

Iranian Authorities Release Assyrian Pastor on Bail

✖ An Assyrian pastor the Iranian government accused of “converting Muslims” has been released from prison on bail and is awaiting trial.

The Rev. Wilson Issavi, whose church is affiliated with the Assemblies of God, was released from Dastgard prison in Isfahan last week. Conflicting reports indicated Issavi, 65, was released sometime between March 28 and the morning of March 30.

On Feb. 2, State Security Investigations (SSI) agents arrested Issavi shortly after he finished a house meeting at a friend’s home in Isfahan. Along with the accusation of “converting Muslims,” the pastor is charged with not co-operating with police, presumably for continuing to hold such house meetings after police sealed the Evangelical Church of Kermanshah and ordered him not to reopen it.

After his arrest, Issavi was held at an unmarked prison facility in Isfahan and apparently tortured, according to a Christian woman who fled Iran and knows Issavi and his family. The Christian woman, who requested anonymity for security reasons, said Issavi’s wife, Medline Nazanin, visited the pastor at the unmarked facility. Nazanin said it was obvious Issavi had been tortured, the Christian told Compass.

Issavi’s confinement cells were so filthy he contracted a life-threatening infection, Nazanin told the Christian woman.

“They took him to the hospital and then returned him back to the prison,” the woman said.

Friends of Issavi added that he is still dealing with the lingering effects of the infection.

During Issavi's imprisonment, authorities threatened to execute him, sources close to the case said. The joy of Issavi's family at his release was tinged with fear as they waited in agony for the possibility of him being killed by Islamic extremists, as is common in Iran when Christians are detained for religious reasons and then released.

"Sometimes they release you just to kill you," the Christian source said.

Issavi has not been informed of his trial date.

Issavi's friend said that low-key ethnic Christians, such as the Assyrians, are largely unbothered for long periods of time. Active Christians are treated differently.

"When you start evangelizing, then you are in real trouble," she said.

Iranian authorities have set up a video camera outside Issavi's church to monitor anyone going in or out of the building, according to the pastor's friend.

Issavi was one of a few Christians in leadership positions arrested in Isfahan in February during what some Middle Eastern experts described as a crackdown on area church leadership.

Isfahan, a city of more than 1.5 million people located 208 miles south of Tehran, has been the site of other anti-Christian persecution. In an incident in July 2008, two Christians died as a result of injuries received from police who were breaking up a house meeting.

On Feb. 28, Isfahan resident Hamid Shafiee and his wife Reyhaneh Aghajary, both converts from Islam and house church leaders, were arrested at their home.

Police handcuffed, beat and pepper-sprayed Aghajary and then took her to prison. Her husband Shafiee, who was away from the

house when police arrived, was arrested an hour later when he returned to the house. Approximately 20 police officers raided the home, seizing Bibles, CDs, photographs, computers, telephones, personal items and other literature.

The couple is still being held. Other details about their detainment are unknown.

Three Christians Released

Elsewhere, three Christians arrested on Dec. 24, 2009, have been released, according to Farsi Christian News Network (FCNN).

Maryam Jalili, Mitra Zahmati, and Farzan Matin were initially arrested along with 12 other Christians at a home in Varamin. Eventually they were transferred to Tehran's notorious Evin Prison, though the other 12 prisoners were conditionally released on Jan. 4.

Jalili, Zahmati and Matin were freed on March 17, though terms of their release were unclear. Jalili is married and has two children.

Iran has a longstanding history of religious repression. Shia Islam is the official state religion and is ensconced as such in Iran's constitution. Every year since 1999, the U.S. Secretary of State has designated Iran as a "Country of Particular Concern" for its persecution of Christians and other religious minorities.

According to the 2009 International Religious Freedom Report issued by the U.S. Department of State, persecution of Christians and other religious minorities in Iran continued to get significantly worse.

"Christians, particularly evangelicals, continued to be subject to harassment and close surveillance," the report states. "The government vigilantly enforced its prohibition on

proselytizing by closely monitoring the activities of evangelical Christians, discouraging Muslims from entering church premises, closing churches, and arresting Christian converts.”