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70 Christians arrested and detained over Christmas in Iran

CSW (05.01.2011) / HRWF Int. (06.01.2011) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - In the early hours of Christmas day the Iranian government arrested 25 Christians and sought to detain 16 others. 50 other Christians have also been detained but it is unclear as yet what the full details are surrounding their cases.

This was the second year running that security services in Iran had targeted Christians over the Christmas period.

Of the 25 detained, 11 have been released. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has serious concerns for the remaining 14 individuals still in prison.

The individuals are all evangelical believers. They include pastors and leaders from within the house church networks of Iran. The government puts severe pressure on such individuals interrogating them brutally and holding them in solitary confinement in order to obtain the names of other church members, to deter them from continuing to practice their faith and to threaten them with further ramifications for Christian activities.

One of the most troubling developments in the latest arrests has been the anti-Christian rhetoric used in public media by religious leaders and members of the Iranian government. Morteza Tamadon, the Governor of Tehran, announced the arrest of several evangelical leaders in a speech in Tehran on 4 January 2010. "Just like the Taliban... who have inserted themselves into Islam like a parasite, they have crafted a movement with Britain's backing in the name of Christianity," he told state-run news agency, IRNA. Mr. Tamadon described the Christians as "tabshiri" or 'missionaries' and threatened more arrests in the near future.

Andrew Johnston, Advocacy Director of CSW, said: "We condemn this brutal attack on evangelical Christians in Iran. The arrest of 70 members of one group reveals the clear targeting of individuals along religious lines. Iran is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and is therefore legally obligated to uphold international standards of religious freedom for all its citizens."

Youcef Nadarkhani to be executed for apostasy

Text of the verdict

Court: 11th Chamber of The Assize Court of the province of Gilan

The accused: Mr Yousef Nadarkhani, currently in general prison,

The accused's attorneys: Mr Abbas Salmanpoor and Dr Naser Sarbazi

Charge: Apostasy

The verdict

According to the indictment No: 89/4/3-2080, issued by the public persecutor office of Rasht, Mr Yousef Nadarkhani, son of Biram, 32 years old and married, temporary in general prison since 28/7/1388, charged with the denial of the prophethood of the great prophet of Islam, that It has resulted in inherent apostasy from the holy religion of Islam after he has accepted it at the age of maturity until the age of 19. The brief definition of what has taken place is that the mentioned-above person was born in 1356 from Muslim parents and according to his own statements in primary investigations, he has accepted Islam and obeyed its commandments from the age of puberty, and at the age of 19 he has converted from Islam to Christianity officially. He has frequently denied the prophethood of the great prophet of Islam and the rule of the sacred religion of Islam. And he has proven his apostasy by organizing evangelistic meetings and inviting others to Christianity, establishing a house church, baptizing people, expressing his faith to others and, denying Islamic values. After his arrest, during investigations, most of the time he has proven his return from Islam and denying the rule of Islam over all the religions in his own handwritten bills to The Assize Court of the province of Gilan.

Even in his last defense on the date of 24/12/1388, when he was asked, "from the age of puberty until the age of 19, what religion have you had?" He replied that " Since I was born in a Muslim family, I was Muslim until I converted to Christianity at the age of 19. In the other persecutor's question with this content that " do you admit that you have been Muslim from the age of puberty and you have converted to Christianity after passing the age of 19?" He replied he had been Muslim from the age of puberty till he converted to Christianity in 19 years of age. He was questioned once again that " do you believe in the elements of Islam which are the unity of God, resurrection of the dead and the prophethood of great Mohammad?" He answered "I believe in the unity of God and the resurrection of the dead but not the prophethood of great Mohammad." After the issuance of culpability and indictment, the case has been sent to the courts that referred it to this section. Dr. Naser Sarbazi and Mr. Abbas Salmanpoor have been appointed as the accused's attorneys, the court proceeded with the case after the formalities were carried out. The representative of the public persecutor office of Rasht read the issued indictment, and according to it, apostasy is a crime according to theologians of Islam and there is a punishment for it in the laws of Islamic Republic of Iran.

