

IRAN: No information on the condition of the Christian convert Mohammad Ali Torabi in Iran

After 2 weeks from his arrest, despite the assurances of the security forces that he would be released in 5 days, there is no information of the whereabouts and the condition of Mohammad Ali Torabi. Moreover, the family of this newly converted Christian, due to security fears, has failed to retain a lawyer in the city of Dezful.

Mohabat News (23.10.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2xjtggV> – After 2 weeks from the arrest of Mohammad Ali Torabi, one of the newly converted Christians in the South Western city of Dezful, his family has failed to locate his whereabouts and to be informed of the charges against him from the judicial authorities.

Mohammad Ali Torabi, 39 years old, was arrested on Tuesday October 10, 2017 at his work place in the city of Dezful by the security forces and taken to an undisclosed location belonging to the Ministry of Information of the city of Ahwaz.

Although his exact whereabouts is unknown, it is assumed that he is being kept in an old military barrack located in an area known as “Chahar Shir”, which connects to the local airport facility. This facility belongs to the intelligence forces of the Sepah and it is said that other detainees have been taken to the solitary cells in this facility.

Informed sources have reported that Mr. Torabi had been promised that he would be released after 5 days once his interrogation is over, but his detention has been extended for unknown reasons.

Currently, after 2 weeks of detention, he was given permission once to contact his family.

Mr. Torabi's family were unable to find a lawyer in the city of Dezful. No lawyer was willing to accept his case. Therefore his family had to travel to Ahwaz, the Capital of the province in order to retain a lawyer for Mr. Torabi.

The family of Mr. Torabi took the lawyer's acceptance letter to the office of the Ministry of Information last Thursday, but they were told to return on Saturday for formal notification of the government about his legal representation.

Sources close to Mr. Torabi's family say that his arrest are due to his activities in promoting Christianity.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has banned Farsi speaking churches from operating in Iran since 2012. As a result, newly converted Christians in Iran are forced into house-churches, which are illegal in Iran.

From the point of view of the government and other security establishments these gatherings are considered illegal and often they are subjected to home invasions by the security forces. The leaders and members of these house churches are often arrested and charged with inciting anti-government and "national security" activities such as the establishment of house churches and the promotion of Christianity.

Recently, Benjamin Netanyahu, the Prime Minister of Israel in one of his speeches given to the Christian media accused Iran of gross violation of the human rights of Christians in Iran. Mr. Netanyahu accused some of the world leaders of compromise and intentional negligence of this matter for the sake of better relations with the leaders of Iran. He mentioned the difficult condition of the Christian minority in Iran and added that Christians in Iran are persecuted mercilessly. Pastors are imprisoned without cause and Iranian Christians are brutally tortured and persecuted for their religious

beliefs.

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IRAN: Another Christian convert arrested in south-western Iran

Iranian security authorities summoned a Christian convert in the south-western city of Dezful and arrested him in the Ministry of Intelligence office.

Mohabat News (23.10.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2y1GL3a> – Another member of the Payam-e Aramesh (Message of Peace) house church in Dezful, Abdol-Ali Pourmand (Elyas) was arrested on October 19, 2017 and transferred to Ahwaz.

Knowledgeable sources told Mohabat News that the security

authorities raided Mr. Pourmand's house when he was working on his farm. Plain-clothes security authorities searched his house thoroughly in his absence and confiscated a few Bibles and Christian CDs.

Later, Mr. Pourmand received a call from the Ministry of Intelligence. He was summoned to their office in Dezful. He went to the ministry's office and was arrested on the spot.

Three days after his arrest, on October 21, 2017, Mr. Pourmand was allowed to make a short phone call to his family. During the call he told his family that he is told he will not be held there for long.

Mr. Pourmand has been married for two months and is currently separated from his new bride.

Three other Christians have been arrested in Dezful recently. Mohabat News has obtained confirmed reports of them being beaten in prison and threatened that if they don't renounce their faith in Christ and turn away from their Christian faith they will be forced to leave the country or be beaten to death.

Persecution of Christians in the south-western province of Khuzestan has intensified in the last several weeks, especially in the city of Dezful.

