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## **Iran releases two Christian women from Evin prison**

***No bail required; charges of 'proselytizing' and 'apostasy' remain***

By Damaris Kremida

Compass Direct News (18.11.2009) / HRWF Int. (19.11.2009) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Two Christian Iranian women, Maryam Rostampour, 27, and Marzieh Amirizadeh Esmaeilabad, 30, were released from prison this afternoon with no bail amid an international campaign calling for their freedom since their arrest on March 5.

The two women, whose health deteriorated while in detention at the notorious Evin prison in Tehran, are at their homes recovering from their nine-month ordeal, an Iranian

source told Compass. They still could face charges of proselytizing and "apostasy," or leaving Islam.

The women were released at 3:30 p.m.

"Words are not enough to express our gratitude to the Lord and to His people who have prayed and worked for our release," the two women said in a statement from United Kingdom-based Elam Ministries.

The women's lawyer had been working to secure their release, and although they were expected to be released yesterday, he was not able to do so because of the high bail the court was demanding. The Compass source said that it was too soon to determine how the lawyer was able to secure their release without bail today, a rarity for Christians released from prison in Iran.

The source credited their release to international lobbying and pressure on the Iranian government.

"It was from the international pressure, and also the government couldn't handle it anymore," said the source. "Already their detention was illegal. At the same time, the government wasn't ready to prosecute them for apostasy. They already have many headaches. They cannot handle everything."

The source said he suspected the two women will be very closely watched and would not have full freedom of movement, limiting their contact with others.

"It is too soon to give all the details," he said. "It is not just about them. When people get out of jail we need time to get information ... it is very difficult."

Rostampour and Esmaeilabad were arrested in March and detained on charges of "acting against state security," "taking part in illegal gatherings" and apostasy under Iran's Revolutionary Court system.

On Aug. 9 the women appeared before a judge who pressured them to recant their faith and return to Islam or spend more time in prison. The two women refused. Last month, on Oct. 7, they were acquitted of the charge of "anti-state activities," and their case was transferred to the General Court.

The charges of proselytizing and apostasy remain against them but are not handled by the Revolutionary Court. While proselytizing and apostasy are not crimes specified in the current Penal Code, judges are required to use their knowledge of Islamic law in cases where no codified law exists.

With a draft penal code that may include an article mandating death for apostates in accordance to sharia (Islamic law) still under parliamentary review, experts on Iran fear things may get worse for the country's converts from Islam.

Elam reported that the women were "doing as well as could be expected, and are rejoicing in the Lord's faithfulness to them." The women reportedly lost a lot of weight during their imprisonment. Esmaeilabad suffered from back pain, an infected tooth and intense headaches, and Rostampour got severe food poisoning last month.

Elam requested continued prayers as the women may still be called to court hearings. The Iranian source said that all Christians released from prison in the last year have pending court cases against them, but almost none of them have been given court dates.

"Maryam and Marzieh have greatly inspired us all," Director of Elam Ministries Sam Yeghnazar said today in a press statement. "Their love for the Lord Jesus and their faithfulness to God has been an amazing testimony."

A member of Open Doors, one of many ministries that mobilized prayer support for the two women internationally, expressed gratitude for the two women's release but cautioned that continued prayers were necessary until they were completely out of danger.

"Open Doors is so thankful for the release of these two women, and we praise God that they are safely home now," said an Open Doors field worker who requested anonymity. "But we continue to pray for them, for physical and mental health. Open Doors also thanks the worldwide Christian family for their prayers for them, but we urge our brothers and sisters to not stop praying. They still have a path to go."

Compass has also learned that on Oct. 13 the leader of a large network of churches in the northern city of Rasht was arrested and is still in prison. Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani has had contact with his family and has been pressured to recant his faith and return to Islam, according to an Iranian Christian who requested anonymity. Nadarkhani is married and has two children under the age of 10.

Another source confirmed that while six of the 24 Christians who were arrested in a police raid on July 31 in the area of Fashan north of Tehran have been released, one identified as Shaheen remains in prison unable to pay bail for his release.

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## **Trial of seven Baha'is delayed, no new date set**

Baha'i World Service News (18.10.2009) / HRWF Int. (22.10.2009) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Although the trial of seven Baha'i leaders imprisoned in Iran for more than 17 months was scheduled for today, when attorneys and families arrived at the court offices in Tehran they were told it would not take place. No new trial date was given.

"The time has come for these seven innocent people to be immediately released on bail," said Diane Ala'i, the Baha'i International Community's representative to the United Nations in Geneva.

"The seven, whose only 'crime' is their religious belief, are once again in legal limbo, held with no idea of the legal process ahead of them. The whole charade cries out for an end to their unlawful detention," she said.

The seven are Mrs. Fariba Kamalabadi, Mr. Jamaloddin Khanjani, Mr. Afif Naeimi, Mr. Saeid Rezaie, Mrs. Mahvash Sabet, Mr. Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Mr. Vahid Tizfahm.

Official Iranian news accounts have said the seven are to be accused of "espionage for Israel, insulting religious sanctities and propaganda against the Islamic republic." They have also been charged with "spreading corruption on earth."

Last week, it appeared likely that the trial would indeed be postponed again, since attorneys for the seven had not yet received the proper writ of notification.

"The fact that their attorneys did not receive proper notification and that there is no new date for the trial is just one among many gross violations of Iran's own legal procedures,

not to mention the violations of due process recognized by international law, that have marked this case from the beginning," said Ms. Ala'i.

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## **Iranian judge charges converts with apostasy and propagation of Christian faith**

ICC (08.10.2009) / HRWF Int. (09.10.2009) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - International Christian Concern (ICC) has learned that on October 7 an Iranian judge charged Maryam and Marzieh with 'crimes' of apostasy and propagation of the Christian faith. They could face life imprisonment if convicted of apostasy.

Elam ministries told ICC that Maryam and Marzieh were unexpectedly taken to appear before the court yesterday morning.

In a positive development, their case has now been transferred from the revolutionary court to the regular courts after the judge dropped the earlier charge of anti-state activities. Maryam, Marzieh and their lawyer are pleased with this development.

Maryam and Marzieh were detained on March 5, 2009. The Iranian officials accused them of 'anti-state activities' following their conversion from Islam to Christianity. During their appearance before the revolutionary court on August 9, they told the court that they would not recant their faith in Christ. For the report on their court appearance, see: <http://www.persecution.org/suffering/pressdetail.php?presscode=325>

Iranian officials sent Maryam and Marzieh to the infamous Evin prison where they have endured mistreatment, including solitary confinement and deprivation of medical attention. Both of them are in poor health. On October 4, Maryam suffered severe food poisoning and was given medical attention after much insistence.

In an interview with the Voice of America Persian News Network, Maryam and Marzieh's lawyer said, "My clients are not prepared to lie about their faith under any condition."

ICC's Regional Manager for Africa and the Middle East, Jonathan Racho, said, "We welcome the move by the Iranian court to drop the charges of anti-state activities against Maryam and Marzieh. We urge Iranian officials to drop charges of apostasy and propagation of Christianity, as well. As party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Iran has an obligation to respect the right of Maryam and Marzieh to follow the religion of their choice."

