

Iranian Regime Intensifies Crackdown on Christians

International Christian Concern (ICC) is alarmed by the latest series of events that continue a pattern of egregious violations of fundamental rights and freedoms in Iran. Three Christians, Ebrahim Firouzi, Sevada Aghasar, and Masoud Mirzaei were arrested on Aug. 21 and detained without charges. On Sunday, an appeals court in Tehran rejected an appeal in the case of American Saeed Abedini who has been sentenced to eight years in prison because of his religious beliefs.

The arrest of Ebrahim Firouzi, Sevada Aghasar and Masoud Mirzaei came on August 21, when plainclothes police officers raided Masoud's office in Karaj, about 50 KM west of Tehran. According to Mohabat News, Ebrahim and Sevada had gone to visit Masoud to say goodbye a few days before Ebrahim was to begin serving a one-year prison sentence.

Ebrahim was sentenced on July 15 to one year in prison and two years in exile. According to court documents his conviction was for exercising basic rights of religious freedom. The document reads: "According to the court's decision, evangelism activities of the accused, Ebrahim Firouzi, are considered to be in opposition to the regime of the Republic Islamic of Iran."

There has not been any indication of charges for the latest arrests. After raiding the office, officers also went to Masoud's home, searched it, and confiscated personal belongings, including a computer. Sevada and Masoud were able to briefly contact their families before being moved to an undisclosed location.

In the case of American pastor Saeed Abedini, a two-judge panel of the Tehran appeals court issued a rejection of an

appeal for a reduction of his eight-year prison sentence. Abedini was convicted as a result of his Christian faith and imprisoned Sept. 26.

Jordan Sekulow, executive director of the American Center for Law and Justice, which represents Abedini's family, said they had hoped Iran "would use its own appeal process to finally show respect for Pastor Saeed's basic human rights, again Iran has demonstrated an utter disregard for the fundamentals of human rights."

However, as Sekulow continued, "this legal decision also signals a new level of concern for Pastor Saeed's safety. By keeping the eight-year prison sentence in place, Pastor Saeed now potentially faces additional beatings and abuse inside Evin Prison—treatment that has significantly weakened him during his first year in prison."

The news of the rejection of the appeal was a devastating blow to Saeed's family. His wife, Naghmeh, told ICC it has been an emotional few days, but she will continue to speak on Saeed's behalf. Naghmeh asked for continued pressure on Iran, and expressed disappointment specifically with President Obama, who has chosen to remain silent on this case.

Most recently, Rep. Trent Franks (R, AZ) spoke out in support of Abedini. In a statement he said, "Iran has once again demonstrated an utter disregard for fundamental human rights by continuing to insist that Pastor Saeed Abedini, an American citizen, be unjustly imprisoned in Iran."

He also criticized the lack of response saying, "I hope that the American people will hold the Obama Administration and State Department accountable for its absolutely criminal silence in the face of such a heartless injustice forced upon this beloved American pastor, his innocent family, and so many others."

There has not been any improvement in the months since the

election of President Hassan Rouhani, rather, as Mohabat News observes, “the arbitrary and unreasonable arrest of the three young Christians in Karaj and the increasing imprisonment of Christian converts during the past few weeks are all signs of a worsening situation for the Iranian Christian community.”

Todd Daniels, ICC regional manager for the Middle East, said, “Iran continues to engage in a pattern of systematic abuse of the basic and fundamental rights of both its own citizens, and in the case of Saeed Abedini, an American citizen.

“We urge leaders across the globe to speak out on behalf of those who are suffering under this regime. We call for the release of all those who are held in prison solely on the basis of their religious beliefs. The Iranian people deserve a government that respects their rights, will uphold their constitution, and honor its international commitments for the good of all Iranians.”

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