With regard to the Article 167 of The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Article 3 of Civil procedure of the Islamic Revolutionary Tribunal, and the Article 105 of the

Islamic Judicial system of Iran. After the court caused him to understand the charge, he initially declined the charge by saying he had not had any particular religion after passing the puberty age till the age of 19, and converted to Christianity officially by believing that it is the only truth. When he was asked by the court that why he has repeatedly stated during interrogations that " Since I was born in a Muslim family, I have been Muslim after passing the puberty age until I converted from Islam to Christianity at the age of 19". He answered " The persecutor induced me to believe whoever is born from Muslim parents and does not choose any religions after passing the puberty age, is a Muslim. That is why I have stated so." The accused's attorneys in addition to repeating their client's defense, stated that, "Since there is no punishment specified in the Islamic Judicial system of Iran and other penal laws and therefore their client has not committed a crime to deserve a punishment. Secondly: Their client has not accepted Islam from the beginning of the puberty age to become an apostate by returning from it. Thirdly: Their client does not deny the prophethood of the great prophet of Islam as he has stated in his bills to The Assize Court of the province of Gilan that, he believes in great Mohammad as the great prophet of Islam. Fourthly: due to existence of not proven evidence regarding this case, the attorneys have requested a not guilty verdict for their client. in response to the court, that whether the accused believes in the prophethood of great Mohammad son of Abdullah as a prophet from almighty God for the salvation of humanity or not, he said, " I have stated in the written bills that he is the prophet of Muslims but not a messenger from God, I am saved for not studying Islam, and I will never speak of Islamic testimonies to convert to Islam.

After hearing of the indictment that was read by the public persecutor, the accused denied his apostasy charge in his last defense, and committed the remaining defense to his attorneys' hands. The attorneys have pleaded a not guilty verdict for their client by repeating the same previous defense. objections have affected on the trial somehow one member of the jury left during the trial. even though some jury members, in the first day 30/6/89 and second day 31/6/89 of the trial, specified that the court has not accepted the objections after the termination of the trial, and answers to the objections have been written.

As a result, with regard to

- 1- The reports of the intelligence bureau of Gilan as the executive office of the Judicial system
- 2- The accused's explicit and indisputable writings with the content that he has accepted Islam at the age of maturity, and quitted it at the age of 19
- 3- Organizing evangelistic gatherings and admitting to the establishments of house churches
- 4- The accused's unreasonable and not proven defense, that he has not entered Islam to quit it
- 5- His written bills from prison to the investigator in charge of the case that confirm his statements in the intelligence bureau
- 6- And other elements that exist in the case such as attorney's unreasonable defense that their client's denial of prophethood of the great prophet of Islam has not been due to enmity and malice with Islam but because of the anger and pressure he has been bearing. It has been proven to the members of the jury that Mr Youcef Nadarkhani, son of Biram, has been born from Muslim parents, have chosen Islam, and quitted it at the age 19. His actions according to the fatwas of all Shia theologians are considered as inherent apostasy from the sacred religion of Islam.

With regard to the Article 167 of The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Article 3 of Civil procedure of the Islamic Revolutionary Court, Article 8 of The law of Establishment of the General and Revolutionary Courts, Article 105 of the Islamic Judicial system of Iran, Article 8 from the book of Tahrir Alvasilah Fi Sofat Alghazi Va Maianaseb

Lah, Fatwas of theologians including Imam and the supreme leader and grand ayatollahs Mohammad Reza Golpayegani, Safi, Makarem Shirazi, Behjat Foumani, and pages of 103 till 109 of his file, the above-mentioned person as an apostate will be executed by hanging somehow his soul is taken from him. the sentence is attendant and appealable at the supreme court 20 days after when It has been delivered.

Source: <http://presenttruthmn.com/blog/iran/youcef-nadarkhanis-verdict-translated-english> (November 22, 2010)

Tehran, seven Bahai members sentenced to 20 years in prison

Asia News (10.08.2010) / HRWF Int. (11.08.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The seven are cultural figures and scientists. They have been in Evin prison since 2008. They are accused of "spying for Israel, insult to religious things, propaganda against the Islamic republic." At least 47 members are in prison because of their faith.

Seven members of the Bahai, a religious minority in Iran, were sentenced to 20 years in prison. The groups official website confirmed the news (news.bahai.org). According to the community's spokesman, the Iranian authorities have decided the sentence August 8 last but only orally communicating it to defence lawyers. They are still waiting for written confirmation from the courts.

The seven members were arrested in March and May 2008 and are being held in Evin prison. Their trial has had its ups and downs, with hearings set and then cancelled throughout 2009. In 2010 there were a few brief sessions from January to June, the defendants had only an hour to confer with their lawyers.

It was never drafted a written sentence, but the semi-official agency ISNA, reported that the seven were tried for "spying for Israel, insulting religious things, propaganda against the Islamic republic." They were also accused of "spreading corruption on earth".