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**Please continue to pray for the release of Maryam and Marzieh. Also pray for improvement of their health. Christian women imprisoned on apostasy charge**

Stefan J. Bos

BosNewsLife (08.10.2009) / HRWF Int. (06.11.2009) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Two young women who converted from Islam to Christianity may face execution or at least life imprisonment after an Iranian court officially charged them with "apostasy" and "propagation of the Christian faith", trial observers and Iranian Christians confirmed Thursday, October 8.

Marzieh Amirizadeh Esmaeilabad, 30, and Maryam Rustampoor, 27, were detained in March for practicing Christianity after authorities raided and confiscated materials from their home.

Authorities reportedly also accused them of "engaging in anti-government activities" but that charge was dropped during the unexpected hearing at the Revolutionary Court on Wednesday, October 7, Christians said.

Both women have refused to renounce their faith in Christ and return to Islam, despite reported pressure from authorities in this strictly Islamic nation.

The two young women are to appear in front of a regular court, trial observers said. The United States has criticized their detention. Iranian Christians have expressed concerns about the health of the women, who have been held in Tehran's notorious Evin Prison.

### **Food poisoning**

On October 4, Maryam Rustampoor suffered severe food poisoning, but was given medical attention only after much insistence, Christians said.

"Maryam and Marzieh have now been in prison in Tehran because of their faith for over six months and their health is deteriorating," explained 'Pray for Iran', an Internet initiative of Iranian churches, which has closely followed the case.

"Both women are suffering from sore thoughts, irregular painful stomach aches and often intense head aches. Both have lost much weight during their ordeal, because of their sickness and lack of nutrition," Pray for Iran added.

"Marzieh's tooth infection is only being treated by painkillers and if the infection spreads it could become critical. Due to overcrowding in the prison and the limited facilities, they have not received adequate treatment."

There are reportedly many other sick inmates and, Christians said there is "a constant risk of picking up other viruses."

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## **Iran temporarily releases Christians on bail**

### ***Maryam and Marzieh Remain Imprisoned***

ICC (15.09.2009) / HRWF Int. (16.09.2009) - Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - ICC has learned that on September 2, Iranian authorities temporarily released seven Christian converts from Islam on bail.

According to the report by Farsi Christian News Network, the seven are part of 25 Christians who Iranian officials had arrested on July 31, 2009 in the northern part of Tehran. The officials released all but these seven believers after extensive interrogation.

Maryam Razandi, Ashraf Onidi, Mehdi Mohammadi, Mobina Lak, Nariman Sharifi, Shahi, and Shahnam Yar-Mohammad Tosaki were held released in the notorious Evin prison until their release on September 2, when they each posted ownership titles on two houses as bail.

Iranian authorities have recently increased their clamp down on Christian converts from Islam. On July 29, they detained four Christian converts in the city of Rasht. The authorities threatened to charge the Christians with apostasy, but later released them after they posted bail in the amount of \$20,000. According to Islamic laws, converts from Islam who are charged with apostasy could face the death penalty.

Meanwhile, Maryam and Marzieh, Christian converts from Islam, still remain imprisoned in the Evin prison after being on March 5, 2009 for the 'crime' of converting from Islam to Christianity. When they appeared before a revolutionary court in Tehran on August 9, an Iranian public prosecutor told them to recant their Christian faith, but Maryam and Marzieh refused to do so. They were later sent back to the prison. To read the full report on Maryam and Marzieh, see:

(<http://www.persecution.org/suffering/pressdetail.php?presscode=325>)

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## **Iran Baha'is face espionage trial**

BBC (15.08.2009) / HRWF Int. (16.08.2009) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Tehran, Iran - Seven members of the Bahai faith in Iran are to go on trial on Tuesday on charges of spying for Israel and of "insulting sanctities".

Six of the Bahais were arrested in May, 2008. The other one was arrested two months earlier. They were the leaders of the Bahais in Iran.

The Bahai faith is banned by the Islamic revolutionary leadership of Iran which considers it heretical.

Bahais claim some 300,000 members in Iran, where the faith originated.

### **Midnight raids**

"The trial of the seven Bahais accused of spying for the Zionist regime of Israel and insulting sanctities will be held on Tuesday," Hassan Haddad of the Tehran's prosecutor office said, the official Iranian news agency reports.

Last year relatives of the six Bahai leaders arrested in May said they had been taken to Evin Prison in Tehran after intelligence ministry officers raided their homes in the middle of the night.

Hundreds of Bahai followers have been jailed and executed since Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979, the Bahai International Community says.

However, the government denies it has detained or executed people because of their faith.

The Bahais consider the man who founded their faith in the 19th Century, Bahauallah, to be a prophet.

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## **Iranian refugee in Turkey beaten for his faith**

***Convert to Christianity loses another job as co-workers learn he's not Muslim***

By Damaris Kremida

Compass Direct (15.06.2009) / HRWF Int. (16.06.2009) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Since Iranian native Nasser Ghorbani fled to Turkey seven years ago, he has been unable to keep a job for more than a year – eventually his co-workers would ask why he didn't come to the mosque on Fridays, and one way or another they'd learn that he was a convert to Christianity.

Soon thereafter he would be gone.

Never had anyone gotten violent with him, however, until three weeks ago, when someone at his workplace in Istanbul hit him on the temple so hard he knocked him out. When he came back to his senses, Ghorbani was covered in dirt, and his left eye was swollen shut. It hurt to breathe.

His whole body was in pain. He had no idea what had happened.

"I've always had problems at work in Turkey because I'm a Christian, but never anything like this," Ghorbani told Compass.

A carpenter by trade, Ghorbani started working at an Istanbul furniture maker in November 2008. From the beginning, he said, the Turks he worked with noticed that he didn't go to the mosque on Friday. Nor did he behave like everyone else.

"If someone swore, I would say, 'Don't swear,' or if someone lied, I said, 'That's not honest,'" he said. "You know Turks are very curious, and they try to understand everything."

Although he tried to conceal his faith from his co-workers, inevitably it became obvious.

Soon after he started his new job, Ghorbani and his family found a new apartment. On the planned move-in day, New Year's Day, his boss sent the company truck along with a truck driver to help; members of the Christian group that often meets in his home also came.

"When the [truck driver] saw all these people at our house, he was surprised," said Ghorbani's wife, Leila, explaining that he seemed especially surprised to find foreigners among the group. "It was big news back at the factory."

Ghorbani said that in the following months the questions persisted, as well as pressure to attend the mosque. He avoided these as best as he could, but he admitted that two mistakes confirmed their suspicions. Someone from work learned that he had a broken personal computer for sale and bought it, only to find Christian documents and photos on the hard drive. Secondly, a mutual friend later admitted to a co-worker that he went to the same church as Ghorbani.

"The attitude in the entire factory changed toward me," said Ghorbani, chuckling. "It was like they had agreed to marginalize me. Even our cook started only serving me potatoes, even though she had cooked meat as well. I didn't say anything."

In May the truck driver who had helped the Ghorbanis move finally confronted him.

"Your country is a Muslim country," he told him, "and you may have become a Christian, but you are coming to Friday prayers today."

On May 22 during lunch, his co-workers told him they were taking him to the mosque that day. "You are going to do your prayers," one said.

Ghorbani brushed it off and, to appease them, said he would come after lunch. But as they were about to leave for the mosque, he asked them why they only pray once a week – and told them that as a Christian he couldn't accept it and wouldn't join them.

After the day's last delivery and pick-up, the truck driver returned to work. As everyone was getting ready to leave, from the corner of his eye Ghorbani saw the truck driver walking up to him, and felt the blow of his fist on his temple. When he regained consciousness, some co-workers were washing his face in the bathroom.

