constitution [Christianity, Jewish, Zoroastrian] is permitted."

Mokhtari described the charter as the "good side" of Rouhani's attitude toward some minorities but, practically speaking, the impact has been non-existent.

"For the Christians who are identified as religious minorities in the constitution, there is still no equal rights to hold and attend to their religious services even in official churches," Mokhtari said. "Since Rouhani got power, at least two official Protestant churches in Tehran have been banned to hold any religious services in Persian language."

Benjamin Weinthal reports on the Christians in the Middle East. He is a fellow at the Foundation For Defense of Democracies. Follow Benjamin on Twitter@BenWeinthal

Hunger strike and protests by Gonabadi dervishes

IOPRI (20.03.2014) - On March 1, 10 dervishes of the Gonabadi Order started a hunger strike and 2000 dervishes across the country joined them to protest the denial of medical treatment of political prisoners, the transfer of 2 dervishes from hospital back to Evin prison and the illegal exile of 2 dervishes from Evin prison to Rajai-Shahr Prison.

On March 8 and 9, manifestations were held in front of the prosecutor's office.

Today, the 10 dervishes ended their hunger strike, which they began on March 1, due to the fact that the 2 dervishes, Hamidreza Moradi and Mostafa Daneshjou, were brought back to hospital.

However the two dervishes who were illegally exiled have not yet been transferred back to Evin Prison.

The jailed dervishes, their family and the dervish community are using every peaceful means possible to have their legal rights respected.

Details about the hunger strike, the protests and the arrests

On March 1, blogger and rights activist Kasra Nouri went on a hunger strike to protest the illegal exile of 2 dervishes, Farshid Yadollahi and Reza Entesar, from Evin prison to Rajai-Shahr Prison, the denial of medical treatment and the transfer of two dervishes, Hamidreza Moradi and Mostafa Daneshjou, from the hospital to Evin prison again.

Ten inmates in Evin prison, the Rajai-Shahr prison and Nezam jail soon joined Kasra Nouri in the hunger strike (including the ailing Hamidreza Moradi and Mostafa Daneshjou)

In solidarity more than 2,000 Gonabadi dervishes from across the country also joined the 10 dervishes.

On Saturday March 8, allegedly 2,000 people gathered at the Prosecutor's office to express solidarity with the dervishes suffering in Iranian prisons. Many were arrested.

According to Majzooban-e Noor, the protests were joined by: Nasrin Sotoudeh, a prominent human rights lawyer; Gohar Eshghi, the mother of jailed blogger Sattar Beheshti, who died three days after his arrest; Massoumeh Dehghan, the wife of jailed human rights lawyer Abdolfattah Soltani, and political activist Nargess Mohammadi.

The protests coincided with Baroness Catherine Ashton's visit to Iran. Later on March 8, Catherine Ashton met Nasrin Sotoudeh, Gohar Eshghi and Nargess Mohammadi.

In the evening the authorities promised to look into the demands of the hunger strikers but nothing changed and another manifestation was held on Sunday, March 9.

According to Sadigheh Khalili, the police, plainclothes agents and special guards suddenly attacked the peaceful protesters.

Sadigheh Khalili said "They dragged the women on the ground and pulled their hair, causing their headscarves to slip. They kicked us with their boots and swore at us. They hit people on the head and neck with batons. They held and pressed on their mouths. They pressed on their throats."

About 300 male and 26 female dervishes (some sources speak of 80 women) were arrested on March 8 and 9. They were all released in the evening but all the detainees were booked and photographed.

The 10 jailed dervishes continued their hunger strike during the following week.

On Saturday March 15, IOPHRI held a manifestation in Hamburg (one in a series of ongoing protests) for the release of Zahra Rahnavard, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karoubi, who remain under house arrest, as well as for the imprisoned dervishes, who are on hunger strike, and all other prisoners of conscience.

On Sunday, March 16, the authorities summoned a dervish in relation to the dervishes' rally in front of the prosecutor's office on March 8 and 9 and we fear more will be summoned and threatened.

On Monday March 17, the demands of the prisoners to transfer Hamidreza Moradi and Mostafa Daneshjou to the hospital were met and the dervishes stopped their hunger strike.