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.

The seven - cultural figures and scientists - are among national leaders of the minority in Iran.

The Bahai community was founded around 1860 by the Persian nobleman Baha'u'llah, a new self-appointed prophet and continuer of the work of Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. In direct contrast then with Islam's proclamation that sees Mohammed as the last prophet. Permitted at the time of the Shah, since the Islamic Revolution of '79 it has been branded as heretical and banned. Since '79 more than 200 followers have been executed or murdered, hundreds jailed, tens of thousands have been deprived of employment, pensions, and commercial activities. All Bahai institutions are prohibited and their holy places, cemeteries and properties have been confiscated by the government or destroyed Many Bahai have been imprisoned for simply having taught their children their religion. Their young people can not go to university, if they do not declare themselves "Islamic".

The group has about 7 million followers worldwide and also has a temple in Haifa, northern Israel. Members have often explained that their presence in Israel has no political reasons, but religious: their founder, after being exiled from Baghdad and Constantinople, went to live in Haifa in 1868, long before the State of Israel was formed.

According to the organization, at least 47 members of the Bahai community in Iran are in prison for their faith.

Iran issues list of approved Muslim hairstyles for men

Michael Theodoulou

Daily Mail (06.07.2010) / HRWF Int. (08.07.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Iran is set to order a crackdown on men sporting 'un-Islamic' haircuts.

Long hair and ponytails are definitely out this summer - though a dab of gel is acceptable, according to the country's morality police.

And a beard is no longer required as a symbol of political and religious correctness.

A photographic catalogue of permissible 'Islamic' hairstyles is to be published and promoted later this month at the 'Modesty and Veil Festival'.

Iran's dour Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance has given the project its vital seal of approval.

'The proposed styles are inspired by Iranians' complexion, culture, religion and Islamic law,' said Jaleh Khodayar, the festival's female organiser.

A tantalising foretaste of what is follically acceptable was provided by Iranian news agencies yesterday, which carried pictures of mostly clean-shaven male models sporting short hair.

Hardliners have frequently raged against youths with 'decadent Western cuts'.

But the red lines governing male grooming have never been clearly identified – until now. Those aping the elaborate styles of some millionaire European football stars have been hauled off to police stations where their beloved locks have been unceremoniously and inexpertly shorn.

First-time offenders braving a close shave with the law get off with an unflattering short-back-and-sides.

But serial hair delinquents risk stiff fines, while barber shops catering to Western fashions have been shut.

Dictating public behaviour and enforcing the strict dress code – especially for women – have long been a way for the regime to demonstrate its control.

But it has been an uphill struggle for an anti-Western regime dealing with a population seduced by Western pop culture.

The dress code crackdown is always beefed up at the beginning of summer when temperatures soar and people wear cooler clothing.

The authorities scornfully brand as 'mannequins' women who flout the rules by thrusting back their obligatory headscarves, wearing a dash of make-up or flashing a bit of ankle.

This summer, for the first time, police were equipped with cameras to film 'immodestly-attired' women, with the footage to be used as irrefutable evidence in court.

But men have also been feeling the heat in this summer's 'anti-vice' campaign.

Police have seized expensive foreign cars whose male drivers are deemed to be 'harassing women'.

To humiliate the car owners, state media have shown pictures of their vehicles lined up along Tehran streets festooned with placards proclaiming, 'Combating harassment of women'.

Also under hardline scrutiny this summer is the growing fashion in Tehran's wealthier northern suburbs to keep dogs – which are considered 'unclean' under Islamic tradition – as pets.

A senior cleric issued a fatwa, or religious ruling, against the practice last month.

'Friendship with dogs is a blind imitation of the West,' thundered Grand Ayatollah Naser Makarem Shirazi. 'There are lots of people in the West who love their dogs more than their wives and children.'

Two Iranian Christian women acquitted of all charges

Young converts previously held in prison for Christian activities have fled country

By Damaris Kremida

Compass Direct (27.05.2010) / HRWF Int. (31.05.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net>
- Nearly five months after releasing them from prison, an Iranian court has acquitted two women of all charges related to being Christians and engaging in Christian activities.

Iranians Maryam Rostampour and Marzieh Amirizadeh Esmaeilabad were arrested on March 5, 2009 and detained on charges of "acting against state security," "taking part in illegal gatherings" and "apostasy" (leaving Islam) under Iran's Revolutionary Court system.