They told him a little about how he was beaten, put him in a cab with one of their colleagues and sent him home. That evening, his fellowship group was meeting at his home. They had just sat down for dinner when Ghorbani arrived later than usual.

"He walked in, and he was limping because his right side hurt," said an Iranian friend who was at the meeting. "There was dirt all over his clothes, and there was blood in his left eye. When I saw him I got scared. I thought that maybe a car had hit him."

Wanting to avoid a hospital visit and questions from police, Ghorbani went to a private doctor a few days later. The doctor instructed him to stay home for three weeks to recover from the injuries: badly bruised ribs, shoulder, shins and eye, and internal stomach bleeding.

When he took the medical report to his workplace the following day, co-workers told him that his boss had fired the truck driver, and that even though management was very happy with his work, it would be safer for him to look for employment elsewhere. They said the truck driver blamed Ghorbani for losing his job and had threatened to kill him if he ever saw him.

"I have a family and home and nothing to lose," the truck driver said, according to co-workers. "If I kill him, the worst thing that could happen to me is that I do some jail time."

Ghorbani's friend said that even if other Iranian converts to Christianity don't suffer violence as Nasser has, life for them is full of pressure and uncertainty at work.

"Maybe for Christians by birth there are no pressures or problems, but people like us who want to [leave Islam to] follow Jesus are fired," said the friend.

He explained that following their faith means living righteously and not stealing or cheating their bosses out of time and wages.

"That's when the marginalization starts, when you resist doing wrong," he said. "But if you live the way they do, lying and stealing, they don't notice you're a Christian."

The Iranian friend said that even before he converted to Christianity in Turkey, his colleagues would pressure him to come to the mosque for Friday prayers because he was a foreigner.

"After becoming a Christian, the pressure gets worse," he said. "The way they look at you changes ... and, honestly, they try to convince you, [saying] that you haven't researched your decision well enough."

Now running his business out of his own home, the friend said no one can disrupt his work because of his faith, but he is a rarity among Iranian refugees in Turkey.

Ghorbani's wife said the New Testament is clear on how to respond to attacks.

"The Bible says don't be surprised when things happen against you, but love more, because you suffer for Christ," she said.

Hope for a Future

The Ghorbanis said they are thankful for their time in Turkey, though their future is unclear.

The family first fled to Turkey in 2002 after realizing that their families were becoming aware of Nasser's newfound faith. Ghorbani had worked in the Iranian Armed Forces for 10 years before he was fired in 1995 because, as a secular Muslim, he refused to attend Quran classes, which were necessary for keeping his job or being promoted.

For the following eight years, the government kept close tabs on the couple, questioning them every six months. Ghorbani could not travel outside of Iran during this period.

In 2001 he became a Christian under the influence of a customer who ordered furniture from his shop. As soon as Ghorbani's passport was issued, he fled to Turkey; his family followed a few months later. Soon his family also espoused Christianity after his wife had a dream of Jesus saving her from sinking sand.

"We have learned the truth, and it has set us free," Leila Ghorbani said.

The family is in the process of applying to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to re-open their case; their first application was denied three years ago.

According to the UNHCR's most recent Global Report, in Turkey there were 2,100 Iranian refugees and 2,300 asylum-seekers from Iran in 2008. Although there is no data on how many Christian Iranians are living in Turkey, it is estimated that there is an Iranian house church in each of 30 "satellite cities" where the government appoints refugees and asylum seekers to live.

The Ghorbanis have three daughters, ages 20, 17 and 2. Ghorbani said he and his family would be in danger if they were returned to Iran.

"As a Christian I can't return to Iran, or I risk losing my life," Ghorbani said. "If they catch me, because I was a lieutenant they will directly hang me."

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## **Iranian authorities pressure father of convert**

### ***Government trying to quell Christian son's human rights activities***

Compass Direct News (20.05.2009) / HRWF Int. (25.05.2009) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - In an attempt to silence a Christian human rights activist living in England, Iranian authorities arrested and interrogated his Muslim father for six days before releasing him yesterday.

Abdul Zahra Vashahi, a retired 62-year-old suffering a heart condition, was arrested on Thursday (May 14) in Iran's southwestern city of Bandar Mahshahr and interrogated about the human rights activities of his son, a Christian convert who has been living in England since 2003. His son, John (Reza) Vashahi, converted to Christianity while in England and in 2008 founded the Iranian Minorities Human Rights Organization (IMHRO).

In February the elder Vashahi had received a call from local authorities telling him that if his son didn't stop his activities, they would arrest him instead.

While his father was in custody, authorities asked the elder Vashahi many questions about his son's activities and had him fill out forms with detailed information about his extended family and friends.

"He is very tired, because the interrogations were very long," his son told Compass. "All the questions were about me."

The younger Vashahi said the Iranian government started putting increased pressure on his family, whom he has not seen in six years, since he founded IMHRO.

"It is a good example of harassment even outside the country," Vashahi told Compass by telephone today. "It is just showing how far the government will go if we let them. Inside we can't talk, and we come to Europe and still they want to silence us; it's a very worrying sign."

Vashahi, unlike his father, was involved in politics when he lived in Iran. His family belongs to Iran's Arab-speaking community, the Ahwazi, most of whom live in the southwestern province of Khuzestan.

He said that even when he was living there, police had come to his father's workplace to ask him questions, but that after he fled the country six years ago, the pressure seemed to have stopped. It began anew when he became an outspoken Christian campaigning for the rights of minorities in Iran and especially with the establishment of IMHRO, he said.

The activist is an active member of Amnesty International, and through his own organization he publicizes Iran's human rights violations of minorities, especially Christians. He has also started a blog called "Jesus for Arabs."

### **Fighting for Minority Rights**

Vashahi acknowledged that his family, which is Muslim, was never happy with his choice of faith or vocation.

Asked whether he believed the government arrested his father because of his faith or his work, the younger Vashahi said, "I think it's both, because part of my human rights activity is in regard to Christians in Iran, and we've been in touch with Christians and persecuted churches."

The 30-year-old activist said that when the Revolutionary Guard arrested his father, they confiscated all of his books and compact discs, as well as a computer and his sister's university dentistry textbooks.

"It's a bad situation, and I hope we find some solution," Vashahi said, "No one has the right to talk about anything in Iran. Suppression of the church is increasing in Iran; they don't want us to talk about that. They don't want us to talk about it inside, and also they want to silence us outside."

Vashahi said that despite the government pressure, he is not planning to stop his human rights activism.

"I'm not going to be silent, because if I do, then I'm accepting their logic, which means I caused the arrest of my dad," Vashahi said. "My dad is innocent, and that system is wrong to arrest someone instead of somebody else."

In 2008, when deciding to establish the IMHRO, he said he felt torn between confronting Iran's injustices and wanting to ignore them from his comfortable, safe distance.

"Another part of me was saying, 'you are safe now, but you should do your fair share, you should make noise, and if people inside can't talk and you are outside and you don't want to talk, how will people learn what is happening?'" he said. "I felt responsibility, and in the end that part won."

In a phone conversation with his mother yesterday while his father was sleeping to recover from his time in prison, he said he felt that she was choosing her words very carefully. She told him not to contact them or other family and friends.

"She emphasized that we are all Muslims, and that this is an Islamic country," Vashahi said. "So she was giving me hints that it [the arrest] had to do with the change of religion."