Another member of the Payam-e Aramesh (Message of Peace) house church, Mohammad Ali Torabi, also known as Davoud, had also been arrested at his work place on October 10, 2017. He was transferred to Ahwaz immediately after his arrest. His family was also told that he will be released soon, but he has not yet been released.

The Islamic regime of Iran has been using different methods, including harassment, terror, arrest and heavy sentences to persecute Christians over the last three and a half decades, especially Farsi speaking Christians in the country. Time and

time again International Human Rights and Religious

Watchdog organizations have condemned the Islamic regime for its mistreatment of Christians, but they deny all reports of Christian persecution.

Despite Iranian government's extensive programs for spreading Shi'ite Islam and punishing conversion to other religions by death, embrace of Christianity among Iranians citizens has been on the rise across the country.

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**RUSSIA/EUROPEAN COURT:
Controversial dissolution of
the Russian Orthodox Free**

Church

The Russian Orthodox Free Church argues the authorities take sides with the official Orthodox Church (Application no. 32895/13).

HRWF (23.10.2017) – In the case Bryansk-Tula Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Free Church against Russia lodged on 19 April 2013, the European Court addressed a number of questions to the parties in May of this year. The case concerns the decision of the Russian Supreme Court to dissolve the church for allegedly failing to bring its founding documents into conformity with The Religious Act of 1997. The applicant complained under Article 9 and 11 of the Convention, taken on their own and in conjunction with Article 14, about its dissolution which was prompted, in its submission, by the Russian authorities' determination to eradicate any competition with the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Excerpt of the Communication of the European Court on 15 May 2017

“On 28 August 1995 the applicant church was officially registered as a religious association having legal-entity status under the RSFSR Religions Act of 25 October 1990.

On 1 October 1997 a new Religions Act entered into force. It required all religious associations that had previously been granted legal-entity status to bring their articles of association into conformity with the Act and obtain re-registration from the competent Justice Department (section 27(4)). The time-limit for doing so expired on 31 December 2000.

In 2004, the Ministry of Justice brought an action for the dissolution of the applicant church, claiming that it had failed, firstly, to submit information demonstrating

continuity of its operation and, secondly, to secure re-registration under the new Religions Act.

On 17 May 2004 the Trubchevskiy District Court in the Bryansk Region rejected the claim. It held that the Ministry of Justice did not produce any evidence showing that the applicant church had committed any repetitive or gross breaches of the legislation or had wound up its operations. In the court's view, its articles of association did not contain any provisions incompatible with the effective revision of the Religions Act. It further referred to the Constitutional Court's ruling of 7 February 2002 to the effect that the dissolution was not an automatic sanction for failure to secure re-registration in the absence of evidence that the religious organisation had ceased its operations or had engaged in unlawful activities.

The Ministry of Justice did not appeal against the judgment. Nevertheless, the applicant church inquired the Ministry about the conditions and procedure for obtaining re-registration. By letter of 20 September 2004, the Ministry replied that re-registration was no longer possible since the time-limit had expired on 31 December 2000.

On 30 June 2010 the Ministry of Justice informed the applicant church that it had studied its file and uncovered a number of irregularities, such as a failure to bring its founding documents into conformity with the Religions Act, a failure to specify "the aims, purposes and main forms of operations" of the religious organisation, the procedure for electing the Diocesan Assembly and Council and the rights and obligations of parishioners, as well as to change its name from "Russian Orthodox Free Church" to "Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church" to reflect the change in the name of the affiliated church that occurred in 1998. The Ministry listed further failings, including non-inclusion in the State Register of Legal Entities, non-submission of an authority form for the bishop Mr Nonchin, failure to submit annual reports on the

continuation of operations and the closing down of local parishes of the Bryansk and Tula region.

The applicant organisation unsuccessfully sought to challenge the Ministry's demands before a court.

On 24 June 2011 the bishop submitted a proof of his appointment to the Ministry of Justice and asked it to provide a copy of the founding documents from their archives because the originals had been misplaced.

By letter of 8 August 2011, the Ministry replied that the appointment letter had not been properly certified and that the provision of copies of the founding documents was outside the Ministry's mandate.