After nearly eight months, on Nov. 18, 2009 authorities released them conditionally.

Although the court hearing their case originally set April 13 as their trial date, Compass was unable to confirm on what date the two women were acquitted, nor the conditions of their acquittal.

Senior Iranian judges and officials repeatedly intimidated the two women and pressured them to recant their faith, according to a press statement by Elam Ministries last week.

"They were warned that any future Christian activity in Iran will be seriously dealt with," according to the statement.

Elam Ministries said the two women had fled Iran on Saturday (May 22) to an undisclosed location and were recovering.

Another Iranian convert who was forced to flee his country under similar circumstances years ago told Compass that he believed the intense lobbying efforts to release and acquit the women brought the government to an unspoken "standoff" with Christian rights groups outside the country.

"I think the court just made a political decision, 'We will let you go, but we will not allow you to stay in the country,'" said the Iranian Christian, who requested anonymity. "That's a pretty old-fashioned procedure they have - 'We will let you go if you leave the country. You can have your faith, but not here.'"

In general, when Iranian authorities arrest Christians, they release them on bail within a few weeks and keep their case files open, thus applying soft pressure while allowing them to continue living in Iran. In cases where the government wants to remove Christians from the country because of their Christian activities, authorities have handed the Christians their passports and documents and told them to leave.

Iran's government views all Christian activities as foreign intervention and thus a threat to national security. The two women's families had hired a private lawyer.

Since their release, the young converts to Christianity had been waiting for a trial date and decision from an Iranian court to decide their fate as Christians living their faith. During this time, sources said that authorities watched them closely and that the two women were under "pressure" and received threatening phone calls.

"The government would not want them to stay in the country as heroes," said the Iranian Christian. "It would be better for the government if they left Iran and didn't become a positive example for the rest of the Christian community in Iran. Otherwise they would create a precedent of [Christians] who have not denied their faith, who have been acquitted and still live as Christians inside the country."

The two women thanked Christians who have been praying for them, according to Elam.

"We hope to eventually share some of what the Lord allowed us to go through to highlight the need and the opportunity for the church in Iran, but right now we will take time to pray and seek the Lord for His will," said Rostampour, according to Elam's press statement.

Iran's Constitution gives Christians "protected" religious minority status, but in practice they face substantial societal discrimination, according to the U.S. Department of State's International Religious Freedom Report 2009.

An article mandating death for apostates in accordance with sharia (Islamic law) reportedly has been stricken from a draft penal code, but experts on Iran say The Council of Guardians and Iran's Supreme Leader still have the final say on who receives capital punishment for leaving Islam.

How schoolchildren are brainwashed in Iran

By Hossein Aryan

RFE (27.05.2010) / HRWF Int. (31.05.2010) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Acting on orders from Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to counter the "soft war" launched by Iran's enemies after last year's disputed presidential election, the Basij militia have beefed up their ideological indoctrination of schoolchildren.

Brigadier General Mohammad-Saleh Jokar, who heads the Students Basij, told the Mehr news agency last week that in the last six months, 6,000 "resistance centers" have been established in elementary schools in order to fully prepare children for joining Basij units when they transfer to middle schools at the age of 12.

The idea of expanding Basij activities was first announced last November, when Jokar told Mehr that "schoolchildren are more susceptible at a young age than at any other time in their lives...and we want to promote and instill into elementary schoolchildren the ideas of the revolution and Basij."

Martyrdom icon

The Basij Resistance Force, with a nominal strength of 12.6 million, has been present in schools since it was first created 31 years ago, but the law authorizing the government to establish schoolchildren's Basij units was ratified by the Majlis only in April 1996.

During the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War, when self-sacrifice and martyrdom became the quintessential values of the Islamic revolution and the guiding principles of Iranian society, more than 550,000 students were sent to the front, often with a plastic "key to paradise" hanging around their necks and the promise that they would automatically go to paradise if they died in battle.

General Jokar told the Fars news agency last October that 36,000 schoolchildren were killed and 2,853 injured during the war, while 2,433 were taken prisoner. The exceptionally high ratio of dead to wounded (in a conventional war between professional armies the number of wounded is higher than the number of those killed) reflects the children's lack of military training: they were used as cannon fodder in human-wave attacks launched by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps against the Iraqi forces.

In order to promote and glorify the spirit of martyrdom in line with the law enacted by the Majlis, October 30 is celebrated as Student Basij Day.

