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IRAN: Religious persecution and issues – Monthly news digest in March 2023

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Christians

Annual report presentation at UK parliament

Article 18 (28.03.2023) – The UN's Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Nazila Ghanea, joined Article18's director, Mansour Borji, and two Iranian Christian survivors of persecution, Mojtaba Hosseini and Sara Fooladi,

for the UK parliament presentation of our joint annual report last week.

The 22 March event was hosted by Fiona Bruce, the UK Prime Minister's Special Envoy for FoRB and chair of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA).

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Supreme Court agrees to retrial of Iranian-Armenian pastor serving 10-year sentence

Article 18 (15.03.2023) – Iran's Supreme Court has agreed that an ethnic Armenian pastor serving a 10-year prison sentence for holding church services in his home should be afforded a retrial.

The ruling by the ninth branch of the Supreme Court, dated 25 February, was communicated to **Joseph Shahbazian**'s lawyer on Monday, 13 March.

In their short explanation, the judges, Ghasem Mezyani and Majid Hosseini-Nik, say that having considered his case, the maximum sentence of 10 years was "not appropriate" as both the Revolutionary and appeal courts failed to "offer any evidence" to prove he was the leader of the group.

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Church Haik Hovsepian founded set to be sold by Iranian state

Article 18 (14.03.2023) – A church of huge significance for Iranian Christians is set to be sold by an organisation headed by Iran's Supreme Leader.

The Assemblies of God church in Gorgan, northeast Iran, has over the years been led by some of the most well-known Iranian

pastors, including three who were killed for their faith.

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'I have to bring back the child who became a Christian,' says Shia cleric

Article 18 (10.03.2023) – A prominent Shia cleric has bemoaned how the younger generation of Iranians are leaving Shia Islam for other faiths, including Christianity, and said he views it as his responsibility to “bring them back”.

Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Javad Alavi Borujerdi, whose grandfather was one of the teachers of the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini, made the comments as part of a public address to Shia students in the religious city of Qom yesterday.

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'I felt very sick every time the jailer searched our bodies with her hands'

Article 18 (08.03.2023) – **Shadi Noveiri** was strip-searched multiple times during her 40 days in detention, an experience she describes as “absolutely humiliating and I believe illegal”.

The Christian convert, who turned 25 during her incarceration, was subjected to the search each time she was taken from the Ministry of Intelligence detention centre in Rasht, where she was interrogated, back to Lakan Prison, which she calls “one of the worst and most unsanitary prisons in Iran”.

“The other prisoners told me: ‘When they want to punish a

prisoner, or send them into exile, they send them to Lakan Prison.’”

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Fifth convert released amid mass pardoning of political prisoners

Article 18 (06.03.2023) – A fifth convert has been released as part of the mass pardoning of political prisoners, while there are reports two more may also have been freed, perhaps taking the total to as many as seven within the past month.

Milad Goodarzi, who was nearly halfway through a three-year sentence – reduced from five – for “engaging in propaganda that educates in a deviant way contrary to the holy religion of Islam”, was released from Karaj’s Central Prison on Saturday morning.

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A letter from Yousef Nadarkhani on the day he was released from prison

Article 18 – (03.03.2023) – **Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani**, who was released on Sunday after nearly five years’ arbitrary detention in Tehran’s Evin Prison, has shared with Article18 a letter he wrote on the day of his release “as a testimony and to express my gratitude”.

In the letter, a full translation of which can be read below, the pastor says that although he has been “locked up many times because of His name” – he previously spent three years in prison after he was sentenced to death for apostasy – he considers everything he has endured as his “small part in sharing in the labour and suffering of Christ”.

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Arbitrarily detained pastor released from prison but faces flogging and exile

Article 18 (01.03.2023) – An Iranian pastor once sentenced to death for his “apostasy” has been “pardoned” and released after nearly five years in Tehran’s Evin Prison, but told he still faces flogging and two years’ exile 2,000km from his home.

