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New wave of persecution against Baha'is

HRWF (06.12.2016) - Repression against Baha'is in Iran has against accelerated in the past few months.

Widespread closures of Baha'i-owned businesses in Rasht

In November, the Office of Public Places in Rasht sealed the business premises of eleven Baha'i citizens in Rasht over the last few days: Faraj Farhangi, Touraj Farhangi, Mohammad Asadpour, Foad Yazdani, Massoud Razavian, Siamak Abdulhamidi, Seed Abdulhamidi, Shahb Taeed, Homayoun Khanlari, Bashir Heravi, and Saadat Yegan. Moreover, the Office of Public Places in Lahijan has sealed the business of Navid Rouhipour in that city.

Observing Baha'i holidays was the sole reason behind the government's closures.

Within the past weeks, more than 120 Baha'i-owned businesses have been sealed across Iran.

Yashar Rezvani's trial scheduled for January

Yashar Rezvani, a Baha'i resident of Ariyashar, was arrested at home by the intelligence service forces on 3rd August. They took his personal accessories including 2 cellphones, a laptop and 1 memory stick. He first spent 33 days in solitary confinement in Evin prison ward and then transferred to ward number 4. He was released temporarily on the bail of 2 billion IRR.

He should show up at Branch 28 of Tehran's Revolutionary Court headed by judge Moghiseh on 17th January 2017.

The primary allegation against him is membership in a Baha'i organization which Mr. Razvani has rejected.

Baha'i murdered in Iran—victim of religious hatred

In an appalling act of violence, a Baha'i has been stabbed to death by two men who admitted they attacked him because of his religious beliefs.

Farhang Amiri, 63, was murdered outside his home on 26th September 2016 in the city of Yazd, Iran, where he and his family have long resided.

On the previous night, two young men visited the residence of Mr. Amiri under the pretense of wanting to purchase his van. Mr. Amiri was not home. His son, who answered the door, was surprised and indicated that he was not aware of any plans by his father to sell the vehicle. The two men, however, insisted. When he asked for their contact information, they made excuses and left. (Source: Baha'is World News Service <http://news.bahai.org/story/1133>)

Nineteen human rights organizations call to protect the rights of Christians in Iran

A group of nineteen human rights organizations call the international community and United Nations bodies to protect the rights of Christians in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Mohabat News (29.11.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2gHZ4hV> - In the summer of 2016, Iranian authorities increased their persecution of Christians, honing in on converts from a Muslim-background.

Between May and August 2016, in locations across Iran, security forces arrested a total of 79 Christians, according to information sourced, family members, and friends. The majority of those arrested were interrogated and detained for periods ranging from a few days to months. At the time of writing, some of these 79 Christians remain in detention and have still not been formally charged. Rights groups believe the true number of Christians apprehended by the authorities could be notably higher, as many arrests would have gone unreported.

In 2012 the Iranian government instituted policies to bar converts from Muslim backgrounds from attending services in official churches. Instead, Christian converts are forced to gather in informal groups known as "house churches". These gatherings are considered illegal by authorities and are often raided. In August 2016 alone, security agents allegedly raided at least four house churches and the house church members were arrested and interrogated.

The individuals responsible for the house church often face charges of "acting against national security through the establishment of house churches". A group of four converts from Rasht were arrested in May 2016 and charged with acting against national security. A verdict is still pending from their hearing on 15 October 2016. Three of those men also faced charges of drinking communion wine and are appealing their sentence of 80 lashes each. Many others of those recently arrested are still waiting to know what charges will be brought against them.

Iranian authorities have put pressure on Christian leaders to emigrate, either through direct threats or through intentional harassment. Some church leaders have reportedly been told during interrogation that they will face 5 to 10 years in prison unless they leave the country. In other instances, Christians have said that harassment has taken the form of a daily summons to security offices for questioning, confiscation of documents such as identity cards to prevent the victim from buying or selling property or cars or forcing the Christians out of their jobs.

This pattern of treatment of Iranian Christians and converts violates Iran's Constitutional and international legal obligations. Article 14 of the Islamic Republic's constitution contains provisions, which uphold basic religious rights for some non-Muslims including Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. Article 19 also enshrines the principle of non-discrimination and article 23 prohibits authorities from investigating a person's belief or taking action against someone solely on account of his or her beliefs.

As a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Islamic Republic of Iran is obligated to ensure non-discrimination under articles 2 and 26 and freedom of thought, conscience and religion under Article 18. Article 18 specifically protects the right of a person to change their religion.

The international community

Since the lifting of international sanctions under the Joint Plan of Action, governments worldwide have been showing a commitment to improving relations with Iran and developing business opportunities. In June 2016, for example, the European Parliament published an analysis of EU-Iran relations in the wake of the nuclear agreement, entitled

"An EU strategy for relations with Iran after the nuclear deal". The strategy disappointingly includes very little mention of human rights.

We suggest the following response from the international community and the Islamic Republic:

(1) Governments should factor human rights, including the rights of religious minorities, into all bilateral dealings with the Islamic Republic. Governmental agencies should explore avenues beyond dialogue alone to ensure human rights violators are held accountable and that trade and diplomatic relations do not contribute to further abuses.

(2) The Secretary General and newly appointed Special Rapporteurs on freedom of religion and human rights in Iran should monitor and report extensively on violations of freedom of religious of people in Iran, in accordance with their mandates before the United Nations.

(3) The Islamic Republic of Iran must ensure that the values enshrined in the Iranian Constitution, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights are upheld and that the right to freedom of religion and belief, including the right of conversion and of non-belief, for all its citizens and residents of the country to be respected.

Sincerely,

Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation
All Human Rights for All in Iran
Arseh Sevom
Article 18
Association for Human rights of Azerbaijani People in Iran
Association of Human Rights in Kurdistan of Iran-Geneva
Baloch Activist Campaign
Center for Supporters of Human Rights
Ensemble contre la peine de mort (ECPM)
European Ahwazi Human Rights Organisation
Human Rights Activists in Iran (HRAI)
Impact Iran
International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran
Iran Human Rights
Justice for Iran
Middle East Concern
Siamak Pourzand Foundation
Small Media
United for Iran

500 Azerbaijani pilgrims stopped on Iran-Iraq border

Vzglyad.az (22.11.2016) - A bus with Azerbaijani pilgrims from Kerbela was stopped on the Iranian border by an Iranian guard after already having crossed the Iraqi border in Mehran.

On their way back from Karbala in Iraq, the Iranian border guards stopped seven buses that they had used to travel back to Iran for over sixteen hours. Around 500 Azerbaijanis were waiting on the border checkpoint to release their buses. The people themselves were free to move but their transportation means were not. The issue was that the documents given to the people by the insurance company in order to guarantee their

safe travel on Iranian territory were not correct. In order to fix the problems with the documents, each pilgrim needed to pay an extra 200 – 250 dollars. The pilgrims agreed to do so because this is the only way. Some of the pilgrims had to wait for over 48 hours.

HRWF adaptation from a translation by Scott and Olga Allen

Over 200 Iranians, Afghans baptised as Iranian Church sees 'spectacular' growth

Silently but effectively, Jesus Christ is doing wonders in Iran, drawing more and more people to follow Him.

Mohabat News (12.11.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2fCkzDe> - Just recently, more than 200 Iranians and Afghans were baptised in a location just outside Iran, the Elam Ministries reported. The service was attended by people from eight different Persian-speaking churches, the group said.

During the event, the newly baptised Christians shared testimonies on how Jesus has changed their lives. One man said he had been suicidal, but Jesus intervened and brought him new hope.

Another new believer shared: "I never thought I would find freedom from my past, but Jesus has set me free."

The growth of Christianity in Iran has been described as spectacular. In fact, several statisticians noted that the Iranian church may be the fastest growing church in the world, according to God Reports.

"Twenty years ago, everyone thought there were 2,000-5,000 believers in Iran," says Elam Ministries' Mark Howard.

But now, he said "the conservative estimate" is 300,000 to 400,000 Muslim-background believers in Iran, with others saying that the number could be as high as one million.

"The word that a lot of our senior leadership team has been using recently is momentum, the Lord is really doing something," Howard said.

"We see incredible opportunity," he said, "reaching Persian speaking refugees in Europe, planting churches in Iran — people are so open right now."

"Every day we have many coming to the Lord. If you give a starving person food and water they will want to share it. That's what they find in Jesus. They are so hungry and thirsty for the truth. They are experiencing it in a powerful way. When they do they want to share it with others," Howard said.

He cited several factors that are spurring the growth of the church in Iran. "There is disillusionment with the Iranian regime and with Islam," Howard noted. "Life has not improved in the last few years, particularly with the sanctions. People are also disillusioned by violence carried out in the name of Islam."

Moreover, Iranians have special affection for Jesus who they view as a revered prophet. In fact, Howard said, some well-known Iranian poets have written about Jesus.

"They [Iranians] are spiritual people. As many search for truth and hunger for the truth, it is natural to look for that in Jesus. When someone tells them about Jesus they are eager," Howard said.

Three Christians released on bail but two others detained

Crackdown: 40 Christians arrested in August alone



L to R: Mohammad Dehnavi, Hadi Asgari, Amin Afshar Naderi, Ramil Bet-Tamraz and Amir Dashti.

World Watch Monitor (10.11.2016) - Three of the five Iranian Christians arrested during a trip to the Alborz Mountains north-east of Tehran in August have been released on bail, though two are still being detained.

Ramil Bet-Tamraz, Mohammad Dehnavi and Amin Afshar Naderi were released after posting bail of around US\$33,000 each, according to Middle East Concern.

