

Iran: American Pastor Tried to Turn Children Against Islam

Iran on Monday accused an Idaho man of trying to entice young people to Christianity and away from the country's official religion, Islam, the man's American-based legal team says.

The trial of Saeed Abedini, 32, of Boise, Idaho, began Monday in the Tehran courtroom of Abbas Pir-Abbassi, a Revolutionary Court judge notorious for harsh sentences. Abedini faces a lengthy prison sentence and possibly the death penalty for the alleged crime of attempting to undermine the Iranian government through the spread of Christianity.

The American Center for Law and Justice said prosecutors presented evidence that Abedini created "a network of Christian house churches" starting in 2000, the year he left Islam for Christianity.

"The regime alleged that Pastor Saeed intentionally sought to sway the minds of Iranian youth by turning the youth toward Christianity and against Islam, the official religion of Iran," the center said in a prepared statement.

The American Center for Law and Justice is a Washington, attorney group that uses litigation to press for religious and speech freedom. It has waged a lobbying campaign to persuade the Obama Administration to make a public demand for Abedini's release.

Abedini was arrested in September during a visit in which supporters say he was managing the construction of a non-religious orphanage. His supporters say he had agreed in 2009

to stop building the church network and to focus exclusively on the orphanage project, and that he had made eight orphanage-oriented visits to Iran before his arrest.

The center said Abedini is represented in Iran by “Naser Sarbazi, a Muslim lawyer in Iran who is dedicated to preserving human rights and upholding the right for all individuals to practice their faith freely.” It also said Abedini’s father, who lives in Iran, was the only family member permitted in the courtroom.

Abedini’s wife, Nagmeh, posted this account of Monday’s courtroom proceedings on the “Pray for Pastor Saeed Abedini” Facebook page:

Saeed was able to share from the Bible to the Judge and say that he was not a political person and had no political intentions, but he was a follower of His Lord Jesus Christ. There will be no more hearings and the formal charges and sentences will most likely be announced next week according to his lawyer in Iran.

There seemed to have been moments when the judge was moved by Saeed’s testimony. Please continue to pray for the Judge and Saeed’s release and his return back to our family.

We should be hearing some news next week.

The American Center for Law and Justice posted a report on its website Monday that claims several lay leaders of the house churches have been summoned to appear in court. But it also said it’s unknown whether the judge will permit any more witnesses, or whether the trial is essentially completed.

Abedini and his wife were born Muslim in Iran. She moved to

the United States as a child, obtained U.S. citizenship, converted to Christianity, relocated to Idaho with her family, and eventually returned to Iran to connect with her extended family, said Lauren Phillips, coordinator for international outreach for Cavalry Chapel of Boise, where the couple are members.

Though ordained after his work planting house churches in Iran, Abedini is not active as a pastor in his home church.

In Iran Nagmeh met Abedini, who had converted to Christianity in 2000 and was helping to start house churches. Married in 2004, they moved to Idaho in 2005 after Abedini endured an interrogation session over his church activities, according to an attorney at the American Center for Law and Justice. As the spouse of an American citizen, Abedini too was granted U.S. citizenship.