Although there were no official charges against his father, Vashahi said it is possible that authorities still could take him to court or detain him again for more interrogation.

"I hope this doesn't happen again," he said. "In fact, they've taken my family as hostage. They did this type of policy to other people and they've always failed, and I don't know why they keep doing it, because people like me they are not going to stop. Others didn't stop, and they're just bringing more condemnation on themselves and exposing themselves to more condemnation in the eyes of the world."

### **New Wave of Arrests**

Compass has learned of four confirmed arrests of Christians in the last two weeks in the capital city of Tehran, while sources said a new wave of arrests has rolled across the country.

Authorities have been warning arrested Christians not to speak to foreign news agencies.

"The government is treating people like they don't want them to talk," said a source. "The government is really afraid of international news agencies, they really don't like them. That is why they put pressure on the believers, and they are really scared."

Although in most cases of arrests and interrogations Christians have been released with no physical harm, a source said in some instances they were told to sign papers that they would stop Christian activities and were threatened if they continued.

"It's happening everywhere," said the source. "This is the strategy of the government. They are doing it everywhere."

Maryam Rostampour, 27, and Marzieh Amirizadeh Esmailabad, 30, are in their second month of detention at the notorious Evin prison house in Tehran, accused of "acting against state security" and "taking part in illegal gatherings."

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## **Grave concerns over welfare of Christian women detained without charge**

CSW (22.04.2009) / HRWF Int. (04.05.2009) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is calling for the immediate release of two female Christian converts from Islam, who are being held without charge and who are reported to be in poor health.

Maryam Rostampour, 27, and Marzieh Amirizadeh, 30, are currently being held in Evin prison, where the Iranian-American journalist, Roxana Saberi is also being held. They share a cell with 27 other women.

The pair were arrested by Iranian security officers on 5 March after their apartment was searched and their bibles confiscated amongst other items. The women are known to be practicing Christians.

Maryam and Marzieh were interrogated at the Police and Security Station 137 in Gysa before being taken to Vozara Detention Centre. They suffered sleep deprivation as part of their interrogation. On 18 March they were taken to branch two of the National Security Section of Iran's Revolutionary Court, before being sent to Evin prison.

Neither have been charged with any crime defined under Iranian or international legislation, nor have they been permitted access to lawyers.

An initial bail request of \$400,000 was retracted by the Iranian authorities after Maryam's and Marzieh's families appealed for their release.

CSW's Advocacy Director Tina Lambert said: "CSW is deeply concerned for the safety of all Iranians who leave Islam, as the number of arrests has increased significantly during 2008. These concerns are heightened by the fact that the Iranian parliament is currently debating a draft bill which could codify the death penalty for apostasy from Islam.

We are calling on the international community to urgently demand the release of Maryam and Marzieh. It is utterly deplorable that these women are being illegally detained for exercising their fundamental human right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Iran continues to remain an aggressive abuser of freedom of religion and belief while Iran's President Ahmadinejad unashamedly condemns the international community's approach to human rights."

For more information, see: <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=press&id=853>

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## **Current Baha'i prisoners in Iran**

Iran Press Watch (24.04.2009) / HRWF Int. (29.04.2009) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – *Iran Press Watch* publishes a list of Baha'i prisoners in Iran who remain incarcerated because of their religious belief. At the present time, there are 49 Baha'i prisoners throughout Iran. The Date of incarceration for each prisoner is provided next to each name.

### **Babol**

- Mushafeq Samandari (Apr 14, 2009)

### **Mashhad**

- Jalayer Vahdat (Jan 26, 2009)
- Sima Eshraghi (Jan 26, 2009)

### **Qa'emshahr**

- Masoud Atayian (Nov 17, 2008)
- Taraneh Sanai, (Jan 18, 2009)
- Shahnaz Sa'adati, (Jan 18, 2009)

- Amelia Fanaian, (Jan 18, 2009)
- Anisa Fanaian (Jan 18, 2009)
- Farzaneh Ahmadzadegan (Jan 18, 2009)

### **Sari**

- Simin Gorji, (2008),
- `Ali Ahmadi, (2008)
- Changiz Derakhshanian, (2008)
- Masoud Ataian, (2008)
- Siyamak Ibrahimi-Nia, (2008)
- Fayzu'llah Rushan (Apr 2008)
- Fuad Naeimi (Apr 2008)
- Zia Allah-Vardi (Oct 18, 2008)
- Sonya Allah-Vardi (Oct 18, 2008)
- Anvar Moslemi (Nov 22, 2008)
- Soheila Motallebi (Nov 22, 2008)
- Firouzeh Yegan (Jan 10, 2009)
- Pegah Sanai, (Jan 10, 2009)
- Torreh Taqi-Zadeh (Feb 15, 2009)
- Mishel Ismaelpour (Apr 21, 2009)

### **Semnan**

- Mr. Adel Fanaian (Jan 4, 2009)
- Mr. Taher Eskandarian (Jan 4, 2009)
- Mr. Abbas Nurani (Jan 4, 2009)
- Mrs. Sahba Rezvani (Dec 15, 2009)
- Pooya Tebyanian (Mar 9, 2009)
- Ali Ehsani (Apr 6, 2009)

### **Shiraz**

- Sasan Taqva (Nov 2007)
- Raha Sabet (Nov 2007)
- Haleh Rouhi (Nov 2007)
- Mehran Karami (Feb 2009)
- Haleh Houshmandi (Mar 18, 2009)
- Farham Masumi (Mar 18, 2009)
- Afshin Ahsanian (Apr 8, 2009)

### **Tehran**

- Vahid Tizfahm, (May 2008)
- Mahvash Sabet, (Mar 2008)
- Jamaledin Khanjani, (May 2008)
- Saeid Rezai, (May 2008)
- Fariba Kamalabadi, (May 2008)
- Afif Naimi, (May 2008)
- Behrouz Tavakkoli, (May 2008)

### **Tonekabon**

- Badi'u'llah Fazli

## Yasuj

- Ali-Askar Ravanbakhsh, (Oct 28, 2008)
- Zulaykha Musavi, (Oct 28, 2008)
- Ruhiyyih Yazdani, (Oct 28, 2008)

## Yazd

- Mehran Bandi, (Aug 28, 2008)

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## **Two Christian women imprisoned in Iran**

***Held with no legal counsel for over a month, they suffer illness in notorious prison***

Compass Direct News (13.04.2009) / HRWF Int. (14.04.2009) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – Accused of “acting against state security” and “taking part in illegal gatherings,” two Iranian Christian women have been held in a Tehran prison for over a month in a crowded cell with no access to legal representation.

Amnesty International, in an appeal for urgent action last week, reported that authorities have made the accusations known but have imprisoned the women without filing official charges. The organization called on Iranian authorities to release them and expressed concern for their health.

Maryam Rostampour, 27, and Marzieh Amirizadeh Esmailabad, 30, who were active in church activities and distributing Bibles according to Amnesty’s appeal, were arrested on March 5. They are being held in the detention center of Evin Prison, a facility that has drawn criticism for its human rights violations and executions in recent years. Amnesty’s appeal included a call to urge Iranian officials to ensure that the women are not being tortured.

Based on a telephone conversation between Esmailabad and a third party on March 28, Amnesty reported that Esmailabad said both are suffering from infection and high fever and had not received adequate medical care. The women continue to be detained in an overcrowded cell with 27 other women. Amnesty said they “may be prisoners of conscience, detained solely on account of their religious beliefs.”