They still haven't been told what charges they face, although MEC reports that their interrogation related to the activity of Ramil's father, Victor, a pastor who is still expecting a summons to court over his arrest (alongside Naderi) on Boxing Day 2014.

Hadi Asgari and Amir Saman Dashti remain in jail and MEC reports that Asgari has faced "particularly intense pressure" during his interrogation.

Iran allows Azerbaijani Christians home on 'conditional' release



Nasibov, Farhadov and Gurbanov (left to right) were arrested by Iranian agents on 24 June.

World Watch Monitor (08.11.2016) - Three Azerbaijani Christians, accused by Iran of "missionary activities", were allowed to go home on Sunday (6 Nov.), after more than four months in prison, Middle East Concern (MEC) said.

Eldar Gurbanov, 48, Yusif Farhadov, 51, Bahram Nasibov, 37, and an Iranian, Naser Navard Gol-Tapeh, have been released from prison, and the Azerbaijanis are able to travel back home, having been released on bail on 29th October.

Gurbanov, Farhadov and Nasibov were arrested on 24 June when security agents raided a wedding party they attended during a visit to Tehran.

For two months, the four men were then kept incommunicado in solitary confinement and continually interrogated, apparently in Evin Prison in Tehran. During this time, they were denied consular assistance and legal counsel.

They were finally transferred in September to shared cells in Ward 350 of the same prison.

They faced charges of engaging in missionary activity and propaganda against the Iranian government.

Despite their conditional release, the men's families and friends still call on Iranian authorities to acquit them of all charges. They hope "the Iranian regime will treat all prisoners with dignity and justice; that people will no longer be penalised on account of their faith or religious activities," MEC reported.



L to R: Camilla and Bahram Nasibov; Yusif and Lala Farhadov, with their son; Aida and Eldar Gurbanov.



Naser Navard Gol-Tapeh

Christians in Iran appeal sentence of eighty lashes for drinking communion wine

Pastor Behnam Irani released.

Morning Star News (29.10.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2eN8Uj8> - Three Iranian Christians sentenced to receive 80 lashes for drinking wine during a Communion service filed an appeal Wednesday (Oct. 25) to have their case overturned, a noted advocacy group reported.

In a trial that lasted a mere 10 minutes, the three converts from Islam, Mohammadreza Omidi, Yasser Mossayebzadeh and Saheb Fadaie, on Sept. 10 were all sentenced to

receive 80 lashes for drinking wine. It was the second time Fadaie and Omid have been sentenced to flogging for taking Communion.

Although Christians are allowed to consume alcohol in Iran, Muslims are not. According to advocacy group Middle East Concern (MEC), the charges "reflect the state view that a Muslim cannot change his or her religion."

The Iranian government uses the alcohol statute as another way to harass converts to Christianity, Kiri Kankhwende of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) told Morning Star News.

"The charge of drinking alcohol for Muslims is found in the sharia penal code and is illegal," Kankhwende said. "Consuming alcohol by non-Muslims is not illegal in Iran, however, Iranian authorities tend to use this to intimidate Christians from a Muslim background, to discourage conversion and make life more difficult for converts."

Some Iranian Christians believe that more conservative elements in the government are trying to create an Iranian church that is compliant with sharia [Islamic law] or an "Islamic-style church," she said.

The attorney for the three Christians has not publically released the grounds for the appeal on the alcohol charges, but the filing was submitted on the last day possible. Advocates monitoring the case expected an appeal to be filed on Oct. 15, but complications with another trial in which the three Christians are charged led to a delay in filing the appeal.

On Oct. 15 the three men and a third convert, pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, were tried on charges of "acting against national security," a catch-all charge often used by the government to punish different types of religious and political dissent, according to human rights activists. The government often uses it against converts instead of the charge of apostasy, according to Rob Duncan, MEC's regional manager for Iran.

"Prosecutors in Iran are not keen to charge converts with apostasy because of the legal complications as well as international condemnation," Duncan said. "Therefore, active converts are frequently charged with action against national security as a catch-all. It is poorly defined what such actions are and relatively easy for interrogators, prosecutor and court to say that by becoming a Christian, a Muslim convert is a threat to the stability (security) of the Islamic nation."

The penalty for crimes against national security can vary from long-term imprisonment to death, but sentences in such cases or even verdicts can be difficult to predict, Kankhwende said.

"Such accusations are often unsubstantiated, and evidence is generally weak or even fabricated," she said. "Confessions, if they are made, are done under torture or threat of torture. It is very difficult to predict the outcomes at court as prisoners are usually denied access to lawyers."

Domestic, regional, and international politics may sometimes impact verdicts as cases related to freedom of religion or belief can carry political messages that may reflect certain political tensions, she added.

Iran's internal security apparatus, VEVAK, on May 13 conducted a series of raids against at least 10 Christian-owned homes. Officials temporarily detained Nadarkhani and his wife, Fatemeh Pasandideh, but then released them both. Authorities took Mossayebzadeh, who was also at one of the houses, into custody.

VEVAK agents summoned Omid and Fadaie to their office by phone and then arrested them in connection with the raids, according to CSW. Weeks later, Mossayebzadeh and Fadaie were released each on the equivalent of a \$33,000 bond, Mossayebzadeh on May 28 and Fadaie on May 29. Omid remained in detention until officials released him June 7, also on a \$33,000 bond.

On July 24, court officials summoned Nadarkhani to court and charged him with crimes against national security. He was ordered to post a bond of \$33,000, released and given a week to raise the money.

Nadarkhani is no stranger to government persecution. In 2010, the Iranian government charged Nadarkhani with apostasy and sentenced him to death. The charges stemmed from a 2009 arrest after Nadarkhani went to his children's school to question the Islamic-only religious education that was available.

Eventually court officials acquitted him on the charges, and in September 2012, he was released from prison. He was found guilty of evangelizing, however, and three months later ordered back to prison on Dec. 25, 2012, and released almost one year later, on Dec. 7, 2013.

Behnam Irani released

On the evening of Oct. 17, after serving six years in prison, Behnam Irani, a pastor and convert from Islam, was released from prison, according to Present Truth Ministries, a ministry group that specializes in Iran.

Irani, one of the leaders in the "Church of Iran," was initially arrested in 2006 and found guilty of action against national security in 2008 and given a five-year suspended jail sentence. In 2010, Irani was arrested during a house-church meeting and eventually found guilty on new charges of action against national security. He was sentenced to serve one year in prison.

In May 2011, he was ordered to begin serving the sentence to which the suspended five-year sentence was added.

All throughout Irani's imprisonment, he suffered serious health issues, including chronic, life-threatening internal bleeding. He was also tortured by prison officials and subject to numerous beatings by his fellow prisoners.

In September 2014, Irani was placed in solitary confinement after being charged with "Mofsed-e-filarz." Loosely translated as "spreading corruption on Earth," the charge carries the death penalty.

The charge was eventually reduced, and on Dec. 9, 2014, it was dropped in an appeal.

CSW Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said in a press statement that he welcomed Irani's release but that his detention lacked even the appearance of justice.

"The continuing systematic harassment and imprisonment of Christians and other religious minorities is in violation of Iran's commitments under its constitution and the international covenants to which it is party," he said. "No one should suffer as pastor Irani has done, simply for following their conscience and belief."

Fishing trip arrests

On Oct. 10, Iranian officials released Ramiel Bet Tamraz and Mohamad Dehnay after each submitted a security bond equivalent to \$33,000. They were part of a group of five Christians arrested in August while on a fishing trip with their families.

On Aug. 26, at about 1:30 p.m. security officials from the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) arrived at the picnic in Firuzkuh, 93 miles (150 kilometers) east of Tehran, raided the picnic, separated the men from the woman and arrested all the men. When one of them asked to see an arrest warrant, which the officials did not produce, he was beaten, according to MEC.

Tamraz and Dehnay were taken into custody along with Amin Nader Afshar, Hadi Askary and Amir Sina Dashti. Originally there were reports that Afshar had been released, but those reports proved unwarranted.

Tamraz is the son of Assyrian pastor Victor Bet Tamraz, who was arrested along with other Christians at his home on Dec. 26, 2014 at a Christmas celebration. The elder Tamraz was informally charged with conducting evangelism, conducting illegal house-church activities and printing and distributing Bibles. He was released on bail on March 1, 2015 without ever being formally charged in court.

According to MEC, no charges have been filed against any those arrested, "despite weeks of interrogation." Hadi faced particularly intense interrogation, according to MEC.

Iranian Christian converts arrested in family party

Iranian security forces arrested a group of Christian converts who had gathered in a family party. Their families are concerned over staged accusations against their loved ones.

Mohabat News (30.08.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2cbbv3x> - Iranian police raided a family party on Thursday August 26, 2016, held in a garden in Firouz-Kouh county, north of Tehran, and arrested a group of Christian converts who had gathered there.

Recently, Iranian police started a campaign to crack down on parties and weddings where Islamic principals are not tightly followed. As part of this campaign, Iranian police identified and raided a gathering in Firouz-Kouh county, arresting 15 of the guests. Later they discovered that there were a few Christian converts among those arrested who had been previously arrested for their faith.

Among the Christians arrested were Afshar Naderi, Hadi Asgari, Amir Saman Dashti, Ramil Bet-Tamraz, and Mohammad Dehnavi.

Eye witnesses reported that Mr. Afshar Naderi protested against the police's harsh treatment of the guests, but police beat him up in response and began searching the premises. They found three Bibles there and added them to the list of confiscated items.