Yousef Nadarkhani, whose death sentence was overturned back in 2011, was sentenced again in July 2017, alongside three other converts, to 10 years in prison and two years’ exile for “acting against national security by propagating house-churches and promoting ‘Zionist’ Christianity”.

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Baha’is

Baha’i Citizen Nahaleh Shahidi Yazdi arrested

Hrana (29.03.2023) – According to HRANA, the news agency of Human Rights Activists, on March 28, 2023, Baha’i **Nahaleh Shahidi Yazdi** was arrested by security forces.

An informed source told HRANA, “Shahidi was arrested on her way from Karaj to Kerman.”

The reasons for her arrest and the detained location are still unknown.

Shahidi was arrested in March 2011 and then sentenced to two years in prison and one year of suspended imprisonment for her civil and children's rights activities, such as holding literacy courses for children left out of schools after the Bam earthquake.

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Baha'i Citizen Parva Behdad sentenced to imprisonment and additional punishments

Iran Press Watch (16.03.2023) – The Isfahan Revolutionary Court recently sentenced Baha'i citizen **Parva Behdad** to three years in prison, a ban from leaving the country for two years and other punishments.

According to HRANA, the news agency of Human Rights Activists, Baha'i citizen Parva Behdad was sentenced to three years in prison, a ban from leaving the country for two years, paying a fine and participating in a religion course for indoctrination.

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A Baha'i grandmother starts her second decade in prison

Iran Press Watch (15.03.2023) – **Mahvash Shahriari Sabet**, a 70-year-old Baha'i teacher and poet, mother and grandmother, is perhaps even more renowned among people outside Iran than in her own country.

She spent 10 years of her life in Iranian prisons, from 2008 to 2017, solely based on her religious beliefs, before her latest arrest on July 31, 2022.

Most of her poems were written during this time. Her books Free, Love Story, and You Remember Me have been published abroad since her works are prohibited in Iran.

Selections of her poetry titled Prison Poems have been translated into English and have been well-received by people worldwide.

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Sepehr Ziaie, Baha'i prisoner, excluded from Khamenei's Amnesty

IranPress Watch (09.03.2023) – **Sepehr Ziaie** is one of the Baha'is detained in recent weeks, during the new round of protests in Iran. While the authorities of the Islamic Republic have launched a show of public amnesty, Mr. Ziaie is one of the hundreds of prisoners who have not been released from prison.

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Continued detention and uncertainty in case of Baha'i citizen Sanaz Tafzali

Iran Press Watch (08.03.2023) – **Ms. Sanaz Tafzali** (Ruhi), a 45-year-old Baha'i citizen, married mother of two, has been detained in Mashhad's Vakil Abad prison for three months without specific charges.

As of March 2, 2023, Ms. Tafzali had been detained for 90 days. Two months ago the court agreed to her bail. However, after posting one of the heaviest property bonds in past years, equivalent to ten billion tomans, Ms. Tafzali remains in custody and authorities have refused to release her. The bail documents remain in the custody of the court.

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The extension of the detention order of Pouya Saraf, a Baha'i citizen in Shiraz

Iran Press watch (06.03.2023) – The detention order for **Pouya Saraf**, a Baha'i citizen living in Karaj, has been extended. Mr. Saraf had already been detained for 100 days at the time the order was extended.

According to HRANA news agency, the news arm of the Human Rights Activists in Iran, Pouya Saraf, a Baha'i citizen living in Karaj, is still in detention and his status is in limbo.

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Jailed Iranian rights activists ready to testify against FM claims

Iran Press Watch (05.03.2023) – In response to Iran's foreign minister's denials of rape in prisons, an imprisoned female activist announced she is ready to testify against the government.

In a letter sent to Radio Farda, the Persian Service of Radio Free Europe in Prague, Narges Mohammadi wrote: "In the past few months, detainees have been brought to the women's ward of Evin prison, and ... subjected to sexual assault and physical torture. We have witnessed the traces left on their bodies."

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