The Ministry brought a new action for the dissolution of the applicant church on the ground that it had committed gross and repetitive breaches of the laws it had outlined in its warning letter of 30 June 2010.

The applicant organisation submitted in its defence that all the irregularities could be remedied by way of registering amendments to the founding documents. However, it could not apply for registration of amendments because the procedure required the presentation of the founding documents or their certified copies which it did not have.

On 4 July 2012 the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation allowed the Ministry's action for the dissolution. It held that the applicant church had failed to bring its founding documents into conformity with the law and that there was "no credible evidence that the Ministry of Justice had prevented it from obtaining re-registration". The Supreme Court restated the grounds contained in the Ministry's letter of 30 June 2010 and declared them to amount to "gross and repetitive" violations of the law which warranted its dissolution.

On 23 October 2012 the Appeals Panel of the Supreme Court

upheld that judgment.”

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RUSSIA/EUROPEAN COURT: “Beware: Sects” campaign in the dock at the European Court

Hare Krishna accused the public authorities of dissemination of false information about their movement (Application no. 37477/11)

HRWF (23.10.2017) – Earlier this year, the European Court addressed a number of questions to the parties in the case “Centralised Religious Organisation Centre of Krishna Consciousness Societies in Russia and Mikhail Aleksandrovich

FROLOV against Russia" (Application no. 37477/11) lodged on 29 May 2011.

The Krishna Centre complained under Article 9 of the Convention regarding a public campaign targeting and labelling them as a "totalitarian sect" and tarnishing their religious beliefs, presenting followers of the Krishna movement as inferior or disabled people and inciting religious hatred and enmity.

The Krishna Centre accused public authorities of disseminating false information about their movement in the form of a "Beware of Sects" project. The project provided guidelines to local secondary schools concerning the Krishna movement as well as Jehovah Witnesses, Mormons, Scientology and others.

Excerpt of the Communication of the European Court on 23 January 2017

On 23 September 2008 the first applicant (the Krishna Centre) lodged a complaint with the St Petersburg Office of the Federal Agency of Mass Communications ("the Agency"), alleging that there was an adverse public campaign and that it fell within the purview of anti-extremist legislation, because it incited enmity and hatred on the grounds of religious belief. The Agency submitted the impugned material to a private company providing expert advice, and sought a report from it as to whether that material could be perceived as inciting racial, national or religious hatred or enmity. The company's report concluded that the material could not be perceived in that manner. On 28 January 2009 an official of the Agency dismissed the complaint, with reference to the above report. On 29 April 2009 a complaint against that dismissal, lodged by the first applicant with a higher authority within the same Agency, was dismissed. The first applicant sought judicial review of the decisions of 28 January and 29 April 2009 under the Code of Civil Procedure. By a judgment of 10 November 2009 the Taganskiy District Court of Moscow dismissed the judicial

review challenge. On 30 November 2009 the Moscow City Court upheld the judgment.

As an example to indicate the existence of an adverse public campaign, the first applicant refers to the "Beware: Sects!" project which was carried out in 2008 in the Ulyanovsk Region. Information about the project was published on the website of the regional administration, specifying that the main goal of the project was to prevent the negative activities of destructive religious groups.

As part of the project's activities, at the regional government's request, staff members of Ulyanovsk State University compiled "Be vigilant: Sects!" guidelines which concerned the Krishna movement, as well as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Scientology, and others. As regards krishnaite, the document read:

"On the streets of our towns you can see colourful groups of people wearing white and yellow clothing and chanting hymns ... You should know that those are members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, a totalitarian religious organisation ...

Their goals are frequently commercial, to procure money by any means. They beg for money, sell their literature; in some countries, they have been caught stealing or selling drugs. All income is submitted to the leaders of the sect ... Even a brief overview of their teachings brings us to the conclusion that such religious teaching is extremely destructive to our society. It is not connected to our people, genetically, historically or geographically. It is a specific spiritual culture of the East. Psychological manipulation and zombification constitute a serious threat to our future."

These guidelines were distributed to the teaching staff of local secondary schools.