The police then transferred those arrested to an unknown location and so far only Amir Saman Dashti has been able to contact his family in a very short phone conversation. Mr. Dashti stated in the short phone call that they were immediately transferred to Evin prison.

Most of the Christians arrested had a history of previous arrests for their faith.

Ramil Bet-Tamraz, is the son of Pastor Victor Bet-Tamraz, former leader of the Shahr-Ara Assyrian Pentecostal Church in Tehran.

Pastor Victor Bet-Tamraz had been arrested himself in December, 2014 while celebrating Christmas with friends and family. In that incident, Amin Afshar Naderi and Kavian Falah Mohammadi were arrested as well but were later released on bail after weeks of interrogation and solitary confinement.

They had all been charged with evangelism through their house church, which is defined as a crime in Iran. They are yet to appear before a court for this charge.

Pastor Bet-Tamraz was held longer and released upon posting a heavy bail on March 1, 2015, after 65 days in detention. Despite his physical problems and advanced age, Mr. Bet-Tamraz was held in solitary confinement for the majority of his imprisonment.

In that incident, Amin Afshar Naderi was released on bail on February 10, 2015 after 36 days in jail, during which he was frequently interrogated. He spent one month of his arrest in solitary confinement.

The other Christian arrested, Kavian Falah Mohammadi, was temporarily released just a week after Mr. Naderi to await his trial.

Families of these arrested Christians are concerned that their loved ones' previous cases will be re-opened and the new charges will be added to them. They are also worried that they will be forced to make confessions against other believers who are currently free on bail, making the situation worse for them as well.

Personal privacy is a serious concern in Iran

According to Article 25 of the Iranian constitution, "searching, intercepting delivery of mails, wiretapping and recording of telephone conversations, publicizing, censorship and interruption of private telegraph and fax communication is illegal, unless permitted through a court order".

Despite this article, Iranian police, security forces and the Revolutionary Guard, do not respect this law and violate Iranian citizens' privacy and personal space.

With this group of Christian believers arrested in their family party, not only will they be charged with having a non-Islamic party, they will be charged with possession of Bibles and Christian material, which is a crime in the country. Even though they were not having a worship session in their gathering, the mere possession of Christian material among them is considered an offence.

Convert explains journey to Christianity, and why he left Iran

In Iran, converting from Islam to Christianity can land you in prison or even get you killed. However, many Iranians – considered "Muslims" regardless of personal beliefs – still "convert". World Watch Monitor spoke to one such "convert", a 27-year-old now living in Europe, about the challenges he faced along the way, and why he left Iran.

World Watch Monitor (11.08.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2bFo60S> - "[My family] were Muslims, but never very strict. We had a good life; my parents were both teachers and my father had some small businesses aside from that. My father was always busy finding ways to earn more and more money. He always followed Islam, except when it had to do with money; money was more important than religion.

"Like my dad, I also loved money. Money gives you friends, respect and fun. I just wanted to have fun growing up. Every night I spent time with my friends, going from place to place in the city; at the same time I genuinely tried to be a good Muslim. But it was hard. Sometimes I would try to say my prayers regularly, but I soon forgot about them or skipped them to sleep in, or have fun with friends. As a Muslim, I often had the feeling that I was failing on so many sides. Then I thought, 'I'm lacking in so many ways. I will not go to heaven anyway. What is the point?'

"I was surprised when one day I found myself having a strange thought: 'Go and find out about Christianity'. I was startled. Why would I find out about Christianity? I didn't know any Christians, and from what I'd heard, it was an old-fashioned religion and Christians were weird people. On top of that, it was dangerous. Why would I choose the chance of imprisonment and death above having fun?

"Time passed, but the thought didn't go away. So one day I thought: 'I'll just do it. I will go and talk to some of those weird guys.' So I took the bus to a church in a different part of the city. When I finally found the church, I asked the porter if I could ask him a question. 'No,' he replied curtly. I remember thinking all the way back to the bus: 'Wow, what I've heard is right. These are seriously weird guys.' It was only much later that I found out that the government had actually forbidden church members to answer any questions about Christianity to me or any other Muslim.

"I tried to go to other churches, but I got the same response there. I had already given up when one night the thought came back in a very intense way. I can't find words to describe it. The thought reoccurred in my mind: 'Go and find out about Christianity and learn how these people think about God.' The feeling confused me. Did I drink too much alcohol? I had trouble sleeping that night because I was thinking how I could find out more.

"Then I remembered my friend. He worked for a security force investigating illegal 'underground' activities. His job was to track all underground activities, including 'underground' Christianity and illegal evangelism. Asking him was my last chance. I knew that my friend could get into a lot of trouble by helping me to contact with someone who could tell me more about Christianity, so I decided to bring up the issue playfully so he wouldn't notice I was actually being serious. My plan worked. My friend gave me the address of a church that he knew was open to Muslims.

"I was so excited! I'd learned that Sunday was the day of the Christians, so the next Sunday I went to the address my friend gave me. When I got closer I saw that there was a worship service going on. At the time I knew nothing about Christianity, so I didn't know exactly what they were doing. I didn't know how long it would take. But I just decided to wait outside until someone came out.

"When the service ended a man came out. 'Can I ask you a question?' I asked him. He looked at his watch and replied, 'Sorry, I am in a hurry now, but please come back next week and ask for me. I thought he might be acting out of politeness, but I decided to try anyhow.

"The week after, I stood by the door of the church again. I was looking for the man, but didn't see him. I started to feel quite uncomfortable. Then someone came to me and asked: 'Can I help you?' I told him I was looking for the man who had told me to come back. He said: 'Unfortunately, he is not here right now.'

"I was about to walk away, when he asked me a dangerous question: 'Do you want to come in and enjoy the service?' Now, I have to explain to you that this is something you just don't do as a Muslim in Iran. So, my first thought was: 'No, no, no!' But at the same time I knew this was the moment. So I took a deep breath and said yes.

"The man opened the door for me. I had seen many mosques from the inside. Big ones, small ones, old and modern. But the feeling I had when I entered the church was something I've never felt before. It wasn't even the way it looked.

"I had seen churches on TV. So it wasn't so much the sight that startled me, it was the way it felt. It felt so peaceful. Walking past the pews I felt like I was in an aquarium; it was like I had a lot of weight on my shoulders. I sat there and felt overwhelmed. I stood up when everyone stood up and sat down when everyone else did. I don't remember anything from the first sermon, I was too consumed with my feelings.

"After the service there was coffee and tea. A man asked me: 'You're here for the first time, right?' I said yes. I asked him if I could ask him questions about God. He said: 'Not here, but please come to my home'.

"So I went to his home. I came with a lot of questions. The answers were strange, but in a good way. It was, for instance, the way he talked about heaven. 'A place in God's absolute presence,' he [called it]. 'A place in which your spirit is at peace totally with your creator.'

"In Islam heaven is a place where you can have all sorts of things you can't have on earth – different sorts of women for your satisfaction, wine, etc. I hadn't heard about the Christian idea of heaven before, but somehow his words about heaven made complete sense to me.

"[He] also told me that God isn't a far-away person but someone who created the earth and put us as humans in the centre. He made us in his image. He even gave us a piece of his very own Spirit. I compared him to Allah, who was far away and got angry about the little things. But with the Christian God I was welcome the way I was. He created me with my weaknesses, he even used my weaknesses to be more like Him. This was a big difference from Allah, who would punish me for any small thing. No, God was my Father, someone who knew me as a person.

"Still, my Muslim background was too strong to just let go. It took a lot of struggling. I told God: 'If you really care, please show me the way.'

"The funny thing is that apart from that church member, one of the people who helped me understand Christianity during that period was someone who had exactly the opposite intention – a 'mini-Ayatollah,' as I call him. This religious leader was trained especially to help Christian converts from a Muslim background return to Islam. I was sent to him by a friend who was worried about my sudden interest in Christianity. But with everything the religious leader said about Islam, I found an alternative in the Bible that was much better.

"It wasn't a specific moment, a lightning flash or a dream. It happened gradually that I became a Christian. It was like the curtains that had been hanging in front of the truth for a long time had been opened for me. What I saw was beautiful.

"I didn't tell my family: 'Surprise! I am a Christian now!' They discovered gradually. I had always been a bad boy and I started behaving differently. For instance, I brought the [dramatized life of] "Jesus" DVD home and watched it with my little brother. They'd expected me to go on drugs, or get in trouble with the police. They didn't expect me to become a Christian.

"My parents weren't happy about my new faith, but they also didn't give me a lot of trouble. It was because of the people who disciplined me that I eventually chose to leave the country. If the authorities would have found me, it would have led to those who disciplined me, and they would have been in big trouble.

"I was 18 when I left home. Now I am 27. I haven't been back in Iran since. I haven't seen my family in 10 years. It's a big sacrifice. But despite everything, I am undoubtedly happy and thankful."

Families ask for help as Azerbaijan Christians detained in Iran

World Watch Monitor (02.08.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2eRiMW9> - The families of three Azerbaijani Christians detained for more than a month in Iran have appealed for help.

Eldar Gurbanov, 48, Yusif Farhadov, 51, and Bahram Nasibov, 37 were arrested on 24 June at an engagement party in Tehran. No charges have been filed against them, nor have they been allowed access to a lawyer.

Middle East Concern reported that initially about 10 people were arrested, but most were soon released.

Mohabat News reported that Naser Navard Gol-Tapeh, 45, a Christian convert from a Muslim background, was "held separate from everyone else during the raid ... and there has been no word on his whereabouts since his arrest".

