

Crackdown in Iran Hits Official Churches

In a rare crackdown on a concentrated area, Iranian authorities have arrested Christians living in the country's third largest city in what is seen as a tactic to discourage Muslims and converts to Christianity from attending official churches.

Since last month officials have arrested about 12 Christian converts in Isfahan, 340 kilometers (211 miles) south of Tehran. Authorities have arrested leaders and members of churches meeting in buildings, as well as some from underground churches, according to *Mohabat News*.

The targeted arrests started on Feb. 22, when intelligence officers arrested approximately seven Christians at their homes between 6 a.m. and 7 a.m., *Mohabat* reported. Authorities raided their homes and confiscated valuables, including **Bibles**, computers, identification and other documents and, in one case, even pictures decorating walls.

The Christian Iranian news service identified those detained on Feb. 22 as Hekmat Salimi, pastor of St. Paul Anglican Church, a convert of 30 years and author of theological books; Giti Hakimpour, 78, a female pastor at St. Luke's Anglican Church; Shahram Ghaedi, an actor; Maryam Del-Aram, 54; Shahnaz Zarifi, a mother of two; and Enayat Jafari.

Another Christian, Majid Enayat, was arrested on the same day at his workplace. He is a member of a house church, and *Mohabat* reported that prior to his arrest, authorities arrested other members of his group. Some of these Christians warned him that authorities intended to arrest him.

Of those arrested, *Mohabat* reported that authorities released Hakimpour on Feb. 25. Authorities have denied proper medical

treatment to Del-Aram, who is under medical supervision. When her daughter tried to bring her medication to her at the prison, they refused it, according to Mohabat.

On March 2, authorities arrested another convert in Isfahan, Fariborz Parsi-Nejad.

Authorities have allegedly arrested more Christians in Isfahan, but sources have not been able to confirm the arrests and details. None of those arrested in Isfahan last month has been officially charged.

Though religious freedom monitors in Iran said it was not clear what triggered authorities to target Christians in Isfahan, one Iranian Christian outside the country said it may be yet another tactic to stop converts from attending Farsi-speaking meetings in official church buildings.

"I now have 12 names of Christians arrested in Isfahan," said the Iranian Christian, who requested anonymity. "Isfahan is a very Islamic city. We have two or three church buildings there. The government is very sensitive in Isfahan, which is the only city apart from Tehran with official church buildings. Now the government is focusing on the church buildings to scare the people so they don't go."

There are also a number of church buildings in various cities in Iran that are attended by ethnic Armenian Christians. The services are held in Armenian, and members have relatively more freedom to meet.

Earlier in February, authorities in Tehran ordered Emmanuel Protestant Church and St. Peter's Evangelical Church to discontinue their Farsi-language services. These were the last two official churches in the capital offering Farsi-language services on Fridays.

On Feb. 12, Noorallah Qabitizade was transferred to Dastgerd Prison in Isfahan. He was originally arrested in Dezful on

Dec. 24, 2010, and this is the third time authorities have transferred him to a different prison because he is outspoken about his faith while incarcerated. His conditions in Isfahan were expected to be harsher, according to *Mohabat*.

Previous Arrests

Since the beginning of this year, authorities have arrested Christian converts in Tehran, Ahwaz, Shiraz, Isfahan and Kermanshah.

In Tehran, authorities on Feb. 8 arrested the pastor of Narmak Assemblies of God Church. He was released on bail on Feb. 16. Sources reported that his arrest was part of a government targeting of government-sanctioned, evangelical denominations.

In Kermanshah, authorities raided a house church on Feb. 21, arresting 13 Christians who had gathered to **worship**. Authorities verbally and physically abused them during the arrest, according to *Mohabat*. Of those arrested, most were released the next day, and now only three remain in prison.

But the Revolutionary Court of Kermanshah last month sentenced Masoud Delijani, a convert to Christianity arrested last year, to three years in prison on charges of being a Christian, holding illegal house church gatherings, **evangelizing Muslims** and action "against national security," according to *Mohabat*.

Arrested on March 17, 2011, Delijani suffered great mental and physical pressure while in prison, according to *Mohabat*. In July 2011 he was released on bail amounting to about US\$100,000 and rearrested two weeks later. Authorities did not give him due legal process, denying him legal defense, according to *Mohabat*.

In January 2010, officials had ordered the **Pentecostal Church** of Assyrians in Kermanshah to close on charges of spreading Christianity among Muslims.

Christians in Iran, most belonging to networks of **house**

churches meeting in small groups in secret, are routinely arrested and interrogated. Iranian authorities view Christianity as a deviant anti-government movement and Christians as pawns of the West.

Iran is the fifth worst persecutor of Christians in the world, according to the most recent World Watch List by Christian support group Open Doors.