

Iran Arrests, Coerces Christians Over Christmas Season

✖ A wave of arrests hit Iranian house churches during the Christmas season, leaving at least five Christian converts in detention across northern Iran, including the mother of an ailing 10-year-old girl.

Security officers with an arrest warrant from the Mashhad Revolutionary Court entered the home of Christian Hamideh Najafi in Mashhad on Dec. 16. After searching her home and confiscating personal belongings, including books and compact discs, police took her to an undisclosed location, according to Farsi Christian News Network (FCNN).

FCNN reported that on Dec. 30 the Mashhad Revolutionary Court sentenced Najafi to three months of house arrest and ordered that her daughter, who suffers from a kidney condition, be placed under foster care. Because of the seriousness of the girl's illness, however, she was left in the custody of her parents – on the condition that they cease believing in Christ and stop speaking publicly of their faith, FCNN reported.

Najafi was denied access to a lawyer during this court hearing, according to FCNN.

During interrogation, officers told Najafi to return to Islam and to disclose names of Christian evangelists. FCNN reported that on some occasions the security officers summoned her husband, blindfolded him and threatened to beat him in front of his wife if she would not sign a confession that she was “mentally and psychologically unfit and disturbed.”

The Dec. 30 court hearing was quickly arranged after she was coerced into signing this confession, FCNN reported, and on

those grounds her child was initially ordered to be taken from her. Najafi's daughter suffers from a severe kidney and bladder condition.

There were no formal charges against Najafi, but she stands accused of contacting a foreign Christian television network, which court officials labeled as a "political" crime, according to FCNN.

Advocacy group Middle East Concern reported that sources believe authorities forced Najafi's sister to file a complaint against her on these grounds.

The officers who came to arrest Najafi said that portraits of Jesus hanging on her wall would be enough to convict her in court, reported FCNN.Â

Arrests and Harassment

Compass has confirmed that authorities disrupted Christmas celebrations of two house groups in the Tehran area on Dec. 21 and Dec. 29, leaving four in prison. Other members attending the special services were also questioned.

In Shiraz, last week at least eight Christians arrested and released over a year ago were called in for questioning about their activities in the past year. They were all released after a few hours.

In Rasht, Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani is still in prison after being arrested on Oct. 13. Nadarkhani is married and has two children under the age of 10.

A source told Compass that another Christian identified as Shaheen, who had been in prison since July 31 when a special meeting of 24 Christians was raided in Fashan, north of Tehran, was released in November. He was the last of the six believers arrested at that meeting to be released.

Apart from arrests, Iranian Christians continue to endure

discrimination. A source told Compass that one Christian was denied renewal of his truck driving license last week. When he asked why, authorities told him he was an enemy of the state.

The Christian had been arrested three years earlier because of his faith.