The Azerbaijanis had been invited to Tehran by friends. Their families have reported that they have not been told why they were arrested, have been kept in separate cells and do not know where they are being held, although after a week's detention they were allowed to call home and said they are in a prison somewhere in Tehran.

After petitions from their families, the Azerbaijani Embassy in Tehran requested permission to meet them, but this has not yet been granted.

On 1 August, their families released the following statement:

"On 22nd June 2016 our husbands and fathers – Eldar Gurbanov, Yusif Farhadov and Bahram Nasibov – travelled to Tehran in the Islamic Republic of Iran. They were invited as guests in Iran to participate in an engagement ceremony and meet with their Iranian friends. As we discovered later, they were arrested on 24th June by security agents during an engagement ceremony and they have not been charged with any crime. Eldar (48), Yusif (51) and Bahram (37) are all married and have children. Yusif has a young son with Down's Syndrome under his care. They have not been charged with any crime and their future is unknown to all of us. We ask all who are concerned to help our husbands and fathers to return safely to their homes!"

More voices from Islamic countries call for Iran to stop persecuting Baha'is

Baha'I World News Service (17.07.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2bEisuF> - A group of Bangladeshi lawyers have joined the increasing numbers of Muslim intellectuals, religious leaders, and professionals worldwide who have called for an end to the persecution of Baha'is in Iran.

In a letter dated 29 May 2016, signed by a dozen "law professionals of Bangladesh", the group says it wishes to "express our condemnation to the government of Iran for the arrests of the Baha'is, including their seven leaders, only because of their religious belief and their imprisonment without any recourse to justice."

They continue: "The fact that the Baha'is are a peaceful community and the largest minority of Iran and being subjected to a premeditated program of hostility especially by the government who have closed the doors of all socio-economic opportunities including jobs, education and security for them is contrary to the norms of any civilized society, and, absolutely unacceptable!"

The group ends by calling for the immediate release of the seven imprisoned Baha'i leaders. They also urge Iran to stop its propaganda campaign against Baha'is.

The 12 Bangladeshi lawyers join a growing number of Muslim religious leaders, scholars, and human rights activists around the world who have chosen to speak publicly against Iran's systematic persecution of Baha'is in recent years.

In May, for example, five Iranian religious scholars published a statement decrying Iran's oppression of Baha'is and calling for tolerance towards those who believe differently.

Abdolali Bazargan, Hasan Fereshtian, Mohsen Kadivar, Sedigheh Vasmaghi and Hasan Yousefi-Eshkevari noted that the "followers of the Baha'i religion have been oppressed because of their religion and beliefs for decades," according to a translation by Iran Press Watch.

"Criticism and rejection of the beliefs of a sect or religion cannot justify violence and tyranny against its followers," said the five scholars, adding that "Islam supports freedom of religion and belief. The Qur'an has affirmed this important point in several verses."

Other Muslim religious leaders have, likewise, begun to make similar calls for tolerance toward Baha'is.

Ayatollah Tehrani's action, which included giving to the Baha'is of the world an illuminated work of calligraphy featuring a sentence from the writings of Baha'u'llah, calling for religious coexistence with Baha'is was quickly praised by many Muslim religious leaders.

These included Dr. Ghaleb Bencheikh, a highly respected Muslim theologian and well-known in France for his promotion of interfaith activities who in 2014 condemned the persecution of Iran's Baha'is as being "in disdain of law" and "an intolerable scandal."

Iranian Christian again forced to return to prison before end of medical treatment

Elsewhere two Christians released, but many still detained

World Watch Monitor (28.06.2016) - <http://bit.ly/28ZHQqJ> -

UPDATE (28 June): Maryam Naghsh Zargaran has for the second time been sent back to prison before her medical treatment could be completed, after the prosecutor's office refused to extend her medical leave.

On 6 June, she had been granted temporary release from prison, but on 19 June the authorities demanded she return.

Her family applied for an extension, but their appeal was refused and she returned to prison yesterday (27 June). Zargaran was also granted medical treatment in October 2015 and forced to return before it could be completed.

Original report (1 June):

An Iranian Christian serving a four-year jail term for "acting against national security" has gone on hunger strike to protest against the prison's refusal to allow her to receive treatment for long-standing health issues.

Maryam Naghash Zargaran, a convert from Islam, is nearly three years into her sentence at Tehran's Evin prison. She was originally arrested in January 2013, in connection with her work at an orphanage alongside Saeed Abedini, who was also imprisoned, but eventually released in January this year.

A member of the Zargaran family told Mohabat News: "Maryam hasn't left her bed in four days. She is burning with fever and has been on hunger strike to raise her protest against prison authorities' indifference toward her health. She is suffering from serious health issues. Before going on hunger strike, she had lost 25kg and her health issues had intensified. Authorities do not show the slightest concern over Maryam's health. In addition, she is suffering from depression and takes medication for it."

Middle East Concern (MEC) reported that a number of her fellow prisoners decided to forgo family visits on 29 May to show support.

On 31 May, MEC reported that she was briefly taken to hospital on 30 May, after which, on her return to prison, she started to drink water.

Zargaran has a history of heart problems and has recently reported pain in her ears and head. In October 2015 she was allowed to receive a few days' treatment outside the prison, but forced to return before it was completed.

Rasht Christians bailed, but many still detained

Meanwhile, in the northern city of Rasht, two Christians have been released on bail after nearly three weeks in jail.

Yasser Mossayebzadeh and Saheb Fadaie were arrested on 13 May alongside Youcef Nadarkhani, an Iranian pastor once sentenced to death for apostasy, and his wife, Tina. The couple were released later that day, but Mossayebzadeh, Fadaie and another Christian, Mohammad Reza Omid, were detained.

MEC reports that Mossayebzadeh and Fadaie were each forced to pay the equivalent of \$33,000 for bail. Omid was not given that option, though it is not yet clear why. UPDATE (7 June): Omid also granted bail.

Since 2015, more than 150 Christians have been detained by the Iranian authorities. Many are in jail, while others, including Mossayebzadeh and Fadaie, have been released conditionally, pending sentencing or an appeal.

MEC's Rob Duncan said the current pressure being placed on Christians in Iran is "not as much through open violence and arrests, as through fear and intimidation".

"There are fewer raids on house churches, but instead people are summoned to security for interrogation," he said. "There is a lot of pressure on people to leave the country as a result. Also, when people are arrested and charged, bail demands are high and can financially cripple a family."

Mohammadreza Omid released on bail

CSW (09.06.2016) - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has learned that Mohammadreza Omid (Youhan), a Church of Iran member who was arrested on 13 May in Rasht, Iran, has been released on bail.

Mr Omid was arrested during a series of raids targeting the homes of church members by Iranian intelligence (VEVAK) officers who seized computers, mobile telephones and bibles. He was summoned to VEVAK offices by telephone prior to a raid on his home.

Along with Church of Iran members Yasser Mossayebzadeh and Saheb Fadaie, Mr Omid was held in Lakan Prison near Rasht pending payment of around US\$ 33,000 in bail. Mr Mossayebzadeh and Mr Fadaie were released on 28 and 29 May respectively. Although Mr Omid was the first to attempt to post bail, judges had refused to accept his payment, stating that he had to remain in jail because VEVAK were bringing additional charges against him.

Mr Omid was eventually released on 7 June. The authorities said nothing about the nature of the new charge, but told Mr Omid he would be "summoned again." To date none of the men have been given reasons for their arrests, neither have they been informed of the charges they will be facing.

In other news, on 6 June, Maryam (Nasim) Naghash Zargaran was allowed to return home from prison for medical treatment. Ms Naghash Zargaran was jailed for four years in July 2013 for "propagating against the regime" and "collusion intended to harm national security". On 30 May, she had been taken to hospital four days into a hunger strike for greater access to medical attention, but was returned to prison soon afterwards. According to the Iranian religious freedom organisation Article 18, family members who were allowed to see her briefly at that time had found her in a semi-conscious state.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "The release of Mr Omid and the medical furlough granted to Ms Naghash Zargaran are a mixed blessing. In both cases, these events are merely temporary improvements. Mr Omid and his fellow church members have been released following exorbitant bail payments and still face unknown charges, while Ms Naghash Zargaran is likely to be returned to complete an unjust sentence once her condition improves. Clearly, Christians in Iran continue to be harassed judicially. We once again urge the international community to press Iran to uphold and protect the right to freedom of religion or belief, as articulated in its constitution and international treaties to which it is signatory. We also urge the international community to hold Iran to account for ensuring that all prisoners of conscience are able to access adequate medical care in a timely manner."

Two Church of Iran members released on bail, one still in custody

CSW (01.06.2016) - Church of Iran members Yasser Mossayebzadeh and Saheb Fadaie, who were arrested on 13 May in Rasht, Iran, have been released on bail. However, Mohammadreza Omid (Youhan), who was arrested on the same day, remains in custody after the authorities refused to accept his bail money.

The men were arrested in a series of raids targeting the homes of church members by Iranian intelligence (VEVAK) officers who seized computers, mobile telephones and bibles.

Mr Mossayebzadeh was arrested during a raid on the home of Yousef Nadarkhani, the Church of Iran pastor acquitted of apostasy in 2012. The pastor and his wife, Tina Pasandide Nadarkhani, were also detained, but were released shortly afterwards. Saheb Fadaie and Mohammadreza Omid (Youhan) were summoned to VEVAK offices by telephone prior to raids on their homes.