The women are allowed a one-minute call each day and a weekly visit from family. Authorities have informed their family members that the women are accused of “acting against state security” and “taking part in illegal gatherings,” according to the report, and that they would be released after payment of a \$400,000 bail. The families have presented the title deeds of their homes as bail but are still waiting for approval from the judge.

Initially the Ministry of Intelligence summoned one of the women, and then took her to the apartment the two shared. There they were officially arrested, and authorities confiscated computers, books and Bibles. The two women were interrogated and held at different police stations.

On March 18 they appeared before Branch 2 of the Islamic Revolutionary Court in Tehran and subsequently transferred to Evin Prison, said the report.

Even if the women are released on bail, they still have to stand trial. Accusations have not included “apostasy,” or leaving Islam, though investigations are ongoing. It is not known whether the women are converts from Islam.

Last September the Iranian Parliament approved review of a new penal code calling for a mandatory death sentence for "apostates." Under current law death sentences for apostasy have been issued only under judicial interpretations of sharia (Islamic law).

Under the new penal code, male "apostates" would be executed, while females would receive life sentences. The new code was sent to Iran's most influential body, the Guardian Council, which is expected to rule on it. The council is made up of six conservative theologians appointed by Iran's Supreme Leader and six jurists nominated by the judiciary and approved by Parliament. This council has the power to veto any bill it deems inconsistent with the constitution and Islamic law.

Converts to Christianity in Iran risk harassment, arrest and attack from authorities even though Article 23 of the Iranian Constitution grants that individual beliefs are private and no one can be "molested or taken to task" for holding them. Iran has also signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which states that everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

"This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching," the covenant states.

The last Iranian Christian convert from Islam executed by the Iranian government was Hossein Soodmand in 1990. He was accused of working as "an American spy." Since then at least six Protestant pastors have been assassinated by unknown killers.

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## **Bahai homes attacked after media commentary**

By Alexandra Sandels

Menassat (03.04.2009) / HRWF Int. (04.04.2009) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – According to a joint statement issued by six Egyptian human rights groups, villagers shouted "No God but Allah" and "Bahais are enemies of Allah," while hurling stones and firebombs at Bahai homes in the village of Shouraniya, located approximately 350 kilometers outside Cairo.

The attacks on members of the Bahai faith, began on Saturday and lasted for several days, following an episode of the TV show "al-Haqiqa," where Egyptian media commentator referred to a Bahai activist as an apostate and called for her killing.

The village's 30 Bahai residents were forced to flee and police prevented them from returning to their village, rights groups said.

AFP reported that the assailants threatened the village's Bahai residents with death.

Egypt's Interior Ministry confirmed the attacks and said that police have made arrests. The ministry, however, denied that police had prevented the Bahai residents from returning to their homes.

"This is just an incident and we are investigating," ministry spokesman General Hamdi Abdel-Karim was quoted as saying by the Associated Press. Abdel-Karim reportedly refused to provide more details. The rights groups are calling on Egypt's public prosecutor to launch an immediate investigation into the attacks.

In an interview with MENASSAT, Egyptian Bahai activist Shady Samir said that the recent attacks are a result of people's ignorance towards the faith.

"For years, people have been fed lies about the Bahai faith and the Bahais. This reaction is nothing but a climax of the ignorance they have about the faith. When someone like Gamal Abdel Rahem claims on a TV show that the Bahais have to be killed, someone will decide to carry out this killing by himself," he said.

The Bahai faith was founded in the 1860s by a Persian nobleman, Baha'u'llah, whom the faithful regard as the most recent in a line of prophets that included Buddha, Abraham, Jesus and Muhammad. Muslims reject the faith because they believe Muhammad was God's final prophet. Bahais have been subject to persecution in the Middle East, particularly in Iran and Iraq.

### ***"This woman should be killed"***

The show on Dream TV featured a Bahai guest from Shouraniya, a Bahai activist and dentistry professor Dr. Basma Gamal Musa. Also participating in the episode was prominent Egyptian media commentator and senior member of Egypt's press syndicate, Gamal Abdel Rahem.

On the show, Abdel-Rahim denounced Dr. Basma, calling her an "apostate" while on air.

He then turned to the viewers and said that "this woman should be killed."

On Tuesday, Abdel-Rahem also hailed the Shouraniya attackers in an op-ed published in Egypt's state-run Al-Gomhouria newspaper.

It is believed that a comment made by the second Bahai activist on the TV show on Saturday may have served as a catalyst for the attacks.

"Ahmed," a Bahai currently living in Cairo after fleeing persecution in Shouraniya, said that his village was "full of Bahais."

In his commentary Ahmed had sought to illustrate that Egypt's 2,000 Bahais are not only living around Cairo.

### ***Climax of ignorance***

Egypt's Bahai community has not only faced criticism from commentators like Abdel-Rahem, but also from the religious authorities.

Recently, Mohammed Sayyed Tantawi, the grand sheik of Al-Azhar, the high seat of Egypt's religious leadership, referred to the Baha'i faith as a "sacrilegious dogma" and a "deviant sect."

Tantawi also linked the Bahai religion with Zionism, which is a charge that Bahais frequently have to face since the religion's leadership has its headquarters in Haifa, Israel.

The rights groups are asking for the public prosecutor to question Abdel-Rahem over, what they call "his incitement to violence against Bahais in both the television program and his published article".

They are also appealing to the Egyptian Press Syndicate to take "immediate action" against Abdel-Rahem.

## ***The ID card controversy***

The Bahai community has been subject to discrimination as a minority in Egypt. Up until recently, they were fighting a dragged out court battle to get their faith recognized on Egyptian ID cards. Prior to the new law, only one of Egypt's three officially recognized faiths, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, could be put as religion on the identity card.

Official papers like identity cards and birth certificates are obligatory in Egypt and not having them can cause immense obstacles. Egyptians cannot enroll in schools or universities, receive medical treatment, or even buy a car without a national ID card.

Four year's after his death, Samir's father was still not considered officially dead by the Egyptian state since he couldn't obtain a death certificate as an adherent of the Bahai faith.

In order for Samir's father to be granted a death certificate, he would have had to convert to one of Egypt's three official faiths.

Samir previously told MENASSAT that it was his father's "last will to die as a Bahai."

In a highly publicized court ruling earlier this year, the Bahais were finally granted the right to put a dash in the field allocated for religion on the ID card or leave the slot blank.

Samir, however, does not believe the recent court ruling in favor of the Bahais has any relation to the attacks.

"This turn has nothing to do with the verdict. And I don't really believe it's an overall public turn. It's simply a reaction to Abdel Rahem's heated up allegations," he said, adding that he doesn't think the events of Shoraneya will be repeated elsewhere in Egypt.

Bahais have lived in Egypt for more than a hundred years. In 1924, Egypt became the first Muslim country to recognize the Bahai faith as an independent religion apart from Islam.

But ever since President Nasser shut down the Bahai national assembly in the 1960s, and the government proceeded to confiscate Bahai properties such as libraries and cemeteries, there has been no official record of the group.

Bahai institutions and community activities remain banned under Egyptian law to this day.

