

# **INDIA: Thousands protest jailing of Christians who were accused of offering money to convert villagers in India**

By Jardine Malado

The Christian Times (29.09.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2khpsEC> – Around 5,000 Christians gathered on the streets in India's Jharkhand state on Monday to protest the jailing of six Pentecostals who were accused of offering money to villagers to convert them to Christianity.

Five men and one woman were arrested from Tukupani village in Simdega district following a complaint from the village chief that some people were offering money to indigenous people to become Christians, according to UCA News.

The ecumenical "silent protest" that took place on Sept. 25 was organized after a local court rejected the bail application of the six Pentecostals on Sept. 21.

"We wanted them to be released because they are innocent people who gathered for a prayer," said Gladson Dungdung, a Catholic leader, who was one of the organizers of the protest.

Dungdung asserted that the district court rejected the bail "seemingly under pressure from higher ups," adding that the protesters will be appealing to a higher court.

The six Christians were charged with upsetting the religious feelings of others, according to district police chief Rajiv Ranjan Singh.

Bishop Vincent Barwa of Simdega expressed concern that an “atmosphere of suspicion” began to emerge in the state following the passage of the anti-conversion law on Aug. 12. He lamented that in several areas, Hindu groups “act as if they have a mandate to keep a check on others, especially Christians.”

The new legislation prohibits conversion through force or allurement or fraudulent means, and it stipulates that those who want to convert to another religion should seek permission from the government. Those who were found to be in violation of the law could be jailed for three years and fined 50,000 rupees (US\$800).

The police officer noted that the six Christians were not booked under the provisions of the anti-conversion law, which is still not enforced as the government has not framed the necessary rules for the law to take effect.

Dungdung, however, contended that the arrest sends a “clear message that the new anti-conversion law will be used as a tool to check the activities of some people and groups. Christians will have a tough time ahead.”

While India’s national constitution guarantees freedom of religion, anti-conversion laws are currently in effect in six states, namely Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Himachal Pradesh.

The ruling Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has claimed that the tribal population of Jharkhand has been targeted by missionaries, noting that the Christian percentage of the tribal people has increased by nearly 30 percent since the last census.

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## **IRAN: Heavy prison terms for a “priest” and another converted Christian” in Iran**

*Heavy sentences for Christians is being haded out by Judge Ahmadzadeh the head of 26th Branch of Islamic Revolutionary Court.*

Mohabat News (08.07.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2udF68m> – As reported by the Christian News Agency in Iran, “ Mohabat News”, “Victor Bat Tomerz”, the former priest of the Assyrian Pentecostal Church in Tehran, and a converted Christian ” Kavian Falah Mohammad” were sentenced to prison terms by Judge Ahmadzadeh of the 26th branch of Islamic Court on 11th of June 2017.

According to the sentences pronounced by this court, “priest Victor” and “Kavian Falah Mohammadi” were accused of violating the national security of the country by hosting “House Churches” and were punished with 10 years prison terms.

According to this sentence, after the prison term, they are banned from leaving the country for two years.

Priest Victor was one of the official Assyrian clerics and had served Pentecostal churches for more than 3 decades. He was also a famous pastor among the Persian-speaking Christians, while he was dismissed from his service with the interference of few government-related agents like "Yonatan Bat Celia", the parliamentary representative of the Assyrian minority in Islamic parliament, and under the pressure from security and information apparatus on 31st of March 2009. Accordingly, the Persian church services provided to the Persian-speaking converted Christians were also canceled.

Reverend Victor along with his wife and their child and 12 other converted Christians were identified and arrested on 26th of December 2014 in their house by the police while they were celebrating Christmas.

The information agents released all the individuals attending this celebration after their written interrogation and signing a promissory covenant. Apart from Reverend Victor, Amin Afshar Naderi and Kavian Falah Mohammadi were also among the arrested Christians who were sent to Evin prison.

Reverend Victor was temporarily released after 65 days imprisonment with heavy bail on 1st of March 2015. Despite his old age, he was mostly kept in solitary confinement which led to his severe health issues.

Kavian Falah Mohammadi was also temporarily released one week later with a bail worth 100 million Tomans ( \$30,000). On the other hand, the status of Shamiran Isavi, Reverend Victor's wife, and his son Bat Ramyyl Tamraz, is still uncertain and their trial has not yet been.

The 26th branch of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran has pronounced heavy charges and sentences for the converts in the past few days.

Amin Afshar Naderi and Hadi Askari, two Converted Christians were also sentenced to 25 years prison terms in the same judiciary branch not to mention that three Christians from Azerbaijan and an Iranian convert were sentenced to 40 years prison terms altogether on 12th June 2017.

Records has shown that heavy charges and keeping the Christian cases sealed from the public along with heavy bails, especial for pastors, has become a very beneficial income for the judiciary, which means they decide heavy bail- in form of cash or noncash payments- and keep pending their trials while pressurizing them in many different ways to force them to leave the country and thus seizing their properties.

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