The men were held in Lakan Prison near Rasht pending payment of around US\$ 33,000 bail each. Following payment, Mr Mossayebzadeh was released on 28 May, while Mr Fadaie was released on 29 May. Although Mr Omid was first to post bail, the judges refused to accept it, stating that because VEVAK had brought additional charges against Mr Omid, he could not be released. However, none of the men has been told the reason for their arrests or the charges they are facing.

In other news, the Iranian religious freedom organisation Article 18 reports that Maryam (Nasim) Naghash Zargaran, who was jailed for four years in July 2013 for "propagating against the regime" and "collusion intended to harm national security", was taken to hospital on 30 May, four days into a hunger strike for greater access to medical attention. According to Article 18, family members who were allowed to see her briefly found her in a semi-conscious state. Reports indicate Ms Naghash Zargaran, who has longstanding health challenges, may have been returned to Tehran's Evin Prison without having received treatment.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), said, "Although nearly three weeks have passed since Yasser Mossayebzadeh, Saheb Fadaie and Mohammadreza Omid were arrested, they still have not been informed of the reasons for their arrests. This is both unacceptable and unjust. Mr Omid's continued detention on further unknown charges compounds this injustice, and we reiterate our call for his release. As Christians in Iran continue to be harassed judicially, we urge the international community to press Iran to uphold and protect the right to freedom of religion or belief, as articulated in its constitution and international treaties to which it is signatory. We also urge the international community to hold Iran to account for the wellbeing of Ms Naghash Zargaran and of other prisoners of conscience, who are being denied access to timely and adequate medical care. "

Exorbitant bail set for three imprisoned Christians

CSW (25.05.2016) - Yasser Mossayebzadeh, Saheb Fadaie and Mohammadreza Omid (Youhan), who were arrested on 13 May in Rasht, Iran, remain in custody after exorbitant bail amounts were set for them.

The three Christians from the Church of Iran denomination are being held pending payment of 100,000,000 Toman each (approx. US\$ 33,000).

The men were arrested as part of a series of raids targeting the homes of church members by Iranian intelligence (VEVAK) officers, who seized computers, mobile telephones and bibles.

Mr Mossayebzadeh was arrested during a raid on the home of Pastor Nadarkhani, the Church of Iran pastor acquitted of apostasy in 2012, who was also detained briefly along with his wife, Tina Pasandide Nadarkhani. Saheb Fadaie and Mohammadreza Omid (Youhan) were summoned to VEVAK offices by telephone prior to raids on their homes.

While Mr and Mrs Nadarkhani were released on 13 May, the three men are still in Lakan Prison near Rasht pending payment of bail. The reasons for their arrests remain unclear

as charges are yet to be proffered. All three are married; Mr Fadaie has an eight year old daughter, and Mr Omidi has two teenage daughters aged 13 and 15.

The men were briefly detained in February 2015, following similar raids. Mr Omidi was initially detained in December 2012, during the annual crackdown on churches. In 2013, he was one of four Christians sentenced to 80 lashes each after they were charged with drinking alcohol during a communion service and possessing a receiver and satellite antenna.

Firouz Khanjani, a member of the National Council of the Church of Iran, said: "With Iran re-entering the international fold we were hoping for improvements in human rights situation, but it is now clear that no improvement has taken place."

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said: "Unfortunately the authorities appear to be resorting once again to a tried and tested policy of demanding excessive bail designed primarily to cripple members of the Christian community economically and to delay the release of detainees. By setting such exorbitant bail amounts without proffering substantiating charges the Iranian authorities merely seek to punish these men. CSW deplores the return of exorbitant bail demands for the temporary release of detainees who have committed no crime and urges the Iranian authorities to cease this practice. We also call for the immediate release of Mr Mossayebzadeh, Mr Fadaie and Mr Omidi, who continue to be held without charge, and for Iran to ensure that justice and equality before the law are guaranteed to all citizens, regardless of their religion or belief."

Pastor Nadarkhani released but three church members held

CSW (15.05.2016) - According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide's (CSW's) sources, Pastor and Mrs Nadarkhani were arrested after VEVAK officers raided their home in Rasht, but were released on the same day.

The raid on the Nadarkhani home is reported to have been part of a series that targeted around ten Christian homes.

Three other Christians who were also arrested on 13 May are still in custody. CSW was informed that Yasser Mossayebzadeh was arrested during the raid on Pastor Nadarkhani's house. VEVAK officers summoned Saheb Fadaie and Mohammadreza Omidi (Youhan) to their offices by telephone prior to raiding their homes, and are reported to have seized their bibles, computers and mobile phones.

It is not the first time that the three men have been arrested. In February 2015, they were briefly detained following similar raids. Mohammedreza Omidi was initially detained in December 2012, during the annual crackdown on churches. In 2013, he was one of four Christians sentenced to 80 lashes each after they were charged with drinking alcohol during a communion service and possessing a receiver and satellite antenna.

This was also the second time that Pastor Nadarkhani has been re-arrested since his release from prison in September 2012. He was initially arrested in 2009 after going to his children's school to question the Muslim monopoly on religious education, which he felt was unconstitutional. He was charged with apostasy and sentenced to death in 2010, a decision that was upheld by the Supreme Court in 2011. On 8 September 2012, he was released from prison following his acquittal on apostasy charges, but was found guilty on charges of evangelising. The pastor was recalled to prison on 25 December 2012 to

complete the remainder of his three year sentence, and was released once again on 7 December 2013.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "While CSW is relieved that Pastor and Mrs Nadarkhani have been freed, we remain deeply concerned for the welfare of Yasser Mossayebzadeh, Saheb Fadaie and Mohammadreza Omidi, who are still being held. The government must be held to account for its harassment of Iran's Christian community, in particular the constant raids on homes and repeated arrests which are without basis. We continue to call on Iran to fully respect its constitutional and international human rights obligations by ensuring that justice and equality before the law are guaranteed to all citizens, regardless of their religion or belief."

Pastor Nadarkhani arrested

CSW (13.05.2016) - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has learned that Yousef Nadarkhani, the Church of Iran pastor acquitted of apostasy in 2012, was arrested today in Iran along with his wife, Tina Pasandide Nadarkhani, and fellow church member Yasser Mosayebzadeh.

This is not the first time that Pastor Nadarkhani has been re-arrested since his release from prison in September 2012. On Christmas Day 2012 he was re-arrested on the orders of the director of Lakan prison, where he had been held, ostensibly to serve the remainder of a three-year sentence. He was released once again on 7 January 2013.

Pastor Nadarkhani was initially arrested in 2009 after going to his children's school to question the Muslim monopoly on Iranian education, which he felt was unconstitutional. He was charged with apostasy and sentenced to death in 2010, a decision that was upheld by the Supreme Court in 2011. The pastor was repeatedly asked to renounce his faith during court hearings in order to avoid the death penalty, but refused. On 8 September 2012, he was released from prison following his acquittal on apostasy charges, though he was found guilty on charges of evangelising Muslims, for which he received a three-year sentence.

Following Pastor Nadarkhani's release, his legal counsel, Mohammed Ali Dadkhah, a prominent human rights lawyer, was jailed for ten years and disbarred in September 2012 for "actions and propaganda against the Islamic regime" and keeping banned books in his home. He was also banned from practising or teaching law for ten years. He was later released on stringent conditions.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are deeply concerned by these developments and await further clarification regarding the reasons for these arrests, Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for Christians who have been arrested on account of their religious beliefs to be released and re-arrested time and again, in a tactic designed to foster a sense of insecurity within the community. We urge the authorities ensure Pastor Nadarkhani, Tina Nadarkhani and Yasser Mosayebzadeh receive due process, and once again call on Iran to fully respect its constitutional and international human rights obligations by ensuring that justice and equality before the law are guaranteed to all citizens, regardless of their religion or belief."

EU High Court rules against deportation of Christian converts to Iran, urges grant of asylum

Religious and human rights groups are applauding a European court decision that ruled governments must grant a fair evaluation of Christian converts before they are denied asylum and sent back to Iran.

See European Court decision at <http://bit.ly/1UetFCQ>

Mohabat News (13.04.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1Sx1Np2> - This week, the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights ruled in the case of F.G vs. Sweden that the Swedish government would be violating Articles 2 and 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which protect life and safeguard against inhumane treatment, if it deported the applicant.

"The lower chamber (of the court) underestimated the severe danger to this convert's life," Robert Clarke, director of European Advocacy for the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) International, told the Catholic News Agency (CNA).

"The Grand Chamber rightly noted that Christian converts are one of the most persecuted religious minorities in Iran. Moreover, the Islamic regime governing Iran has systematic mechanisms in place to identify all Christian converts – even those practicing in secret," Clarke added.

Roger Severino, director of the DeVos Center for Religion and Civil Society at The Heritage Foundation, said: "Asylum should be granted to individuals who are being persecuted and fear for their lives because of converting to a different religion.

"Iran's anti-conversion laws violate the fundamental human right to be able to choose your own religion and live out your beliefs, which includes the right to change your religion without the government threatening imprisonment or in the case of Iran, death for apostasy," he told CNA.

In 2009, an Iranian citizen reportedly applied for asylum and a resident permit in Sweden after suffering political persecution. Two years later, the Swedish Migration Office denied his request, which he appealed.

The lower chamber of the court ruled in January 2014 that Sweden's denial was "justified" because the applicant's life was reportedly not in jeopardy, since Iranian authorities were unaware of his conversion and he could keep his faith private.

The ADF, however, filed a brief on behalf of the Iranian citizen with the European Human Rights Court, arguing that the lower court's decision "violated his religious freedom" and that converts to Christianity face numerous threats in Iran.