<http://hriran.com/en/test/42-dervishsufi/4269-three-ill-dervishes-joined-hunger-strike-to-protest-the-exile-of-their-cellmates.html>

<http://hriran.com/en/test/42-dervishsufi/4275-prisoners-families-rallied-people-to-gather-at-the-tehran-prosecutors-office.html>

<http://www.rferl.org/content/irans-dervishes-on-hunger-strike-inside-outside-prison/25289690.html>

<http://archive.radiozamaneh.com/english/content/protesters-beaten-arrested-gathering-jailed-dervishes>

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<http://hriran.com/en/test/42-dervishsufi/4309-protesting-dervishes-beaten-and-detained.html>

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<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/03/iran-dervishes-hunger-strike-protest.html>

<http://hriran.com/en/test/42-dervishsufi/4346-jailed-dervishes-end-hunger-strike-in-iranian-prisons-sick-dervish-prisoners-transferred-to-hospita.html>

Human rights violations against dervishes in Iran

IOPHRI (20.03.2014) - Since the revolution of 1979, which brought Iran's conservative Shiite clerics to power, Shariah is the basis for all laws in the country. They deny religious minorities within Islam such as Sufis any rights in the constitution. Sufis give a different interpretation to Islam based on love and tolerance. They refuse to subject to the radical Iranian Islamic ideology. This infuriates the religious establishment who believe Sufis are a threat to their power.

The attacks on the Sufis have intensified since 2005, when Ahmadinejad took office.

Sufis have faced arrest, been sentenced to lashings, or been forced to pledge not to attend Sufi ceremonies. Places of worship and gathering houses have been destroyed. Private houses were raided and personal belongings confiscated. The government is blacklisting Sufis from employment and preventing their children from gaining an education. Lawyers who defended the Sufis were removed from the judiciary or imprisoned themselves. Journalists who wrote about their complaints were fired.

Traditionalist Grand Ayatollahs such as Safi Golpaigani, Makarem Shirazi and Fazel Lankarani issued fatwa's against the Sufis calling them heretical and as we all know, apostasy can lead to the death sentence.

In November 2007, another Grand Ayatollah, Nouri Hamedani issued a fatwa in answer to questions of a group of religious students in Qom.

This fatwa was published by Shabestan-Press in Qom on 21 November 2007.

In this fatwa, Hamedani claimed: *'there is no room for Sufism in Islam*. He quoted the sixth Imam of the Shiite as saying *"the Sufis are our enemies, and the people who have any interest to the Sufis are our enemies as well"*. This fatwa furthermore stated: *One of the difficulties of the Muslim-societies during the history were these Sufis, and the important Ulema of Islam (the Mullahs) did a lot of fights against this sect, and did a lot of efforts to eliminate and destroy their roots...Muslims should fight these persons and do the Jihad against them ...'*

These fatwa's and pro-governmental websites waging an on-going smear campaign create a hostile environment for the dervishes.

On 10 November 2007, a place of worship (hosseinieh) of the Gonabadi dervishes in Boroujerd was burnt and bulldozed. More than 180 followers of the order in Boroujerd were arrested and 80 were injured.

A year earlier, in February 2006, a similar attack took place in Qom. According to official reports, 1200 followers of the order were arrested and hundreds wounded.

On 19 February 2009, the tomb of the 19th century poet Nasir Ali was destroyed. The mausoleum was a protected heritage site used by Sufis since 2002. The Sufi meeting house next to the mausoleum was destroyed as well.

In a reaction to all the destructions, persecutions and suppression, tens of thousands of Gonabadi dervishes gathered in front of Tehran Parliament on 21st February 2009, to demand an end to the attacks on their metaphysical movement.

850 Sufis were arrested and many were held for months in Evin Prison, where they were tortured. Since 2009, every year on 21st February, this day is remembered as 'dervish day'.

In 2013, on dervish day, 3000 dervishes gathered in front of Evin prison to demand the release of the imprisoned Sufis. 350 were arrested, some were mistreated, but all of

them were released in the evening. The government granted them their main demand: a brief family visit for seven Gonabadi lawyers and internet personnel, who have been held in solitary confinement in Evin Prison since 13 January of this year.

IOPHRI

Freedom of Religion or Belief Prisoners in Iran

By Willy Fautre, *Human Rights Without Frontiers International*

HRWF (19.04.2014) - In Iran non-Muslims may not engage in public religious expression, persuasion or try to convert Muslims. Proselytizing of Muslims by non-Muslims is illegal and can be punishable by death. The government enforces this prohibition by closely monitoring the activities of Evangelical Christians and discouraging Muslims from entering Church premises. Christians of all denominations report the presence of security cameras outside their churches, allegedly to confirm that non-Christians do not participate in services. Worshippers are also subject to identity checks by authorities posted outside places of worship.