It was on that day in 1980, during the battle for the southern port of Khorramshahr at the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War, that 13-year-old Hossein Fahmideh pulled the pin out of a grenade and leaped clutching it under an advancing Iraqi tank, killing himself and disabling the tank. Islamic republic founder Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini declared Fahmideh a hero, and a monument to him was later erected on the outskirts of Tehran. That monument has since become a place of pilgrimage for schoolchildren.

Discussing the importance of observing Islamic standards in kindergartens, Welfare and Social Security Minister Sadeq Mahsouli, himself a former Revolutionary Guard commander, said last month that "children should be educated in such a way that when they reach the age of 13, they will be able to imitate Hossein Fahmideh."

Pioneers, Komsomol, And Commissars

According to General Jokar, the Student Basij currently numbers 4.6 million members of both sexes. They are subdivided into units of "Omidan" (Hopes, in elementary schools); "Pouyandegan" (Seekers, in middle schools) and "Pishgaman" (Standard Bearers, in high schools). Those subdivisions are similar to the Young Pioneers and Komsomol in the Soviet Union.

Meanwhile, 4,000 experts in political education are to be sent to schools across the country, a senior Education Ministry official recently told the Iranian Labor News Agency. Those experts, who bear a striking resemblance to Soviet-era political commissars, are to show children "how to combat the onslaught of [Western] culture and inform them about the enemies' plots being hatched against the Islamic revolution."

"The clerical regime is once again using religion to create an ideology in order to brainwash schoolchildren and consolidate its authority in society, the way many other authoritarian regimes do," Azadeh Kian, a political sociologist at Paris University VIII, tells RFE/RL's Radio Farda.

Increasing indoctrination

Confirming that the indoctrination of schoolchildren has become a priority for the regime, Education Minister Hamid-Reza Hajibabai recently disclosed that "10,000 houses of the Koran, 20,000 prayer rooms, and 20,000 libraries will be established in schools."

Said Payvandi, a professor of education at the University of Paris VI, describes such indoctrination as anathema to education. "All international charters stress that children, especially 7-14-year-olds, should receive education in a free environment devoid of ideological pressure or military training," he tells RFE/RL's Radio Farda.

Schoolteachers too are seriously concerned by the government's measures to indoctrinate even the youngest schoolchildren. A teacher from the province of Khuzestan who asked not to be named told Radio Farda that the presence of at least one Basij at every school, Basij cooperation with the Intelligence Ministry, and the selection of Basij members as headmasters in most schools has brought schools firmly under the control of the security agencies.

Yet these combined measures were not sufficient to prevent student protests at a number of schools last September inspired by the post-presidential-election demonstrations.

It seems as though the government's education policy over the past 30 years has not succeeded in molding young Iranians' minds. "The government's failed policy manifested itself in [the post-presidential-election] protests by young people who were born after the [1979] revolution and grew up in an environment imbued with propaganda and the ideologization of Islam. But the result [of that brain-washing] has been the opposite of what the regime intended," says sociologist Azadeh Kian.

Rouzbeh Bolhari of RFE/RL's Radio Farda contributed to this article. Hossein Aryan is deputy director of Radio Farda. The views expressed in this commentary are his own, and do not necessarily reflect those of RFE/RL

Christian who fled Iran wins asylum in Kenya

Judge rules Iranian convert from Islam requires protection from persecutors

By Simba Tian

Compass Direct (15.03.2010) / HRWF Int. (16.03.2010) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Mohammad Azbari, a Christian convert from Islam who has fled to Kenya, knows what it's like to be deported back to his native Iran.

When it happened in 2007, he said, Iranian authorities pressured the government of Norway to return him and his wife Gelanie Azbari to Iran after hearing rumors that he had forsaken Islam.

"When we arrived in Iran, we were interrogated by security and severely beaten," he told Compass in Nairobi, where he and his family fought to persuade the Kenyan government to decline Iran's demand to deport him back. "My son got scared and began urinating on himself."

A cousin managed to secure their release, but not before Iranian authorities had taken valuable – and incriminating – possessions.

"They took everything that I had – laptop, camera and some of my valuables which contained all my details, such as information concerning my baptism, and my entire profile, including that of my family," Azbari said.

Azbari had been employed in the Iranian army before fleeing, he said, and authorities were monitoring his movements because they were concerned that, having Islam, he might betray his country and reveal government secrets.

When he and his Christian wife, a native of the Philippines, first fled Iran in 2000, he was still a Shia Muslim. The previous year authorities had arrested his wife after finding a Christmas tree in their house in Tehran; Azbari was not home at the time and thus escaped arrest, but as authorities took his wife away they left their then 3-year-old son unattended.