The judgment states: "The applicant's conversion to Christianity is a criminal offence punishable by death in Iran. In addition to the risk of social persecution as a Christian, the applicant risks criminal prosecution for the crime of apostasy. The order for the applicant's deportation to Iran, where he could be tried under the above-mentioned criminal and procedural law, equates to a violation of principles deeply enshrined in the universal legal conscience."

Iran ranked as the ninth worst country for Christian persecution. It considers conversion from Islam a crime punishable by death.

Clarke warned that if a convert to Christianity is identified by the Iranian government, he or she is very likely "to suffer substantial harm, deprivation of liberty, assaults and continual harassment. In the worst case the individual could face severe ill-treatment or death."

In its 2014 religious freedom report, the U.S. State Department indicated that "Christians, particularly evangelicals, continued to experience disproportionate levels of arrests and high levels of harassment and surveillance."

The U.N. Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran also reported "that authorities held at least 49 Protestant Christians in custody, many for involvement in informal house churches," according to CNA.

Baha'i couples welcoming spring in prison

Iran Press Watch (15.03.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1YrLhu5> - In the final days of the current year, in which Iranian families are preparing to welcome the New Year*, a Baha'i couple, Payman Kooshakbaghi and Azita Rafizadeh were arrested and sent to prison to start their long sentences.

There are four Baha'i couples among political prisoners and prisoners of conscience. This report is an attempt to introduce them and to bring to light how they are welcoming the New Year far from each other and from their children.

On Sunday the 28th of February, Payman Kooshakbaghi, a Baha'i citizen, in the company of his son Basheer, went to Evin Prison to visit his wife. Before reaching the visiting room, he was arrested by three plain clothes officers and transferred to prison to start a five year sentence.

On the issue of his arrest, one of Mr. Kooshakbaghi's relatives told Radio Zamaneh, "Payman was arrested without prior notice or summons. They did not even allow him to properly bid farewell to his wife. Officers separated him from his son, and without proper attire they took him to an unknown location. Previously, on numerous occasions after the imprisonment of his wife Azita, in November 2015, Payman contacted the Deputy Prosecutor and the Head of the Office of Enforcement, requesting to be notified prior to his arrest. This request was due to the psychological condition as well as the young age of his son, and because he had no one to look after him during his sentence. If notified earlier, that would have enabled him to prepare his son for the absent of both parents. The Deputy Prosecutor assured him that at this moment they had nothing to do with him, but on Sunday unexpectedly in presence of his son and before entering the visiting room he was arrested."

Payman Kooshakbaghi, and his wife Azita Rafizadeh were arrested in June 2011 because they were working with and cooperating with the Baha'i Institute of Higher Education (BIHE). The couple, who studied in the same university after graduation in Computer Engineering, began to teach Baha'i students who had been denied an education online.

Azita Rafizadeh went to India to continue her education; after she was successfully awarded Master's Degree in Computer Science, she returned to Iran. In connection with the trial of these two Baha'is, a reliable source told Radio Zamaneh "Payman and Azita were summoned to the Revolutionary Court of Tehran, and were asked to sign a document stating that they would not work with BIHE any more. After doing so their case would be considered closed. On denying the request, Azita in June 2014 and Payman in May 2015, in the 28th branch of the Revolutionary Court under the presiding Judge

Moghiseh, they were sentenced to four years and five years of imprisonment respectively.

They were accused of membership in the "misguided" and illegal Baha'i group with the (supposed) aim of rising against the security of the country, and of being active in a Baha'i educational institution. After receiving her second summons, Azita, on 24 October 2015, presented herself to Evin prison to begin her four year sentence.

Another Baha'i couple who are in prison in Iran are Adel Naiemi and Elham Farahani. Naiemi was sentenced to 11 years, and his wife to four years of imprisonment. These two Baha'is are in Raja'i Shahr Prison and the women's section of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience in Evin Prison respectively.

Adel has endured more than three years and his wife more than two years of their sentences, while their son Shamim is enduring a sentence of three years with his father in the same prison.

For more information about the condition of this couple read more at the following site: [Baha'i Couples Spend Valentine's Day in Prison](#)

Iman Rashidi, Shabnam Mottahed, Fariborz Baghi and Nategheh Naiemi are other Baha'i couples who are behind bars in Yazd prison.

The imprisonment of these two couples is connected with the previous trial and sentencing of 20 Baha'i citizens in the city of Yazd. On 31 July 2012, twenty Baha'is were arrested collectively in the cities of Yazd, Kerman and Arak. After three weeks they were released on bail. In September 2013, the Islamic Revolutionary Court sentenced these Baha'i citizens to from one to four years of prison on charges of being members of secret (Baha'i) institutions and of rising against national security.

From the month of February 2015, these convicted Baha'is – including this couple – were summoned one by one to assume their sentences.

Iman Rashidi and his wife Shabnam Mottahed were summoned to Yazd prison on the 19th of March 2015 to undertake their sentences.

The beginning of their sentences coincided with busy days of preparation for the Persian New Year, and thus has not been covered by any news media.

These two Baha'is have been in Yazd prison for more than eleven months. Iman has been sentenced to three and half years and Shabnam to two years of imprisonment. This young couple do not have any children.

Fariborz Baghi is another Baha'i who was convicted by the Revolutionary Court of Yazd. He started his sentence on the 7th of March 2015. Fariborz was sentenced to two years imprisonment; his wife Nategheh Naiemi received a one year suspended sentence.

Fariborz, in a published open letter addressing the judges of the Revolutionary Court, indicated that his sentence and that of his wife were unjust; demanded that the Court annul its decision: "... when the Islamic Revolution succeeded in 1357, I was a 14 year old youth; being an excellent student I decided to continue my studies to become a medical doctor. To follow my dream I participated in and became successful in passing the entrance exam of the "high school attached to Shiraz University". I supposed I would continue my studies after high school in the same university without needing to attempt the National University Entrance exam, but after the revolution, the wave of opposition and discrimination against Baha'is prevented me from receiving a high school certificate. I lost my hope of studying at any university. My father's possessions were confiscated;

my brother-in-law was arrested and sentenced to death. These happened along with all the other horrifying incidents with which my family was struggling for years. The authorities came after me and my family. During those years an excellent opportunity presented itself for me to study in Canada, but due to my adherence to my religion's doctrine and because of my love for Iran and Iranians I decided not to pursue the path of moving to another country. I accepted the insults, deprivation and belittling rather than have material comfort. Finally I started a business of my own."

This imprisoned Baha'i, in response to one of the accusations levelled against him – organising secret (Baha'i) institutions and rising against national security – in the same letter indicated: "the assertion of secret institutions brings to mind a very dangerous and negative connotation which is worrisome. When looking carefully at the nature and the mode of operation of these institutions from a religious angle, these institutions activities are related to helping the needy, settling family misunderstanding, preventing divorce, financial affairs and even Baha'i children's education ... bearing this in mind, even if it is organised and conducted in secret, it cannot be a threat to the country's security."

At the end of his letter, Fariborz Baghi addressed the judges of his case, saying: "Respected judges, now I am a fifty year old man with many unfulfilled dreams which are still fresh in my mind, but to betray my country or even to act against it has never crossed my mind for a single moment."

The publication of this letter online and in social media did not show any effect on his sentence – rather, it aggravated the conditions of Fariborz Baghi's sentence. While he was still in prison the same Revolutionary Court added two more years to his sentence, accusing him of agitating public opinion.

Fariborz's wife, Nategheh Naiemi, after being summoned on 6th of October 2015 along with another Baha'i, A'zam Mottahari, they presented themselves to Yazd prison to complete their sentences.

This couple have a son and a daughter. Leva, their daughter was married without her father being able to attend her wedding, as the Yazd prison authority refused to release him for few hours to attend his daughter's wedding.

Soroush Shadabi arrested in Karaj

Iran Press Watch (15.03.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1SdqA6J> - Soroush Shadabi, a Baha'i from Karaj, near Tehran, was arrested on March 11, and his business was shut down. This follows the arrest of three young Baha'is who had been prevented from pursuing higher education, on March 8, in Tehran and Karaj; the new arrest is assumed to be related.

According to the reports from the NO to the Harassment and Imprisonment of Baha'is in Iran Campaign, three young Baha'i residents of Tehran and Karaj were arrested separately on March 8, 2016, and were transferred to an unknown location after their homes were searched.

Previously, in 2014, these three Baha'is had passed the Nationwide University Entrance Exam, but had been denied higher education due to their religious beliefs and a false charge of having an "insufficient file".

After this incident they filed a complaint. In their petition to the "Bureau of Administration" court, they referred to items 19, 22, and 3 of the Iranian Constitution, and appealed for their right to pursue higher education; however, their petition was denied.

Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran - Ethnic and Religious Minority Rights

[View report here](#)

UN (10.03.2016) – The report was submitted to the Human Rights Council pursuant to resolution 28/21. The report communicates developments in the human rights situation of the Islamic Republic of Iran that have transpired since the submission of the Special Rapporteur report to the 70th session of the General Assembly in October 2015.

The present report outlines the Special Rapporteur's activities since the renewal of his mandate by the Human Rights Council during its 28th session, examines ongoing issues, and presents some of the most recent and pressing developments in the country's human rights situation. Although the report is not exhaustive, it provides a picture of the prevailing situation as observed in the preponderance of reports submitted to and examined by the Special Rapporteur. It is envisaged that a number of important issues not covered in the present report will be addressed in the Special Rapporteur's future reports to the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council.