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## **Three Iranian converts ordered to stop 'Christian activities'**

### ***Judge puts them on probation, threatening them with 'apostasy' trial***

Compass Direct News (31.03.2009) / HRWF Int. (01.04.2009) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – Declaring three Iranian Christians guilty of cooperating with "anti-government movements," a court in Shiraz on March 10 ordered the converts to discontinue Christian activities and stop propagating their faith.

An Islamic Revolutionary Court judge handed an eight-month suspended prison sentence with a five-year probation to Seyed Allaedin Hussein, Homayoon Shokouhi, and Seyed Amir Hussein Bob-Annari. The judge said he would enforce their prison sentence and try

them as "apostates," or those who leave Islam, if they violate terms of their probation – including a ban on contacting one another.

A new penal code under consideration by the Iranian Parliament includes a bill that would require the death penalty for apostasy.

"The warning that they will be 'arrested and tried as apostates' if they continue their Christian activities is quite chilling," said a regional analyst who requested anonymity.

The Islamic Revolutionary Court was created after Iran's 1979 revolution to prosecute those suspected of seeking to depose the Islamic regime. The "anti-government movements" referred to by the judge are satellite television stations Love Television and Salvation TV. Unlike the Internet, which is heavily censored in Iran, the two 24-hour satellite TV stations can bypass government information barriers.

Sources said links between the accused and these organizations, however, remain tenuous.

"The TV link came up almost six months after [the original arrests], so it is very new," said an informed source. "We believe they just made it up, or it is something they want to make appear more important than is the reality."

The three men were arrested by security forces on May 11, 2008 at the Shiraz airport while en route to a Christian marriage seminar in Dubai. According to a report by Farsi Christian News Network (FCNN), at that time the families of the three men avoided formal charges by agreeing to terms of release, including payment of a bond amount. Details of the terms were undisclosed.

### **Churches Pressured**

The sentencing of three converts from Islam follows more than 50 documented arrests of Christians in 2008 alone, and the recent government crackdown includes Christian institutions that minister beyond Iran's tiny indigenous Christian community.

On March 19, Assyrian Member of Parliament Yonathan Betkolia announced that by order of the Islamic Revolutionary Court, an Assyrian Pentecostal church in Tehran would be closed. According to FCNN, the church in the Shahrara area of Tehran was facing closure because it offered a Farsi-language service attended by converts from Islam.

During a speech following his election to Parliament in October, Betkolia had lauded freedoms accorded to minority groups in Iran, and he has publicly protested the Shahrara church allowing "non-Assyrians" – that is, Muslims – to attend services. The regional analyst said that Betkolia made these pronouncements as the increase in government pressure on the Christian community has put him in a difficult position.

"As a representative of the Assyrian community, a priority for Betkolia is to ensure the preservation of the limited freedoms and relative peace his traditional Christian community enjoys," said the analyst. "Disassociation from a church which has welcomed believers from a Muslim background should therefore be seen as a form of self-defense."

The number of Assyrian Christians in the country is estimated at between 10,000 and 20,000, with estimates of Armenian Christians in Iran ranging from 110,000 to 300,000.

Advocacy organization Human Rights Activists in Iran strongly criticized the decision to close the Assyrian church.

"The closing of the church is clearly a violation of human rights," the organization stated, "because the right to change one's religion and the right of self-expression are hereby targeted by the Islamic Revolutionary Court."

The pastor of the Shahrara church has indicated that cancelling Farsi-language services may allow it to continue, though it was unclear at press time whether the congregation's leadership was willing to make that compromise. FCNN reported in February that church leaders had on some occasions cancelled Farsi-language services at church.

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## **European Union expresses "deep concern" over seven Baha'i prisoners**

BWNS (18.02.2009) / HRWF Int. (20.02.2009) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – The European Union yesterday issued a statement expressing its "deep concern" over Iran's plans to bring seven imprisoned Baha'i leaders to trial for espionage and other charges. The Baha'i International Community has called for their immediate release, maintaining their innocence and characterizing the regime's claims as an "escalation of its systematic crackdown on the Baha'is."

The EU statement coincided with increasingly sharp anti-Baha'i rhetoric from Iranian officials, who said a trial for the seven might come within a week.

The seven Baha'i leaders have been imprisoned in Tehran for more than eight months, during which no formal evidence has been brought against them and they have not been given access to their legal counsel, Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi. Another 30 Baha'is are imprisoned in Iran, while 80 other prisoners have been released on collateral.

The European Union said it was concerned that, "after being held for so long without due process, the Baha'i leaders may not receive a fair trial.

"The EU therefore requests the Islamic Republic of Iran to allow independent observation of the judicial proceedings and to reconsider the charges brought against these individuals."

The document was endorsed by the entire 27-nation membership of the EU, along with Turkey, Croatia, Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Ukraine, and Moldova.

Separately, in Brazil yesterday, the president of the Human Rights Commission of the Federal Chamber of Deputies sent an open letter to Iran, asking for the release of the Baha'i prisoners.

The Brazilian statement was issued by Pompeo de Mattos, president of the national legislature's Human Rights Commission.

"The peace-loving, humanistic principles and practices for which the Baha'is are known in Brazil have earned this community respect and credibility among the country's human rights supporters," said Deputy de Mattos. "There is therefore no reason to doubt the credibility of their claims."

Other such strong statements of support have been issued over the past several days from governments and parliamentarians in a number of countries, including Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Meanwhile, an official Iranian news agency report yesterday quoted a judiciary department spokesman as saying the seven Baha'is "would attend their hearing sessions within one week."

According to an Islamic Republic News Agency story, Judiciary spokesman Ali-Reza Jamshidi told reporters at his weekly press conference yesterday that the "seven committed criminal acts including spying for foreigners."

Mr. Jamshidi stated that the Baha'is would "definitely be allowed to use legal counsel," though they have had no access to their lawyer to date.

His statement followed a harsh report on Sunday that quoted Iran's prosecutor general as saying the government plans the "complete destruction" of Baha'i administration in Iran.

"The administration of the misguided Baha'i sect at all levels is unlawful and banned, and their ties to Israel and their opposition to Islam and the Islamic regime are clear," said Iranian Prosecutor General Ayatollah Ghorban-Ali Dorri Najafabadi, according to a report in Fars News.

"The danger they pose to national security is documented and proven and therefore it is necessary that any substitute administration that acts as a replacement for the original be confronted through the law," said Ayatollah Najafabadi.

Diane Ala'i of the Baha'i International Community said the activities of the Baha'i leaders had to do with meeting the minimum spiritual and administrative needs of the 300,000-member Baha'i community of Iran. She said Ayatollah Najafabadi's attempt to portray their actions as "dangerous" was baseless and that the government is well aware that there is no truth to such allegations.

"How can the chief prosecutor equate something so harmless as a group of individuals who get together to give spiritual guidance and administer such things as marriages and burials and children's moral classes with something that threatens Iran's national security?" said Ms. Ala'i, the Baha'i International Community's representative to the United Nations in Geneva.

"After they banned Baha'i administration in Iran in 1983, the government has always been aware of and informed of the activities of these ad hoc groups.

"In the eyes of the government, the only real 'crime' of the seven currently in Evin prison - along with the some 30 other Baha'i prisoners currently held in Iran - is that they hold a religious belief that is different from the majority in Iran, and that is something that the current regime finds intolerable," she said.

Ms. Ala'i also discussed remarks made yesterday by Mr. Jamshidi in response to a question about Ayatollah Najafabadi's statements. Mr. Jamshidi was quoted as saying: "Any acts which could be taken as propaganda against Islam, Iran and its Islamic establishment is definitely considered a crime and its perpetrators would be legally encountered."