Last year, **Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF)** published its first Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) Prisoners List for the year 2012. The 2013 report, comprises hundreds of prisoners that were behind bars on the ground of laws forbidding or restricting their basic rights to freedom of religion or belief: (1) freedom to change religion or belief, (2) freedom to share one's religion or beliefs, (3) freedom of association, (4) freedom of worship and assembly, or (5) conscientious objection to military service.

This Prisoners List has been expanded over the previous year to document FoRB prisoners in 24 countries.

As far as Iran is concerned, we have documented about 120 individual cases of believers who were in prison last year on the purely religious grounds I have mentioned before. **34 members of Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches** are on our list. They were prosecuted for the following activities: personal conversion from Islam to Christianity - missionary activities aiming at converting Muslims to Christianity - attending a house church meeting - Christmas celebrations in private with Muslim guests - distributing Bibles

The official charges were however very different and somewhat frightening: propaganda against the regime - threatening the national security - affiliation to an anti-security organization - gathering with intent to commit crimes against the Iranian national security - being in contact with foreign organisations - carrying out anti-Islamic propaganda.

12 members of the Church of Iran are also in prison on the official ground of apostasy, propaganda against the regime, action against the national security or missionary activities.

35 Baha'i prisoners are listed in our report but the US Commission on International Religious Freedom has identified more than 100. Prison sentences range from one to twenty years and can include a year or more of forced resettlement once the prisoner is released. They serve prison terms for a wide range of official charges such as :espionage, propaganda activities against the Islamic order, the establishment of an illegal

administration, cooperation with Israel and acting against the security of the country, membership of a perverse sect, plotting the overthrow of the government. These frightening accusations usually mask quite a normal activity such as carrying out community activities or teaching the Baha'i faith.

A number of Baha'is are just lecturers or work for the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education, an organisation that aims to provide higher education to Baha'is, as they are often barred from attending Iran's other universities. Baha'is are *de facto* considered apostates from Islam. The right to believe in the Baha'i faith and to profess it individually or in community is denied to them.

Our report also documents the cases of **14 Dervishes** for allegedly insulting the Supreme Leader, disturbing the public mind, enmity against God, membership in a deviant religious group or affiliation to a sect endangering national security.

A number of Sunni and Shia Muslims are also in prison because of their voicing of dissenting opinions.

In August 2013, an Iranian court sentenced **17 Sunni Muslim**, including religious scholars, to death because of their religious beliefs.

The condemned have been in Gohardasht Prison, west of Tehran since early June last year, awaiting execution. They were convicted of "acting against national security," and "enmity against God".

A **Shi'a Muslim**, Ayatollah Mohammad Kazemini Boroujerdi, was first sentenced to death and then to 11 years in prison for advocating the separation of religion and state and speaking out in favor of the rights of religious minorities. The official charges were: enmity against God and spreading propaganda against the regime.

4 Zoroastrians are also in prison for being members of the Iran Zoroastrian Committee.

Mojtaba AHMADI , he was sentenced to 6 years in prison: blasphemy (3 years), conspiracy and anti-regime propaganda (3 years).

Mohsen SADEGHIPOUR was sentenced to four and a half years in prison, 74 lashes and a fine. The official charges were: anti-regime propaganda favoring the Zoroastrian faith; insulting Islamic practices, insulting the Supreme Leader and promoting activities against the Islamic Republic through the propagation of Zoroastrianism.

Abolfazl (Pouria) SHAHPARI was sentenced to 2.5 years in prison and 74 lashes.

Mohammad Javad (Dariush) SHAHPARI was sentenced to 2 years and 4 months in prison and 74 lashes.

Capital punishment or sentences to multiple lashes are not uncommon in Iran as it can be seen with these examples.

Freedom of Religion or Belief in Iran

By Dr Mark Barwick, *Human Rights Without Frontiers International*

HRWF (18.03.2014) - UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon was speaking recently to the Human Rights Council, where he expressed his frustration with Hassan Rouhani's

presidency thus far. He said that Mr Rouhani has failed to implement reforms that he had promised during his election campaign. The rights to free speech and assembly, the freedom of expression, all continue to be severely restricted. Activists, lawyers, journalists and others continue to be in prison for having done nothing more than exercise their right to free speech. Hundreds of people were executed last year and scores already have been executed in this present year.