"Ethnic and Religious Minority Rights"

57. The Special Rapporteur expresses serious concern at the continuing systematic discrimination, harassment, and targeting that adherents of the Baha'i faith continue to face in the country. In January 2016, a revolutionary court in Golestan province reportedly sentenced 24 Baha'is to a total of 193 years in prison in connection with the peaceful exercise of their faith.[79] On the morning of 15 November 2015, Intelligence Ministry agents reportedly arrested 20 Baha'is in Tehran, Isfahan and Mashhad. Authorities failed to provide information about the charges against these individuals, and their families were not informed of their whereabouts for several days. At least 80 Baha'is were reportedly detained as of 31 December 2015 in connection with the peaceful exercise of their faith.[80] In its response, the Government asserts that "followers of the Bahai cult enjoy citizen rights" pursuant to the country's laws and that allegations presented to the contrary in the report were "baseless."

58. In addition to arbitrary arrests, detentions and prosecutions of Baha'is, the Special Rapporteur continues to receive troubling reports that Iranian authorities continue to pursue activities that economically deprive Baha'is of their right to work, reportedly in line with a 1991 directive issued by the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution.[81] These policies include restrictions on types of businesses and jobs Baha'i citizens can have, closing down Baha'i-owned businesses, pressure on business owners to dismiss Baha'i employees, and seizures of businesses and property. On 15 November 2015, the Bureau of Public Places in the province of Mazandaran shut down 23 businesses belonging to Baha'is, including in the cities of Sari, Ghaem Shahr, Tonekabon and Babolsar. Actions to close Bahai-owned businesses appeared to follow their voluntary closure by owners in observance of their religious holiday the day before. In its response, the Government alleges that Bahais in Iran live under "normal" conditions despite "the history of their formation cooperation [sic] with the Shah[']s regime and their involvement in the suppression of people and their role in the management of the dreaded intelligence service SAVAK." The Government also asserts that the shutdown of several Bahai-owned businesses in Mazandaran province was related to "administrative issues."

59. Discrimination against the Baha'i community in Iran is legally sanctioned by a lack of constitutional recognition of the faith and the absence of legal protections for its adherents. This situation is further perpetuated by open attacks on the community by state officials or individuals close to the state. On 16 October 2015, for example, the Deputy of the Parliament's National Security Commission, Mr. Haghigharpour, called the Baha'i faith a wayward sect created by Britain, and compared Baha'is to Wahabbis whom he said sought to increase tensions between Shias and Sunnis in the region.[82] In its response, the Government notes that "[g]iven the history of century-old cooperation between the Bahai sect and the Shah['s] regime and SAVAK, historical facts could not be overlooked as nobody can stop criticizing Nazism in Germany."

60. The Special Rapporteur also expresses his concern at the treatment of Iranian Christians from Muslim backgrounds, who continue to face arbitrary arrest, harassment and detention despite the fact that article 12 of the Iranian constitution recognises and protects adherents of the Christian faith. The Special Rapporteur notes that many of these individuals are often accused of acting against the national security or "propaganda against the state," and that under Iranian law, individuals, including Christians of Muslim backgrounds, can be prosecuted for the crime of apostasy. Dozens were reportedly detained in Iranian prisons as of January 2016, many for involvement in informal house churches. The Special Rapporteur received reports in December 2015 that an allegedly Shia "religious group" in the capital Tehran had confiscated land belonging to an Assyrian Chaldean church. In an interview with *Shargh* newspaper, the head of the church also complained of broader legal discrimination against Iran's religious minorities, including in the country's civil code.[83] In its response, the Government notes that the operation of house churches is unlawful because they have not acquired the necessary permits from the authorities, that the establishment of house churches is "unnecessary" because there are more than "20 active, half-active and historical churches" in Iran, and Christians have not "requested permission to build new churches" in the country. The Government also characterized the situation regarding the Assyrian Chaldean church as "a dispute between two Iranian citizens."

61. In a positive development, news outlets reported in September 2015 that President Rouhani appointed a Sunni Kurd, Dr. Saleh Adibi, as Ambassador to Vietnam and Cambodia. Mr. Adibi is believed to be the first Iranian Sunni to be appointed as permanent representative since the founding of the Islamic Republic.[84] Iran's Sunnis, which constitute the largest religious minority in the country, have long complained that Iranian authorities do not appoint or employ them in high ranking government positions such as cabinet-level ministers or governors. They have also raised concerns regarding reported restrictions on the construction of Sunni mosques in Shia-majority areas, including the capital Tehran, and the execution or imminent execution of Sunni activists the government alleges were involved in terrorist-related activities. In its response, the Government notes there are more than 10,000 mosques and 3,000 religious schools for Sunnis in the country, that there is no need to build prayer halls for Sunnis in Tehran, and that pursuing policies that encourage Sunnis to have their own mosques or prayer halls is equivalent to "sow[s] the seeds of discord among Muslims." The Government also refutes the characterization that several Sunnis who have been executed or on death row are peaceful activists, and alleges they engaged in "violent acts and terror."

79 Information received by the Office of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran.

80 See report Annex.

81 <http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/TheBahaiQuestion.pdf>.

82 <http://icana.ir/Fa/News/286516>

83 http://www.radiofarda.com/content/f14_iran_church_christians/27458286.html

84 http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2015/09/150902_i03_iran_diplomat_sunni

Four Baha'is arrested

Sen's Daily (11.03.2016) - <https://sensday.wordpress.com> - On March 8, four Baha'is were arrested simultaneously in Tehran, Karaj and Sari. Their names are given as Tara Houshmand, Rouhiyyeh Safajou and Sarmad Shadabi, in Tehran and the nearby city of Karaj, and Behzad Dhabih in Sari. It is not known where they are being detained.

Tara Houshmand was arrested by security agents in her home in Tehran, which was searched. Her personal effects including a computer, a mobile phone and books were seized. She was one of a group of Baha'is excluded from education who responded to a claim made in 2014, by Mohammad Javad Larijani, Head of the Human Rights Council of the Judiciary, that Iranian authorities do not discriminate against Baha'is, and challenging the Baha'is excluded from education to send documentation. The Baha'i students took their documentation to the authorities as requested, thus exposing Mr. Larijani's lie.

Mr. Sarmad Shadabi was arrested at the Roudehen campus of the Islamic Free University, near Tehran. He was a signatory of a letter about the breaches of Bahais' civil rights, written to a Parliamentary Commission on Human Rights. An interview with him, about his expulsion from University, was cited on the BBC Persian service.

Rouhiyyeh Safajou was arrested by 8 security agents posing as workers from the gas supply company. When she opened the door to them, they entered and searched her home, and took her away. She is also a student excluded from education. She was one of a group of Baha'i students excluded from tertiary education who met with Ali Reza Mahjoub, a reformist Member of Parliament, to argue for the right of education.

No details are available on the arrest of Behzad Dhabih in Sari, but it appears to be unrelated to the arrest of the three students. Mr Dhabih, whose name was spelled Zabihi in a previous Iran Wire report, managed one of the three Bahai-run optometry businesses in Sari which were closed in November, 2015. At that time the Bureau of Public Places in the Province of Mazandaran shut down 23 businesses belonging to Bahais in the cities of Sari, Qa'em Shahr, Tenakbon and Babolsar.

Heavy sentences imposed on Baha'is of Gorgan, Gonbad-e Qabus and Minudasht

Iran Press Watch (26.01.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1PkHVam> - According to a report from the "NO to the Harassment and Imprisonment of Baha'is in Iran" Campaign, citing Baha'i News: 24 Baha'is have been sentenced to over 193 years of imprisonment in total by a court in Gorgan.

These are among the heaviest sentences issued in the past few years against Baha'i citizens.

The names of these citizens and the sentences issued against them are as follows:

Shayda Ghoddusi from Gorgan and Shahnam Jazbani from Minudasht have been sentenced to 11 years in prison.

Pooneh Sanaei, Farah Tebyanian, Parisa Shahidi, Behnam Hosni, Mona Amri Hesari, Mojdeh Zohouri, Parivash Shojaei, Tina Mohebati and Hana Aghighian from Gorgan, Bit

Hedayati, Vesagh Sanaei and Hana Koushkebaghi from Gonbad-e Qabus, and Navid Moalemi from Minudasht have been sentenced to 9 years in prison.

Roufia Pakzadan, Soudabeh Mehdinejad (Maveddat), Mitra Nouri, Shiva Rohani, Maryam Dehghan, Hooshmand Dehghan and Nazi Khalaji from Gorgan, Camelia Bideli and Shohreh Samimi from Minudasht have been sentenced to 6 years in prison.

According to informed sources, these sentences can be appealed. Nearly twenty Baha'is were arrested on Oct 17, 2012 in Gorgan and Gonbad-e Qabus in a wide crackdown on Baha'is in the region, and later released on bail on a temporary basis.

A Sunni activist arrested in Bukan

HRANA (24.01.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1QnZPIf> - Seyed Kaweh Seyedzadeh has been arrested in Bukan by the security forces and was taken to an unknown location.

According to the report of Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), the Bukani citizen, was arrested on Wednesday, 16th January, and after 8 days he has not been able to contact and his family are unaware of his whereabouts and charges.

A family member of Mr. Seyedzadeh said that he has been arrested associated with Sunni religious activities.

Kaweh Seyedzadeh, 29, married, already had a history of detention for 9 months on similar charges.

Saeed Abedini freed from Iranian prison after three years

The Christian Post (16.01.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1ZrCle1> - Pastor Saeed Abedini has been released from prison in Iran after more than three years in captivity for his Christian faith.