"The fact is that the Baha'i Faith is the only independent world religion other than Islam that accepts the divinity of Muhammad and reveres the Qur'an - along with the holy books of all the world's great religions," Ms. Ala'i said. "There is nothing anti-Islamic or anti-Iran about the Baha'i Faith, its teachings, or the practices of its followers. The government cannot impose its own interpretation of Islam on the Baha'i Faith and conclude that the Baha'i Faith is anti-Islam."

The arrest of the Baha'i leadership takes place in the context of a severely and rapidly escalating campaign of attacks against the Baha'i community that has included the creation and circulation of lists of Baha'is with instructions that the activities of the members of the community be secretly monitored; dawn raids on Baha'i homes and the confiscation of personal property; a dramatic increase over the past two months in the number of Baha'is arrested; daily incitement to hatred of the Baha'is in all forms of government-sponsored mass media; the holding of anti-Baha'i symposia and seminars organized by clerics followed by orchestrated attacks on Baha'i homes and properties in the cities and towns where such events are held; destruction of Baha'i cemeteries throughout the country; demolition of Baha'i holy places and shrines; acts of arson against Baha'i homes and properties; denying Baha'is access to higher education and, increasingly, vilification of Baha'i children in their classrooms by their teachers; the designation of numerous occupations and businesses from which Baha'is are debarred; refusal to extend bank loans to Baha'is; the sealing of Baha'i shops; refusal to issue or renew business licenses to Baha'is; harassment of landlords of Baha'i business tenants to force their eviction; and threats against Muslims who associate with Baha'is.

"Indeed, the lives of the seven leaders currently in prison reflect lifelong efforts to promote the best development of Iranian society as a whole, through the promotion of education, social and economic development, and adherence to moral principle," Ms. Ala'i said.

Earlier this week, the British Foreign Office Minister Bill Rammell issued a statement saying the Iranian government "appears to be increasingly using vaguely worded charges to target human rights defenders and religious minorities."

"It is hard," said Minister Rammell on Monday, "not to conclude that these people are being held solely on account of their religious beliefs or their peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression and association."

To read this article and see photographs of the seven imprisoned Baha'is, go to:  
<http://news.bahai.org/story/699>

To see the Baha'i World News Service home page, go to:  
<http://news.bahai.org>

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## **Certificate in Anti-Baha'i Studies**

Iran Press Watch (03.02.2009) / HRWF (04.02.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - Editor's Note: In light of increased attacks on the Baha'i community in Iran and further systematization of these hostilities, the following story in Ayandeh Roushan [Bright Future] News Agency caught our attention and is presented below in translation.

Professional school of Sects and Religions is now accepting applications from those interested in training in the fields of Christianity, Baha'ism, and Wahhabism in Qom.

According to reports received by Ayandeh Roushan, in its effort to educate professional clergy in comparative studies of sects and religions, the Advanced [seminary] Studies School of Sects and Religions has introduced specialist training in understanding the principle beliefs of Shi'ism and discussions of the intellectual foundations of newly-emerging religions, denominations, and schools of thoughts.

The first phase of these training sessions includes specialized studies in the fields of Baha'ism, Wahhabism and Christianity. Interested individuals meeting the prerequisites

may refer to Imam Baghiru'l-'Ulum School in Qom, Safayyih Avenue, 37th Street, from January 26 to February 30, from 9 am till 1 pm.

Applicants for these courses must have completed level 2 of clerical seminary school in Qom, passed a training entrance exam, and successful completed an interview.

The following documents are required for registration for the exam: (1) Two 3×4 pictures, (2) a copy of birth certificate, and (3) a certificate of studies assessments at the seminary school.

Entrance exam will be on March 5, 2009. Those interested may contact telephone no. 0251-7839496

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## **Baha'i International community deplores destruction of Khavaran cemetery**

BWNS (30.01.2009) / HRWF Int. (03.02.2009) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – The destruction earlier this month of a cemetery in Iran used for the mass burial of hundreds killed in the aftermath of the Islamic revolution in 1979 is an outrageous violation of human dignity, the Baha'i International Community said today. At least 15 Baha'is were among those buried at the site.

"The destruction of the Khavaran cemetery by government agents goes against all concepts of respect for the dead in any culture, including values preached in Islam," said Diane Ala'i, the representative of the Baha'i International Community to the United Nations in Geneva.

"We join with other human rights groups inside and outside of Iran in condemning this shameful deed, which is yet another sign of the intolerance of the current Iranian regime," said Ms. Ala'i.

Located southeast of Tehran, the Khavaran cemetery was used as the burial site for hundreds who were killed in the early years of the Iranian revolution.

Earlier this month, a group of unidentified individuals using bulldozers demolished an area of the cemetery known as the "graveyard of the infidels," the area where many of the people executed in the early years of the revolution were buried.

Reports indicate the group clearly represented a branch of the government. It was also reported that the officials told the cemetery custodian that the parcel was being demolished to develop a green space or park.

Human rights groups inside and outside of Iran have since registered protests.

On 20 January 2009, Amnesty International called on Iranian authorities to "immediately stop the destruction of hundreds of individual and mass, unmarked graves in Khavaran, south Tehran, to ensure that the site is preserved and to initiate a forensic investigation at the site as part of a long-overdue thorough, independent and impartial investigation into mass executions which began in 1988. ..."

Iranian human rights advocates, including Nobel Prize winner Shirin Ebadi, have also condemned the cemetery's destruction.

"We have recently learned that Khavaran cemetery, where the victims of the illegal massacre of political prisoners in the 1980s and especially 1988 are buried, has been

destroyed by some officials," the Human Rights Defenders' Centre said in a statement issued on 25 January, according to Agence France-Presse. "The Human Rights Defenders Centre condemns this ugly and appalling act and notes that everyone including the authorities is required to maintain the dignity of the dead."

At least 15 Baha'is were buried in the same section of the cemetery, all victims in the early 1980s of the government's campaign to systematically persecute Iranian Baha'is for their religious beliefs.

Specifically, it is known that eight members of the national Baha'i governing body killed on 27 December 1981 are buried there, along with six members of the Baha'i Spiritual Assembly of Tehran, killed on 4 January 1982. It is likely that other Baha'is were buried there, too.

According to a Baha'i whose husband is buried at the site, most of the graves in that section of the cemetery were unmarked, designated only by numerical row markers.

"They called it the place for 'infidels,'" said the widow, who currently resides outside of Iran. "They just gave us row numbers, and that is how I knew where my husband was. But there were no markers and we were not allowed to identify which grave was which."

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## **Three Iranian Christians arrested from homes in Tehran**

### ***'Continuously high' wave of arrests increases; whereabouts, charges unknown***

Compass Direct (23.01.2009) / HRWF Int. (27.01.2009) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – Three Christians from two different families were arrested from their homes Wednesday morning (Jan. 21) and are being held without charges, sources told Compass.

Authorities took Jamal Ghalishorani, 49, and his wife Nadereh Jamali from their home in Tehran between 7 and 8 a.m., about a half hour after arresting Hamik Khachikian, an Armenian Christian also living in Tehran. Ghalishorani and his wife are Christian converts from Islam, considered "apostasy" in Iran and potentially punishable by death.