The first applicant lodged a non-criminal complaint with the Prosecutor General's Office under the Prosecutors' Service Act. The complaint was then forwarded to the regional prosecutor's office for examination. On 29 December 2008 the regional prosecutor's office replied that: the public authorities had acted within their remit in relation to the "Beware: Sects!" project and guidelines; the primary objective of the project was to discuss acute issues relating to interfaith dialogue, and build the best possible framework for the relationship between the State and religious organisations; it remained open to the first applicant to institute civil proceedings, if they considered that the impugned guidelines impinged upon their rights or freedoms.

The first applicant's renewed complaints to a higher authority were dismissed on 26 March and 6 June 2009 by, among others, the Prosecutor General's Office.

The first applicant sought judicial review of those administrative decisions under the Code of Civil Procedure.

By a judgment of 27 October 2010 the Tverskoy District Court of Moscow dismissed the first applicant's complaint, finding that the relevant decisions had been issued by a competent authority acting within its remit, and had disclosed the absence of sufficient grounds for action on the part of the prosecution service. On 16 March 2011 the Moscow City Court upheld the judgment.

Second applicant

The second applicant, Aleksandrovich Frolov, complained that he was prohibited from holding a public meeting to disseminate information about their values. The municipality ruled that the meeting ran counter to section 7 of the Public Events Act and the District Court dismissed the case.

Both applicants complain of Article 9 violations of the Convention. The Court questions whether the applicants

exhausted domestic remedies, if they have standing, and if the interference with the public meeting was lawful under Russian law at the time.

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ALGERIA: ‘Unjust law’ still denying churches their ‘right to worship’

World Watch Monitor (19.10.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2hSDh7Z> – Churches in northern Algeria continue to clash with the authorities over permission to hold services in non-religious buildings.

Authorities in Tizi Ouzou province – 100km east of the capital, Algiers – have said a 2006 law that regulates non-Muslim worship is breached by churches meeting in houses meant

only for accommodation or commercial purposes.

But the churches have cited the 2016 constitution, which states that religious freedom is guaranteed if in compliance with the law. They have said that they are complying with the law because of their formal affiliation with the Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA), which has been officially recognised by the government since 1974 and is accredited with both the ministry of the interior and the local government.

One of the churches, in the commune of Ait Bouadou, uses a house that was leased on behalf of the EPA. It opened in December 2015 and, two months later, following complaints from locals, was ordered to close. In September the church received a letter from the mayor, again stating that the church is “not permitted” and demanding its closure because the house was intended initially for “dwelling or commercial use”.

The church of more than 200 people continues to meet while its leader seeks legal advice.

A second church, in the centre of Tizi Ouzou, was summoned by the authorities on 18 October and asked to “comply with the provisions of the 2006 law”. The pastor of the 100-strong church in Boghni, which has been active “for several years”, said it was “explained to the chief of the *daira* [local government] that we are a community affiliated to the EPA and that we meet in accordance with the law”.

The church has submitted documents to the authorities, showing its affiliation to the EPA, and continues to meet.

Earlier in 2017 summonses were issued to churches in Ait Djima and Maatkas, also in Tizi Ouzou.

In April 2016 World Watch Monitor reported that [Algerian churches faced intimidation and harassment](#) because of the 2006 law, including the EPA-affiliated churches in Maatkas and Ait Djima.

At the time, a pastor of a Protestant church in the capital, Algiers, said the 2006 law is used as a tool of persecution by the authorities. "It is an unjust law against Christians, who are denied their right to worship and the opportunity to share the Gospel freely," Rev. Haddad said, adding that "the situation of Christians in Algeria will not improve until the outright law, which is no longer justified, is repealed".

Because of the long-standing difficulty faced by Algerian churches, it has become standard practice to rent premises and inform the local authorities they have done so. Despite this, the authorities fail to respond to almost all applications from churches, including EPA affiliates.

Several Christians have received fines and suspended prison sentences under the 2006 law, including Christian teacher Habiba Kouider, who was charged in 2008 for the illegal possession of bibles.