Abedini, a U.S. citizen who has attracted high-profile advocates for his release including President Obama and members of Congress, was released on Saturday along with three other detained Americans: Washington Post correspondent Jason Rezaian; former Marine Amir Hekmati, and Nosratollah Khosavi-Roodsari, The Washington Post reported. Senior U.S. administration officials also confirmed the release of the four prisoners, according to CNN.

Abedini's wife, Naghmeh, who has tirelessly campaigned for his release since his imprisonment, said in a statement, "This has been an answer to prayer. This is a critical time for me and my family. We look forward to Saeed's return and want to thank the millions of people who have stood with us in prayer during this most difficult time."

Pastor Greg Laurie of Harvest Christian Fellowship in California, who has publicly advocated and prayed for Abedini's release, posted on his Facebook Saturday: "American Pastor, Saeed Abedini along with the 3 other American prisoners have been released from Prison in Iran! This is an answered prayer! For years the hashtag has been #SaveSaeed Now, we can update it to #GodsavedSaeed"

The four Americans were released by Iran in exchange for at least six people imprisoned by the United States and also ahead of the nearing implementation of the July 2015 historic nuclear deal between Tehran and six world powers. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani had previously said that Abedini would not be released until 19 Iranian prisoners held in the U.S. are granted their freedom.

American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), the legal group representing Abedini's wife and family, noted that they first heard news that Saeed was released from his prison cell to Iran's Central Intelligence agency late Friday night. It was not until Saturday morning that they were able to confirm that the pastor was really freed.

"This is a major victory. We are incredibly grateful to the more than 1.1 million people who have joined us in fighting across the globe for Pastor Saeed's freedom," said Jay Sekulow, chief counsel of ACLJ, in a statement.

"We're delighted this day has finally arrived," Sekulow continued. "We have worked and prayed that this day would finally arrive. And now, Pastor Saeed can return home."

Pastor Saeed Abedini of Boise, Idaho, had served over three years of an eight year sentence in Iran for the supposed crime of endangering national security, but in reality it was because of his Christian faith. Abedini is a Muslim convert to Christianity and was in Iran working on building an orphanage when he was suddenly arrested. He had endured physical, emotional and psychological abuse during his imprisonment, according to his family, but resolutely stated that he would not renounce his Christian faith to escape punishment.

Naghmeh Abedini often shared that their two young children, aged 9 and 5, have missed their father terribly and it was difficult as a mother to endure her children's pain. With news that Saeed has indeed been released, the family will finally be reunited after years apart.

"We are grateful for the release of Pastor Saeed. The prayers of the Body of Christ all over the world have been answered," reflected Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission. "This day of celebration should remind us to pray and work all the more for the multitudes still persecuted for their faith all over the world, including in Iran. We hope and long for the day when Iran, and nations like it, are free from those who wish to enslave the conscience at the point of a sword."

Iranian Christian prisoner temporarily released from prison

Maysam Hojati, a Christian convert residing in Esfahan, was temporarily released from prison after 15 days, during which he endured solitary confinement and lengthy interrogation sessions. He had been arrested a couple of days before Christmas in his parental home.

Mohabat News (07.01.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1ZmcoWO> - Maysam Hojati, a young Christian man, was temporarily released from prison on January 6, 2016 after posting a bail.

Mr. Hojati who is 34 years old, was also known as Soroush among his friends.

Mr. Hojati had been arrested just two days before Christmas, on December 23, 2015, when four plain-cloths security authorities raided his parental home in Esfahan.

Authorities who identified themselves as intelligence officers forced their way in the house and beat Mr. Hojati in the presence of his parents.

Plain-clothed authorities searched the house thoroughly and confiscated Mr. Hojati's personal belongings including a few Bibles, hymn books, Christian articles, personal computer and cellphone. At the end they took down Hojati's Christmas tree.

Accusation and Lengthy Interrogations

After Mr. Hojati's arrest, his parents did everything in their power to find out about his whereabouts and health with no success.

Authorities blindfolded Mr. Hojati and transferred him to an unknown location immediately. He was put in solitary confinement in a five square meter cell with no windows for 12 days. During that time he was interrogated for 10 to 12 hours a day. Interrogators threatened him and beat him every time he refused to give them the answers they wanted.

The questions they asked him were mostly related to his relationship with foreign churches and their leaders, how they conducted house-church services, and distributed Bibles. Finally, they asked Mr. Hojati to sign a disclaimer.

A source close to the situation told Mohabat News that two days before his release, Mr. Hojati was taken to the intelligence ward of Esfahan prison known as A-T.

Someone called Mr. Hojati's parents at 9am on Wednesday January 6, and asked them to go to the Revolutionary Court of Esfahan to find out about the fate of their son.

In the court Mr. Hojati was officially charged and a ruling was issued for him to post a bail for his temporary release. Mr. Hojati posted a one billion Rial (approximately 35 thousand USD) bail before for his release.

Hojati was charged with being baptized as a Muslim-born (apostasy), evangelism, distributing Bibles, and partaking in house-church planting.

With this heavy bail posted, Hojati should wait to be summoned to court for his hearing.

Iranian Christians Pay a Heavy Price for their Faith

Today many Iranian Christians are serving time in prison for their faith. Iranian Christians, especially Farsi-speaking Christians, have been facing the threat of imprisonment for years for sharing and practicing their faith. Islamic regime of Iran considers gathering of Christians in their home for worship, a threat to Iran's national security.

Almost all Farsi-speaking churches are closed in Tehran and other cities. Islamic authorities in Iran strive to defame evangelical Christians by falsely accusing them and to tell Iranians that evangelical Christianity is a corrupt form of Christianity, thus not approved by the government. Therefore, Iran's judicial and intelligence system deem Christian converts a threat to national security, accusing Christians, especially Farsi-speaking Christians, of arbitrary security and political charges in order to crack down on them.

Foad Khanjani released at the end of his sentence

Iran Press Watch (05.01.2016) - <http://bit.ly/20oZQ3m> - The Baha'i Foad Khanjani has been released from Rajai Shahr prison, as he had served his entire sentence. According to the report of Human Rights Activists News Agency in Iran (HRANA), Foad Khanjani was released from Rajai Shahr prison at the end of his four-year sentence, on 14th December, 2015.

Foad Khanjani was arrested on 27th April, 2010, and was released on bail after a few days. Later, he was sentenced to 4 years in prison by Judge Moghiseh of the 28th branch of the Revolutionary Court. The same sentence was again confirmed by the 54th Branch of the appeals court, by Judge Movahed.

Mr. Khanjani began his sentence in Evin Prison on January 17, 2012¹, but on August 5 of the same year, without any official exile warrant, he was exiled to Rajai Shahr prison in Karaj.

Mr. Khanjani had been previously denied higher education, and was even expelled from his work at the Industrial Management Institute of Isfahan, because of his Baha'i religious beliefs.

Foad Khanjani's father, Aladdin Khanjani, was also arrested following the election protests. Mr. Khanjani's grandfather Jamaloddin Khanjani is one of the seven Yaran ("Friends" of Iran – Bahai national facilitators), who is now serving a prison sentence in Rajai Shahr prison in Karaj. Mr. Khanjani's sister, Leva Khanjani, was also previously prosecuted, and imprisoned in Evin prison.

Persecution of Christian converts continues under Rouhani

IranHumanRights.org (04.01.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1KCsnYL> - Despite President Hassan Rouhani's pledges during his election campaign in 2013 that "All ethnicities, all religions, even religious minorities, must feel justice," the targeting of Christian converts for state persecution and prosecution has continued unabated under his administration.

Most recently, two days before Christmas, officials from the Administration's Intelligence Ministry arrested a Christian convert in Isfahan, according to the Alliance of Iranian Churches known as Hamgam, carting him and an assortment of his personal belongings off to an undisclosed location.

The arrest of leaders of minority faiths in Iran, especially those that engage in proselytizing, and the systematic discrimination of members of such faith in all walks of life, have led the UN Secretary-General and the UN Special Rapporteur for Iran to consistently cite the denial of freedom of religion as a major human rights violation in Iran.

"Agents of the Intelligence Ministry in Isfahan entered the home of Meysam Hojati on December 23, 2015, scolded him in front of his parents, slapped him on the face, searched his home and took personal belongings including his computer, phone, Holy Book and Christian pamphlets," Mansour Borji, a spokesperson for the Alliance told the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran.

"They took him away handcuffed and blindfolded. The agents even took the Christmas tree. That's really strange. Why would they care about a Christmas tree?" he added.

Borji, who lives in the UK, told the Campaign that since Hojati's arrest, his family has been unable to establish where he is being held.

Hojati was previously arrested in March 2012 along with a group of other Christian converts in Isfahan and accused of proselytizing in home-based churches, the spokesperson for the Alliance of Iranian Churches said.

Home churches are unofficial and unlicensed places of Christian worship in people's private homes. They have steadily grown in number in Iran due to the authorities refusal to license new houses of worship.

The Christians were released on bail two months later.

Borji noted that in the past ten years it has become common for security agents to arrest Christian converts in various cities around Christmas. "By making these arrests around this time the government hopes to intimidate converts by threatening them with heavy punishments... so that they would either leave the country or stop their [religious] activities."

A year before, on December 26, 2014, Pastor Victor Bet Tamraz, a former leader of the Tehran Pentecostal Assyrian Church, along with two converts, were arrested in Tehran. He was also released on bail after two months in detention in Evin Prison.
