

Christian Sisters Released From Iranian Prison

✖ Two sisters jailed in Iran for more than eight months after refusing to renounce their Christian faith were released Wednesday.

Maryam Rustampoor, 27, and Marzieh Amirizadeh Esmaeilabad, 30, were arrested March 5 on charges of “acting against state security” and “taking part in illegal gatherings.”

During an August court hearing, the women were pressured to renounce their faith in verbal and written form, but both refused. “If we come out of prison we want to do so with honor,” they said after the hearing, according to Elam Ministries, which supports Christians in Iran and has advocated for the women’s release.

As a result of their response, the judge sent the sisters back to prison “to think about it,” Compass Direct News reported. At a court hearing in October, the judge dropped the anti-state charge, but the women still faced charges of propagation of Christianity and apostasy.

“Words are not enough to express our gratitude to the Lord and to His people who have prayed and worked for our release,” the sisters told Elam Wednesday.

Rostampour and Esmaeilabad were held in the notorious Evin prison, a facility that has drawn criticism in recent years for its human rights violations. Sources say the sisters were put in solitary confinement and subjected to intense interrogations.

Esmaeilabad also suffered from spinal pain, an infected tooth and intense headaches but was reportedly denied medical attention for a time. In October Rostampour had severe food

poisoning.

"Maryam and Marzieh have greatly inspired us all," said Elam director Sam Yeghnazar. "Their love for the Lord Jesus and their faithfulness to God has been an amazing testimony."

Open Doors, a group that advocates for persecuted Christians, launched a campaign to free the women. The group called on supporters to contact Mohammad Khazaee, Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations, and to the Iranian government requesting the sisters' immediate release.

David Yeghnazar, Elam's U.S. director, said it is not clear why the women were released, but he credits prayer. He notes that roughly 17,000 people have spent at least a month interceding for Iran as part of Elam's Iran 30 prayer campaign.

"We're not sure of the exact reasons for their release, but certainly people have been praying for their situation," he told *Charisma*.

Although the U.S. State Department designated Iran as a country of "particular concern" for its religious repression, hundreds of thousands of Iranians have reportedly come to Christ in recent years. Many converts report having dreams and visions of Jesus that led them to salvation.

Yet amid the growth of underground churches, government intimidation of Christians has been increasing. Elam leaders say last year there were more than 50 known cases of arrests and imprisonment, and some cases of torture.

Despite their release, the sisters may face further legal battles. "They've been told there will be a future court hearing, so prayers continue to be needed," David Yeghnazar said. "What we don't want to happen is that people think, 'They're out. We don't need to keep praying for them.' ... I really believe that people's prayers are making a difference."