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IRAQ/SYRIA: Four members of the U.S. Congress call to bypass U.N. and help Iraqi Christians and Yazidis directly

HRWF (20.10.2017) – Four House members are pressing the top official of the U.S. Agency for International Development to bypass the United Nations and channel funds intended to help Christians and Yazidis in Iraq directly to Catholic charities and others helping them on the ground. On 12 October, they addressed a letter to Mark Green, Administrator of the US Agency International Development in Washington DC as follows:

Dear Administrator Green,

As ISIS is driven from Iraq, the need for reconstructing the homes and cities of Christians, Yezidis, and other ethnic and religious minorities in the Nineveh Plain has reached a point of existential urgency. This area of Northern Iraq is the ancestral homeland of ancient faith traditions against which ISIS committed genocide. Returning Christians, Yezidis and others to their rightful place will reknit the once-rich tapestry of pluralism and diversity that existed in the region – an effort that is essential to any hope of durable stability in Iraq and the region.

It is our understanding that the State Department has gravitated toward channeling humanitarian, stabilization, and recovery funds to the United Nations to handle such a dynamic. The United Nations often provides vital coordination in emergencies. But a combined strategy of re-securization,

revitalization, and repatriation – within a fast narrowing window of time – requires swifter, more effective, more accountable action to restore these indigenous communities. We have also received credible reports of significant corruption in the UN bidding and contracting process for stabilization projects in Iraq. In addition to issues of immigration and challenges of assimilation in new countries, we cannot allow inaction to create the conditions for permanent refugee camps or for scattering of Internally Displaced Persons and refugees who long to return home.

Success also has a national security dimension. Repatriation has a strategic advantage of heading off potential conflict between the KRG and Baghdad while barring an Iranian land bridge to the Mediterranean, which presently threatens to fill the vacuum in the Nineveh Plain created by the removal of ISIS. This land bridge will be occupied by forces loyal to Tehran if security and rebuilding fails to come from other quarters.

USAID has an immediate opportunity to partner with entities committed to the appropriate reconstruction of damaged homes and public buildings, in several key towns in the Nineveh Plain of Iraq. Although two Administrations and the United States Congress determined that ISIS targeted Christians, Yezidis, and other religious and ethnic minorities for genocide, a lack of concerted response following the fall of ISIS has resulted in dire conditions where these peoples desperately need assistance if they are to survive. Timely action would address provisions outlined in the genocide declarations and mirror the current Administration's desire to help the survivors.

There have been a number of relevant Congressional actions – including Fiscal Year 2017 omnibus (P.L. 115-31) requirements that some of the \$1.4 billion appropriated for the International Disaster Assistance and Migration and Refugee Assistance accounts be made available for religious minority

victims of genocide. Congressional delegations to the region met with survivors and their conversations animated legislation such as the Iraq and Syria Genocide Emergency Relief and Accountability Act (H.R. 390), which the House passed unanimously in June and followed upon the unanimously passed genocide resolutions (H. Con. Res. 75 and S. Res. 340). In addition Congressional hearings and communications to the President and State Department have been clear about the importance of acting now. The goal is to assure that USAID and the State Department spent authorized and appropriated funds to prevent these endangered communities from being erased.

We implore you to review proposals from credible organizations on the ground in the region who are committed to these goals, and if deemed worthy, to move swiftly to empower them through available resources to rebuild the region. We strongly urge your agency to embrace the significant opportunity to restore hope for peoples who face extinction, and we stand ready to assist in any way we can.

Sincerely,

Jeff Fortenberry, Member of Congress

Anna G. Eshoo, Member of Congress

Chris Smith, Member of Congress

Robert Aderholt, Member of Congress

Fortenberry, Aderholt, and Smith are longtime human rights advocates. Democrat Rep. Eshoo has a personal interest in the mission. She is a Chaldean Catholic and first-generation American. Her mother is Armenian and her father is an Assyrian Christian from Iraq.

The letter is the latest effort by a bipartisan group of lawmakers in the House and Senate, along with human rights

activists and Catholic groups, to persuade the State Department and USAID to change the previous policy of directing most of its money to Iraq through the United Nations.

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