"I was put in a small cell for two days," Gelanie Azbari told Compass, through tears. "While in the cell two police guards raped me. It was the worst of all the nights I have had in my lifetime. Since that time I have been sick both physically and mentally."

Authorities soon took her husband in for interrogation, suspecting he was a spy for foreign states.

Still a Muslim, Azbari allowed his wife to follow her Christian faith. He had grown accustomed to watching her pray as a Christian and watch the Jesus Film. As time went by, he developed an urge to embrace Christianity. They started reading the Bible together.

The idea of trusting in and following Christ filled him with fear, as it was against the law to convert from Islam – it would mean losing his life, he said.

"I started questioning our leaders, who see themselves as God," he said. "The claim of Jesus as the prophet as well as the Word and spirit of God is indicated in the Quran. When I read in the Gospels of Jesus giving people rest, it made me want to decide to accept him as my Lord and Savior."

Sensing danger, the family fled to the Netherlands in 2000, and it was there that Azbari embraced Christianity. In 2003 the family left the Netherlands for Norway.

Azbari was an avid student of his new-found Lord; while in Norway, he became seminary teacher of Christology.

Throughout, Azbari said, the Iranian government had been monitoring his movements. In 2007 Iranian officials persuaded the Norwegian government to send him, together with his wife and son Reza Azbari, back to Iran.

After their interrogation and mistreatment upon arrival in Iran, Azbari managed to call his sister, who connected him with the army general cousin who helped secure their release. His sister took them in, but his brother in-law was not happy with their Christian prayers; he began quarreling with his wife, Azbari's sister.

"They began looking for trouble for us," Azbari said. "Sensing danger, we then left the home and went to find a place to stay. Everywhere we tried to book in we were rejected, since we were people who had been deported."

They began attending a church made up primarily of foreigners, where Azbari's wife and son felt more at home than he did. His army general cousin found out and, angry that they had sought refuge in a church after he had secured their release, grew furious.

"He was very angry, as they had also discovered this information from the laptop they had confiscated and threatened that I should be arrested," Azbari said. "I then decided to move to central Iran to look for employment, leaving my family behind."

The couple felt they could not go to Gelanie Azbari's homeland as the Philippines has such friendly relations with Iran, he said.

"To go back to Philippines or Iran is quite unsafe for us," Azbari said.

In October 2009, his sister notified him that police were looking for him and his family.

"I then decided to flee the country through Turkey, then to Kenya where I was arrested and then deported to Turkey," Azbari said. "In Turkey they could not allow me to enter the country, hence I was returned to Kenya."

They were arrested in January for illegal entry into Kenya. On March 4, a judge at Chief Magistrate Court No. 3 of Kenya dropped the charges against him, declaring that Azbari required international protection from his persecutors. The court also directed that Azbari be given back all his documents and the 10,000 Kenyan Shillings (\$US130) in bail he had deposited.

They had applied for asylum with the United Nations. Appearing before the court on behalf of Azbari on Jan. 15, a representative of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees had argued that he deserved asylum because his religious status had forced him to flee from his country of origin. On March 4 the court found that Azbari and his family require international protection under Section 82 of the laws of Kenya, and he was set free.

"We have witnessed the love of God and the sacrifices of what it means to love one in word and deed," Azbari said moments after the decision. "We saw the love of Christ from the people who understood and stood with us."

He thanked friends who introduced his family to Nairobi Pentecostal Church, which provided them spiritual strength. Three attorneys represented Azbari: Wasia Masitsa, a legal officer for the Urban Refugee Intervention Program; Christian lawyer John Swaka; and Laban Ogoro of the United Nations. Rene Kiamba of the International Christian Chamber of Commerce had helped him post bail.

Christian priest and wife arrested in Iran

RFE/ RL (04.03.2010) / HRWF Int. (09.03.2010) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Reyhaneh Aghajari and Hamid Shafiee were arrested on February 28 by security agents who took away their personal belongings, including books, mobile telephones, CDs and a number of Bibles in Persian. The two reportedly converted to Christianity about 15 years ago.

Their whereabouts and the charges against them are not clear.

Meanwhile, the wife of another Christian priest, Wilson Issavi, who was also arrested in Isfahan about a month ago, has said that her husband has been tortured in jail. Issavi is the leader of the Assyrian evangelical church of Kermanshah. Madeleine Nazanin was quoted by a Christian website, "FCNN," as saying that her husband's condition in jail is deplorable.