Even still, Iran persists in refusing access for UN rights investigators to visit the country, despite repeated requests since 2005. Such is life in Iran today.

Human Rights Without Frontiers has monitored with increasing concern the situation in Iran, particularly in regard to the country's religious minorities. Iran - at least statistically and publicly - is a fiercely Shia Muslim nation. And despite its legal provisions for the respect of minority faith groups, it is still extremely difficult to be anything but Shia in Iran today. And no progress can be noted under Mr Rouhani's presidency toward alleviating the harsh repression under which these groups live.

Now today is the official launch of our 2013 World Report on Freedom of Religion or Belief. This is also an eventful day for our organisation, because we are celebrating the 25th anniversary of the founding of Human Rights Without Frontiers in 1989. Willy Fautré will tell us more about that in a moment.

The World Report on Freedom of Religion or Belief tracks a number of violations in countries of particular concern, one of which is Iran under President Rouhani. On some occasions, Mr Rouhani has tried to portray Iran as a land where religious minorities enjoy freedom to practice their faith. However, there is a serious disconnect between the government's official rhetoric and the harsh realities that many Iranian citizens experience on a daily basis.

Iran has historically been home to various faith and cultural traditions. And Iranians in general have been an intellectually open and tolerant people. But in our time, the space for free expression and the free practice of one's religion or belief has closed significantly. In Iran we witness the sadly paradoxical situation where an authoritarian regime exerts power over a largely tolerant society.

The report chronicles very worrying trends of targeted acts of repression against Christian groups and their leaders, Baha'is, Zoroastrians and minority Muslim communities. There are also harsh penalties reserved for those who try to convert from Islam to another faith or to no faith at all.

Of course, the freedom to adopt or change one's religion is protected by article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, freedom of thought, conscience and religion includes the 'freedom to change one's religion or belief, if one so chooses, and freedom to manifest that religion or belief in teaching, practise, worship and observance.'

I am free to believe as I choose, and I am also free to believe differently or not to believe at all. Article 18 was intended to also protect a person's right to renounce religion altogether.

This freedom is blatantly disregarded by Iran's government. One mechanism for the suppression of this right has been the establishment of laws that forbid changing one's religion or belief system or forsaking one's religion, more commonly known as apostasy. This is the case for several countries in the world today, including Iran. Iran is one country that has actively prosecuted its citizens for apostasy with penalties that can go as far as extended prison sentences and even the death penalty.

One recent example has been the case of Youcef Naderkhani, who was sentenced to death in 2010 for offenses related to apostasy. Mr Naderkhani had renounced his faith as a Muslim, one that he had never actually practised anyway, and had openly become a Christian. This was regarded as a capital offense.

Mr Naderkhani was finally acquitted of the charges and released just last year.

However, his case is illustrative of the nefarious nature of laws in Iran, which are routinely applied arbitrarily as a means of intimidation, instilling fear, restricting free speech, exerting control and effectively squelching any sort of social or political dissent.

In the end, these laws are evoked as one way to protect those who hold power. The current regime, established after the Shah was overthrown in 1979, has always lacked widespread legitimacy. To a large degree, these repressive measures have very little to do with religious conviction and much more to do with preserving power.

Just a cursory look at the kinds of charges that are issued against members of religious minorities is revelatory of what we're talking about here. Baha'is are serving 20 year sentences for such things as espionage and endangering national security. Sufis are convicted of propaganda against the state, insulting the Supreme Leader and disturbing public order. Christians are sentenced for propaganda against the state and threatening public order.

Mr Rouhani presides over a very complex system that is dedicated above all to protecting the interests of the country's ruling elite. This is accomplished by systematically ensuring the continuation of the regime's supposed Islamic Revolution and by suppressing any opposition voices, including those of minority religious groups.

There are, in fact, small openings for affecting change in Iran under Rouhani's administration - but these are really quite small. Mr Rouhani already knows well the system in which he works. To a large degree, he is a product of this system. He knows how to navigate it. He knows its limitations and points of resistance. It would be quite remarkable to see any significant change under Hassan Rouhani's watch.

At the same time, the people of Iran have longed for much better than the current regime has so far offered. Much international attention has been focused on Iran's nuclear programme. While securing a nuclear-free future for the region is undoubtedly important, it is also in the interest of the EU to give strong support to Iran's growth in democracy. Protecting the rights and well-being of faith and belief minorities are an integral part of this longer project. And it is something that cannot wait.

