

Iranian Pastor Tortured, Threatened for 'Converting Muslims'

✖ An Assyrian pastor the Iranian government accused of “converting Muslims” is being tortured in prison and threatened with execution, sources close to the case said.

State Security agents on Feb. 2 arrested the Rev. Wilson Issavi, 65, shortly after he finished a house meeting at a friend's home in Isfahan, located 208 miles south of Tehran. His church, The Evangelical Church of Kermanshah in Isfahan, is a 50-year-old church body affiliated with the Assemblies of God that caters to the local Assyrian population.

According to Farsi Christian News Network, Issavi's wife, Medline Nazanin, recently visited her husband in prison, where she saw that he had obvious signs of torture and was in poor condition. Iranian intelligence officials told Nazanin that her husband might be executed for his alleged activities.

During the raid, State Security police detained everyone in the house, later releasing all but Issavi and the owner of the home. Security officials also seized personal property from the home. Typically in Christian arrests in Iran, security officials confiscate all documents, media materials, computers, and personal documentation.

Issavi is being held in an unmarked prison, according to FCNN.

Last month's arrest seems to be part of an anti-Christian sweep that is taking place across Isfahan. In addition to the politically motivated detentions and executions that have taken place after June's contested election and subsequent nation-wide political protests, it appears authorities are rounding up Christian leaders.

More Arrests

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

Aghajary was at home with a group of other Christians when police came for her and her husband, who was not at home, according to Middle East Concern, a group that assists persecuted Christians. Police handcuffed Aghajary and, upon finding boxes of Bibles, began beating her.

The assault continued until eventually Aghajary was pepper-sprayed and removed from the scene. Her husband Shafiee was arrested an hour later when he returned to the house.

Their fate and whereabouts are still unknown.

Authorities assaulted another Christian visiting the house at the time of the raid when he protested the police action. Other Christians at the house were threatened, but no one else was arrested. Approximately 20 police officers raided the home, seizing Bibles, CDs, photographs, computers, telephones, personal items and other literature.

One regional analyst, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said the Iranian government is set on crushing religious freedom within the country.

"The recent spate of church leader arrests provides clear evidence of the Iranian authorities' desperate determination to strangle the growing church movement, along with all other forms of perceived political dissent," he said.

February's arrest was not the first time Shafiee has had run-ins with Iranian authorities. He has routinely been ordered to appear before police for questioning and then released. This arrest, however, was different. When family members contacted police on March 1, they were told that the couple's case was

under the jurisdiction of the Revolutionary Court and were turned away with no other information.

While the couple is imprisoned, family members are caring for their two teenage boys.

Frequent Harassment

Like Shafiee, Issavi has been harassed frequently by the Isfahan branch of the State Security police. He has been ordered to appear before the police many times, then arrested and interrogated. In addition, police have threatened members of his family and have broken into his house and taken items such as his computer.

On Jan. 2, 2010, police sealed the Kermanshah church and ordered Issavi not to reopen it. The church continued to have house meetings, and authorities charged Issavi with not cooperating with the government.

The Assyrians were one of the first ethnic groups in the Middle East to adopt Christianity. The existence of the Assyrian Christian community in Iran predates the existence of their Islamic counterparts by several hundred years. There are 10,000 to 20,000 Assyrian Christians living in Iran, according to unofficial estimates cited in the 2009 International Religious Freedom Report issued by the U.S. Department of State. The total Christian population is 300,000 nationwide, according to the United Nations. Most of those Christians are ethnic Armenians.

Isfahan has been the site of some of the worst religious persecution in Iran. On July 30, 2008, Abbas Amiri, a Christian man in his 60s, died in a hospital after being beaten by Isfahan security police. Authorities had arrested Amiri along with seven other men, six women and two minors during a July 17 raid on a house meeting. Four days after her husband died, Sakineh Rahnama succumbed to her injuries and a stress-related heart attack. Later, officials wouldn't allow

local Christians to hold a memorial service.

Iran, where Shia Islam is the official state religion, is known to be one of the worst countries for repression against Christians. The U.S. Secretary of State has designated Iran as a Country of Particular Concern every year since 1999 for its persecution of non-Shia Muslims, among others.

Last year, according to the International Religious Freedom Report, persecution of Christians and other religious minorities continued to get “significantly worse.” The state department placed the blame for this squarely at the feet of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Iran’s conservative media, who “intensified a campaign against non-Muslim religious minorities, and political and religious leaders” by issuing a continual stream of inflammatory statements.

“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.”

Evangelical Christians were required to carry church membership cards and provide photocopies to authorities, according to the report.

“Worshippers were subject to identity checks by authorities posted outside congregation centers,” it states. “The Government restricted meetings for evangelical services to Sundays, and church officials were ordered to inform the Ministry of Information and Islamic Guidance before admitting new members.”