She said that an official at the detention center where her husband is being held in Isfahan has said that he has been charged with baptizing and converting Muslims, and that he is awaiting his "trial and execution."

Islamic law -- as applied in Iran -- says a Muslim who converts to another faith can face the death penalty. In recent years, there have been no reported cases of execution of converts.

Iran detains Christians without legal counsel

Half of those arrested in recent months could face apostasy charges

By Damaris Kremida

Compass Direct (28.01.2010) / HRWF Int. (29.01.2010) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – At least 14 Christians have been detained in Iranian prisons for weeks without legal counsel in the past few months as last year's crackdown has continued, sources said.

Three Christians remained in detention at Evin prison after authorities arrested them along with 12 others who had gathered for Christmas celebrations on Dec. 24 in a home 20 kilometers (12 miles) southeast of Iran's capital, Tehran, according to a source who requested anonymity.

While the others were released on Jan. 4, remaining at Evin prison were Maryam Jalili, Mitra Zahmati and Farzan Matin, according to the source. Jalili is married and has two children.

Matin sounded ill in a short phone conversation this week to his family, the source said.

"Maybe he caught a cold, maybe it's something else, but for sure they are under heavy pressure," the source said. "They are not allowed visits from family. It doesn't seem good."

Security forces went to the homes of all the detainees and confiscated their books, computers and other literature, according to Farsi Christian News Network. None of the Christians have had access to legal counsel or representation.

"Normally they eventually release them," said an Iranian source of the Dec. 24 arrests. "They never keep one person forever ... but we don't know when. We are used to living with this kind of government. Therefore we try our best and seek what God will do, and pray that they don't keep them so long."

The source said authorities have promised the release of the three Christians arrested Dec. 24 but have yet to let them go.

"They called their families, and they were told they would be released after bail ... but then they didn't [release them]," he said of the three Christians held in Evin.

Within days after the Dec. 24 arrest, Jalili's sister, Mobina Jalili, and another Christian were arrested in Isfahan. The source said these two have had no contact with their families. The location and conditions of their detainment are unknown.

Apostasy charges

In the southwestern city of Shiraz, seven Christians were being detained as of Jan. 11, another source said, and most of them may face charges of apostasy, or leaving Islam.

Family members who have spoken with the arrested Christians said authorities have told the detainees – with the exception of one who was not born a Muslim – that they are guilty of apostasy, the source said.

The names of those detained in Shiraz are Parviz Khaladj, Mehdi Furutan, Roxana Furouyi, Behrouz Sadegh-Khanjani, Abdol Reza Ali Haghnejad, Iman Farzad and one identified only as Mahyar.

Another Christian in the northern city of Rasht, Davoot Nejatsabet, also has been arrested. And Yousef Nadarkhani, who was arrested last year on Oct. 13 in Rasht, remains in prison.

The source said the government was in crisis with so many of its citizens continuing to openly protest against it, and that this was an opportune moment to lash out against Christians.

“They see that the West is keeping quiet about Christians,” said the source. “But the Christians should mobilize about what is happening.”

Arrested Christians are regularly denied legal counsel. Often Christians are charged with other crimes, such as espionage or disrupting public order, because of their faith. The charged political climate in Iran has made it nearly impossible for Christians to find appropriate defense lawyers they can afford, a source said. Many of Iran’s human rights lawyers have either fled the country, the source said, are in prison or are otherwise unable to take up Christian cases.

Under sharia (Islamic law), apostasy is one of several “crimes” punishable by death, although Islamic court judges are not required to hand down such a sentence. No converts to Christianity have been convicted of apostasy since international pressure forced officials to drop the death sentence of Christian convert Mehdi Dibaj in 1994.

In the years following the convert’s release, however, Dibaj and four other Protestant pastors, including converts and those working with them, have been murdered. The murderers of the Christians have never been brought to justice, and government officials are suspected of playing a role in the killings.

Governmental and non-governmental agencies say that Christian converts are regularly placed under surveillance, arrested, imprisoned without due process and tortured. Muslim-born Iranians who have embraced Christianity are legally prohibited from practicing their newfound faith.

Declaration of the High Representative on behalf of the European Union on the trial against seven Baha’i leaders in Iran

The Council of the European Union (12.01.2010) / HRWF Int. (13.01.2010) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – On January 12, 2010, the High Representative on behalf of the European Union issued the following declaration about the trial of seven Baha’i leaders, which commenced today in Iran:

The European Union expresses its serious concern about the start today of the trial against seven Baha'i leaders in Iran, as the charges against them appear to be motivated by their belonging to a minority faith.