Iran: Eight Christians arrested and interrogated

CSW (07.03.2014) - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has been informed that eight Iranian Christians were arrested and interrogated by security forces on 5 March 2014.

Amin Khaki, Hossein Barunzadeh, Hossein Etemadifar, Rahman Bahman, Mohammad Bahrami, Saiede Rahimi, Fatemeh Bagheri and Amineh Moalla were arrested on Wednesday afternoon during a group picnic near the city of Shush-e-Daniel.

The group was subsequently taken by minibus to a location where they were blindfolded and interrogated by armed agents from the Ministry of Intelligence and National Security

(VEVAK) until 9pm. During the interrogation, members of the group had personal items confiscated, including their mobile phones.

Although details are still unclear, CSW understands that most of the group was released after being told not to contact their relatives. However, arrest warrants were issued by a cleric for three of them, namely, Amin Khaki, Hossein Barunzadeh (Daniel) and Rahman Bahman (Zia).

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "This harassment and interrogation of innocent people who were merely socialising is both highly irregular and wholly unacceptable. We urge the Iranian government to ensure that the rule of law is upheld and religious minorities are not subject to arbitrary interference by officials and subsequent trumped-up charges."

Man faces execution for alleged mockery of prophet

A 34-year-old Iranian man is in imminent danger of hanging for allegedly "insulting the Prophet" in a recorded private joke that security forces found on his personal computer.

Mohabat News (02.03.2014) - Rouhollah Tavana was arrested by Mashhad Intelligence officers at his home in October 2011, and the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran reports that the court ruling indicates that the officers had "confiscated a private video recording of Tavana on his personal computer, in which while under the influence of alcohol, he allegedly uttered a phrase the judge interpreted as insulting the Prophet of Islam, a crime under Iranian law."

The Campaign reports that Islamic Republic laws clearly indicate that if the person uttering insults to the Prophet is under the influence of alcohol, they cannot be given the death penalty for their actions.

Tavana's mother, Fakhri Jamali, has told the campaign: "We have asked all authorities for a pardon and for forgiveness for him. My son has repented. My son wrote a letter in prison and expressed remorse, but nothing happened. We can't rely on anything. They are going to hang him just like that."

Campaign executive director Hadi Ghaemi says: "It is mind-boggling that in the 21st century, the Iranian Judiciary wants to hang a young man for uttering a random phrase during a video he shot of himself and kept it private. This is an unbelievable act of inquisition at its worst."

Fakhri Jamali has appealed for help to save her son, saying: "They said they will serve the lawyer and my son with his death sentence ruling at Vakilabad Prison in Shiraz in the next two weeks. My son has no idea that the Supreme Court has confirmed his death sentence. He keeps calling from prison and asking about it, and all we do is to give him hope. We are now forced to give interviews to the media. Up until now, we were afraid my son's situation would worsen if we gave interviews, but we have no choice anymore. We ask everyone to help stop my son's death sentence."

Jamali described the incident that led to her son's death, telling the Campaign: "Three years ago, one of my son's friends called the Mashhad Intelligence Office and told them that my son had information at his home that was 'anti-revolutionary' and 'against the Supreme Leader.' Forces from the Mashhad Intelligence Office raided my son's home

suddenly, searching through all his books, personal items, and his computer hard disk. On his computer there was a video that my son and one of his brothers had made of themselves on the night of his birthday."

Jamali goes on to add: "In this video, my son, who was having a drink, said a sentence that cannot even be a direct insult to Prophet Mohammad. He was holding the knife he was going to cut the cake with and he said, 'Put this knife up your prophet's butt.' But this film was private and other than himself and his brother, there was no one else in it. My son was kept in solitary confinement inside the Intelligence Office for three-and-a-half months, and then they transferred him to Vakilabad Prison in Shiraz."

The Campaign reports that the judiciary has also charged Tavana with producing alcoholic beverages based on another personal video confiscated during the raid on his home. Tavana's mother says the basis of that charge is also a private video made in jest: "He had a file on his computer which the Intelligence forces found. Rouhollah had videotaped himself when he was all alone, concocting an alcoholic beverage in a pressure cooker in the kitchen. [In the video] he was jokingly describing the directions for making the alcoholic drink. But all of these were private files. The Intelligence forces themselves took the files and put them on CDs and entered them into his case."