Christian sources told Compass that Ghalishorani converted to Christianity 30 years ago, and his wife received Christ about 15 years ago. They have one child, a 13-year-old daughter, while Khachikian has two children, a 16-year-old son and an 11-year-old daughter. Authorities have not told the families of the charges against those arrested or their whereabouts.

The three arrested Christians belong to house churches, source said, and they hold jobs and are not supported as clergy. Police also took books and computers from the families' homes.

The arrests come as part of a tsunami of arrests in the past several months, the sources said.

"We don't know why the pressure is continuously high, but we see that it is increasing," said one source. "The government does it to the Baha'i people as well – there are more arrests in the last several months among them than in maybe the whole 30 years before."

Arrests and pressure on Christians from authorities have ramped up even further in the past few months, the source said, adding that the reasons were unclear.

Another source, however, said the arrests are part of a concerted, nationwide government plan.

"We are quite sure that these arrests are part of a bigger operation from the government," the source said. "Maybe up to 50 people were arrested. In Tehran alone already some 10 people were arrested – all on the same day, January 21."

Sources noted that whereas past waves of intense harassment and arrests of Christians eventually have subsided, recent pressure has been "continuously high," with reports of arrests in almost every month of 2008.

"In the past there have been waves of incredible pressure, but then it seemed to calm down a bit sometimes," said one source. "Then we had the feeling pressure came and went, but now it is continuously ongoing."

The families of those arrested fear for their safety. Khachikian's wife is "very confused, she has no idea where her husband is," said the source. "Relatives are taking care of the daughter of Jamal and Nadereh's, but of course she's very anxious about what will happen to her parents."

The arrests are particularly disturbing in light of the Iranian parliament's approval last September of a new penal code calling for a mandatory death sentence for "apostates," or those who leave Islam. In the past death sentences for apostasy were issued only under judicial interpretations of sharia (Islamic law).

Under the new penal code, male "apostates" would be executed, while females would receive life sentences. The new code was to be sent to Iran's most influential body, the Guardian Council, which will rule on it. The council is made up of six conservative theologians appointed by Iran's Supreme Leader and six jurists nominated by the judiciary and approved by parliament. This body has the power to veto any bill it deems inconsistent with the constitution and Islamic law.

The last Iranian Christian convert from Islam executed by the Iranian government was Hossein Soodmand in 1990. He was accused of working as "an American spy." Since then at least six Protestant pastors have been assassinated by unknown killers.

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## **Raids and arrests of Baha'is reach critical levels**

### ***Specter of torture and ill-treatment rises high for Baha'is in prison***

International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (22.01.2009) / HRWF Int. (23.01.2009) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran expressed grave concern for the situation of Iran's largest religious minority group today. Members of the Baha'i Faith have been targeted with alarming frequency in recent months with 36 Baha'is currently under arrest in Iranian prisons.

"The continued targeting of members of the Baha'i community is indicative of the larger goal of suppressing individual human rights by the Iranian government. All Baha'is detained and arrested, have committed no crime whatsoever," said Hadi Ghaemi, Campaign spokesperson.

On the morning of 14 January 2009, Intelligence Ministry officials raided the homes of 12 Baha'is in Tehran. The officials confiscated books, materials, and photographs related to the Baha'i Faith as well as computers and CDs. The agents arrested Shahrokh Taef,

Jinous Sobhani, Didar Raoufi, Aziz Samandari and Payam Aghsani. They are currently being held incommunicado in Evin Prison. Their families have met with the presiding judge but have been unable to see their loved ones.

These recent arrests come on the heels of the raid of 20 Baha'i homes in Semnan on 15 December 2008. Another raid of a Baha'i home in Yazd was carried out on 11 December. Three Baha'is were arrested in Ghaemshahr, Mazandaran the week of 18 November 2008, and one of them, Mr. Masou Ataiyan is still in prison. In October, Ziaollah Allahverdi and his wife Sonia Tebyani were arrested in Behshahr, Mazandaran. Other arrests and raids were carried out in August in Mehrian.

Among the many cases of Baha'i arrests, the most important were the arrests of seven members of the Baha'i leadership group who have been in prison for over seven months. The seven members still have no access to legal counsel. They are permitted family visits only twice a month, visits which are never more than a few minutes and always in the presence of prison officials. The five male detainees are incarcerated within the same cell, only 10 meters in area and with no beds. The detention order of all seven members of the leadership group was officially extended for another two months on 26 November 2008.

"The international community should strongly condemn the persecution of minority religious groups in Iran. The government shows no signs of relenting in its targeting and persecution of Baha'is," Ghaemi said.

Following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the targeting of the Baha'i community of Iran escalated to dangerous levels with the members of the national governing body of Baha'is being kidnapped and executed. Many other Baha'is throughout Iran have been executed since and the present situation bears strong resemblance to those cases.

The actions of the Iranian government are in violation of international standards of human rights and religious freedom and the Campaign calls on the Iranian government to cease its persecution campaign against the Baha'i community of Iran.

For the latest human rights developments in Iran visit the Campaign's website at [www.iranhumanrights.org](http://www.iranhumanrights.org)

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## **Iranian media report Baha'i missionary arrests**

CNN (16.01.2009) / HRWF Int. (20.01.2009) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – Iranian authorities have reportedly arrested several women for doing missionary work for the Baha'is, the religious group whose persecution by the Islamic republic has been condemned by human rights activists and governments around the globe.

Tabnak, a semi-official Iranian news service, reported the development but did not specify how many women were arrested or when they were seized.

The arrests took place in Kish Island, Iranian territory in the Persian Gulf, the agency said. Tabnak said some of those arrested came from Tehran and others from abroad.

"For a long time now, those who wanted to recruit young Iranian men to join the Baha'is used attractive women as bait," the site said. "Israel has given sanctuary to the leaders of this perverted group [Baha'is] for many years, and the United States and Britain have provided them with billions of dollars to engage in propaganda."

This news comes after the Baha'i movement reported that six members of the group were arrested in Tehran this week, including one who works with lawyer and activist Shirin Ebadi, a Nobel peace laureate. Seven leaders of the group seized in 2008 remain in jail.

In a resolution Thursday, the European Parliament condemned Iran's harassment of Ebadi, who had been threatened when she undertook the defense of the seven people arrested. The parliament also criticized the dissemination of "false information" by [Iran's](#) Islamic Republic News Agency, which said Ebadi's daughter converted to the Baha'i faith.

The parliament says "allegation can have serious consequences since Baha'i believers are harshly persecuted in Iran."

The Baha'is -- who believe they are targeted in the predominantly Shiite nation because of their faith -- have faced oppression, including arrests, over the years.

They say the persecution is part of a pattern of religious persecution that began in 1979. That's when the monarchy of the Shah of Iran was toppled and an Islamic republic was created.

The Baha'is say the government's philosophies are based largely on the idea that there can be "no prophet following Mohammed" and that their faith "poses a theological challenge to this belief."

The Baha'is say they regard their founder, Baha'u'llah, as "the most recent in the line of Messengers of God that stretches back beyond recorded time and that includes Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Krishna, Zoroaster, Christ and Mohammed."

The Baha'is, regarded as the largest non-Muslim religious minority in Iran, say they have 5 million members around the globe and about 300,000 in Iran.

The Baha'i World Center, which the movement refers to as its "spiritual and administrative heart," is in the Acre/Haifa area in northern Israel. That location predates the founding of the state of Israel; it was formed during the Ottoman Empire's rule of Palestine.

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