The EU recalls that freedom of thought, conscience and religion is a fundamental and undeniable right which shall be guaranteed in every circumstance, in accordance with article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which the Islamic Republic of Iran has signed and ratified.

The EU calls for a just, fair and open trial respecting all international standards and obligations under the ICCPR. The EU reiterates its request to the Islamic Republic of Iran to allow independent observation of the judicial proceedings.

The EU also expresses its deep concern about the recent detention of another 13 members of the Baha'i community for alleged involvement in anti-government protests. The EU calls on Iran to end the persecution of the Baha'i community and to release the detained individuals.

The Candidate Countries Croatia* and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, the Countries of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidates Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and the EFTA countries Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, members of the European Economic Area, as well as Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova align themselves with this declaration.

* Croatia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.

Tehran puts 7 Bahai's on trial for spying

AFP (12.01.2010) / HRWF Int. (13.01.2010) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Iran on Tuesday put on trial seven members of the banned Bahai religion on charges of "spying for foreigners" and cooperating with Israel, the ISNA news agency reported.

"The first hearing for seven leaders of the illegal group of Bahais who were arrested in May 2008 was held today in the presence of their lawyers in Tehran revolutionary court," ISNA said.

The charges include "spying for foreigners, cooperation with the occupier regime of Qods (Israel), holding meetings with the aim of action against domestic security and corruption on earth."

Under Iran's Islamic law, "corruption on earth" is punishable by death.

"All the activities of the outlawed Bahai's sect in Iran is being led by its global centre based in Israel," ISNA cited the revolutionary court as saying in a statement.

The Bahais have a sprawling temple in Haifa, in northern Israel, which is the Islamic republic's arch-foe.

"Based on the evidence and the defendants' confessions, they held meetings with ambassadors of different Western countries and discussed information and actions with them," it added.

Followers of the Bahai faith, founded in Iran in 1863, are regarded in the Islamic republic as infidels and suffered persecution both before and after the 1979 Islamic revolution.

The Bahais consider Bahauallah, born in 1817, to be the latest prophet sent by God.

Washington on Monday condemned Iran's decision to try the seven Bahais.

"The United States strongly condemns the Iranian government's decision to commence the espionage trial against seven leaders of the Iranian Bahai community," US State Department spokesman PJ Crowley said.

"We are deeply concerned about Iran's ongoing persecution of Bahais and treatment of other members of religious minorities who continue to be targeted solely on the basis of their beliefs," he said.

Iran has also arrested around a dozen Bahais who it said will go on trial this week in connection with anti-government protests in late December.

"They were not arrested because they are Bahais ... Arms and ammunition were seized in some of their homes," Tehran prosecutor Abbas Jafari Dolatabadi said.

Baha'is arrested in Iran after protests

RFE/RL (06.01.2010) / HRWF Int. (08.01.2010) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Baha'i representatives say that Iranian police have arrested 13 members of the religious community for alleged involvement in antigovernment protests, RFE/RL's Radio Farda reports.

The Baha'i community representative to the United Nations in Geneva, Diane Ala'i, told RFE/RL that the government is trying to link Baha'is to the recent demonstrations.

Clashes during the December 27 protests on the Shi'ite Ashura holiday left at least eight demonstrators dead. Mass arrests are said to number well into the hundreds or higher.

Ala'i said the 13 Baha'is were arrested on January 3.

She said "they have been asked to sign a commitment letter promising not to attend protests in the future. However, they did not attend the [Ashura day] rally."

Ala'i said that although three of those arrested have been released, 10 remain incarcerated at Evin Prison in Tehran.

She said that there are a total of 48 Baha'is in Iranian jails.

The arrests come as seven Baha'i community leaders are set to stand trial on January 12. They face charges of espionage and propaganda against the Islamic Republic.

The Baha'i faith began in 19th century Iran, and currently has an estimated 5 million followers worldwide. While Baha'is regard their faith to be within the tradition of Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad, Iran's Shi'ite government regards Baha'ism as Islamic heresy.

There are some 300,000 Baha'is in Iran, a community that human rights groups say has faced serious repression under the Islamic republic.

Baha'i community representative Ala'i believes the latest arrests of Baha'is are designed to tarnish the reputation of their community and hurt the prospects of the Baha'i leaders at their upcoming trial.