The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran calls on the Iranian judiciary to rescind Rouhollah Tavana's death sentence of on the authority of Article 263 of the Islamic Penal Code, which states: "If the individual accused of [insult] claims that his statements were made reluctantly, negligently, unintentionally, or while drunk, or angry, or were verbal blunders, or were said without attention to the meaning of the words, or were quoting another individual, he will not be considered an insulter of the Prophet."

Christian converts; a threat to Iran's national security?

Iran's Islamic regime uses any means to impose this idea on Iranian society that evangelical Christianity and the "house-church" movement is a deviant form of Christianity and thus is far from real the Christian beliefs.

Mohabat News (21.02.2014) – Religious surveillance on all matters is a trait of Islamic regime of Iran. This leaves no room for other religions to exist in the country, and thus religious minorities will be denied their social and political rights.

Contrary to their promises, Iranian Islamic rulers seem to have forgotten that every Iranian citizen should have equal rights to take his/ her place in the life of the nation and, regardless of their religious beliefs, should enjoy freedom to practice their religious beliefs.

Christian persecution continues with even more intensity since the beginning of 2014 with many Iranian Christians arrested over the Christmas season. In its 2013 World Watch List, Open Doors International Ministries ranked Iran among top 10 countries where Christians are persecuted the most.

Many officially registered churches were closed down over the past few years including The Central Assemblies of God Church, the AoG Church of Ahwaz, and the Janat-Abad Church. Additionally, Christians with Muslim background are not allowed in the few churches that remain open and the Farsi Bible cannot be freely published and distributed in Iran. These restrictions, in fact, have boosted the growth of house churches, despite all the risks involved in running as well as attending house-church meetings.

Islamic regime of Iran uses any means and dedicates large budgets to impose the idea on Iranian society that evangelical Christianity and house-church movement is a deviant form of Christianity and far from the real Christian beliefs. By this, the Islamic rulers seek to portray Christians as a threat to national security. This is the primary reason why most Christians, especially Farsi-speaking ones, are prosecuted and arrested for security violation charges.

Iranian constitution recognizes Christians as religious minorities, and grants them the right to practice their faith. However, this law, like many other laws in Iran, is not respected, and merely acts as a cover for more discrimination and harassment of Christians and other religious minorities.

Based on his pre-election promises, some interpret Hasan Rouhani's election as Iran's president as a hope for improvement of religious freedom in Iran. So far, Iran's new president has not been able to keep his campaign promises.

Wife of AoG pastor conditionally released from prison

Wife of Assemblies of God pastor was conditionally released from Sepidar Prison in Ahwaz.

Mohabat News (28.01.2014) - According to Mohabat News, Mrs. Shahnaz Jayzan, Pastor Farhad Sabokrouh's wife, was released on Tuesday, January 28, 2014, from women's ward of Sepidar Prison in Ahwaz. She was the last prisoner from those arrested in a raid on AoG Church of Ahwaz.

Her release was conditional and happened three months before her prison term ended. She has to report to the Revolutionary Court of Ahwaz every four months.

According to reports received by Mohabat News, neither Mrs. Jayzan, nor her husband, Pastor Sabokrouh are permitted to hold church services or visit Christians in Khuzestan province. Also, they were told they should leave their hometown, Ahwaz. The Christian couple should now live against their will in Tehran.. Despite being an officially registered pastor, Iranian authorities have completely banned Pastor Sabokrouh from conducting any church-related activities or offering spiritual services.

In a pre-organized raid, Iranian authorities had arrested members of AoG Church of Ahwaz as they had gathered to celebrate Christmas on December 23, 2011.

All arrested members were released in a few hours, after brief interrogation and filling out forms which included their personal information, except Pastor Farhad Sabokrouh, his wife, Shahnaz Jayzan and two other church ministers, Naser Zamen-Dezfuli, and Davoud Alijani. They were charged with "converting to Christianity, Proselytizing Muslims, and propagating against Islamic regime by means of evangelism".

Later, the Revolutionary Court of Ahwaz, sentenced all four Christian detainees to one year in prison. Davoud Alijani was summoned in writing to appear before the court in order to admitted to prison on May 1, 2013. The other three Christians received summons to appear before the Revolutionary Court on May 4, 2013, where they were transferred to Sepidar Prison the same day.

Before Mrs. Jayzan, Pastor Sabokrouh, Naser Zamen-Dezfuli, and Davoud Alijani had been released. Mrs. Jayzan was the only one in prison from this group of arrested Christians, who was eventually released after 272 days of imprisonment.

Iranian authorities strictly monitored activities of AoG Church of Ahwaz, before completely closing it down and arresting all of its congregation on December 23, 2011. Even being officially registered did not help to keep the church doors open.

Recently, Open Doors International released 2014 World Watch List, a list of 50 countries where Christians are being persecuted in various measures. Iran ranked 9 in the list, placing it among countries where Christians face "severe" persecution. Iran's Islamic government severely restricts Christian activities, especially for Christian converts with Muslim background.

Ahwaz church minister released from prison

A Christian convert and minister at the Assemblies of God Church of Ahwaz, who had been imprisoned, was granted 20 days of remission and released from prison.

Mohabat News (15.01.2014) - According to Mohabat News, Christian prisoner, Davoud Alijani, also known as David, was released from Karoon Prison on Monday, January 13, after 257 days in prison.

He was released while only 20 days were remaining from his original prison term.

According to the report, security authorities had raided a Christmas celebration on December 23, 2011 and arrested Mr. Alijani and a number of other members of AoG Church of Ahwaz. The raid happened in a pre-organized fashion.

All those arrested were threatened and interrogated and had their personal information and addresses recorded. All, except Pastor Farhad Sabokrouh, his wife, Shahnaz Jayzan, and two church ministers, Naser Zamen-Dezfuli, and Davoud Alijani were released after a few hours. The four detainees who were kept, were charged with converting from Islam to Christianity (apostasy), proselytizing Muslims, and propagating against the Islamic regime through evangelism.

Based on these accusations, the Revolutionary Court of Ahwaz sentenced the four Christian detainees to one year in prison. Mr. Alijani was taken to prison to serve his sentence as he himself went to the court. The three others were summoned to the court on May, 4, 2013 and transferred to Sepidar prison from there.

Farhad Sabokrouh and Naser Zamen-Dezfuli were released on December 4, 2013, after 214 days in prison, while Pastor Sabokrouh's wife, Shahnaz Jayzan is still in prison. However, unconfirmed reports indicate that she will be released in the next several days.

None of the four Christian prisoners were granted a leave permit during their time in prison. It is reported that an administrative order to Iranian courts prohibits them from issuing leave permits for prisoners of conscience and political prisoners.

The raid on this church was a shock to the Iranian Christian community, since the Assemblies of God Church of Ahwaz is a registered church and operates under the supervision of security authorities. This is also an indication of the arbitrary oppression of Christians by the Islamic regime of Iran.

Revolutionary court sentenced a Christian convert to one year in prison

Mohabat News (05.01.2014) - According to Mohabat News, Karaj Revolutionary Court sentenced Hossein Saketi Aramsari to one year of imprisonment. Hossein Saketi is a Farsi-speaking Christian convert. Judge Asef Hosseini convicted him in Branch 1 of Revolutionary Court in Karaj.

The court delivered the sentence to Mr. Saketi orally.

Human Rights activists report that Mr. Saketi appeared before court several times before receiving his final prison sentence. The court sentenced him to a year in prison, while earlier he was granted bail for conditional release. However, for unknown reasons, judicial authorities prevented his family from posting the bail for his conditional freedom.

Iran's Ministry of Intelligence had arrested Mr. Saketi on July 23, 2013 in Golestan province.

Hossein Saketi, whose friends call him Stephen, was then transferred to a jail in Jajrom county and from there to the Intelligence Office in Bojnord, in the Northern Khorasan province.

After 15 days in solitary confinement, and after Mr. Saketi made the claim that the court in Bojnord did not have the required jurisdiction to judge him, his case was transferred to Alborz province Revolutionary Court.

The charges mentioned in his case were Christian evangelism-related.

This Christian believer was handed over to the Intelligence Office in Karaj on August 6. He was held in solitary confinement in ward 8 of Rajaei-Shahr prison until October 26 and eventually taken to ward 7 of Karaj Central Detention House, where he is being held today.

While Christians all around the world celebrated Christmas and New Year, many Christian families in Iran missed their loved ones who are in prison.

Religious dissidents in Iran, especially Christian converts, are under increasing pressure and are subject to inhumane treatment from the Islamic government of Iran. These pressures have reached their peak in the past three years and have resulted in arrests and the imprisonment of a large number of Iranian Christians, closure of many Farsi-speaking churches, and the closure of house churches across the country. These pressures from government are intended to stop the spread of Christianity in Iran.
