

Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani Psychologically Tortured

The mistreatment of a pastor in Iran awaiting a decision on his death sentence for refusing to recant his faith amounts to physical and psychological torture, a source close to the pastor's family said.

Youcef Nadarkhani, sentenced to death a year ago after a court of appeals in Rasht, Iran, found him guilty of leaving Islam in September 2010, is in deteriorating health, according to a member of Nadarkhani's denomination, the Church of Iran, who requested anonymity.

He said that communication with Nadarkhani is limited, but that sources close to the imprisoned Christian indicated that he has undergone physical and psychological torture.

"Certainly he was hit, but his [telephone] conversations are heard [by authorities]," the source said. "We know that he has been in extreme situations, and we consider that torture. When you have spent time in a solitary cell unable to talk to others for a long time, or you are told you will be killed, this is also torture."

The court in Rasht, 243 kilometers (151 miles) northwest of Tehran, was expected to pronounce a verdict on Nadarkhani's appeal last month, and sources said the court's long silence bodes ill. Instead of pronouncing a verdict, the court sent the Christian's case to the nation's Islamic authority, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, to make a ruling.

Authorities have also continued to pressure Nadarkhani to recant his faith while in prison. Last month they gave him Islamic literature aimed at discrediting the Bible, according to sources, and instructed him to read it.

Some sources indicate a ruling could come the second half of December. One said some Iranian Christians believe that, in the face of international outrage over the case, the government would announce a verdict near the Christmas holidays so that it would receive less notice. On Nov. 10, the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) reported that a verdict on Nadarkhani's case was expected in mid-December, regardless of whether there is a ruling by Khamenei.

Authorities arrested Nadarkhani in his home city of Rasht in Oct. 2009 on charges that he questioned obligatory religion classes in Iranian schools. After finding him guilty of apostasy, the court of appeals in Rasht in November 2010 issued a written confirmation of his charges and death sentence.

At an appeal hearing in June, the Supreme Court of Iran upheld Nadarkhani's sentence but asked the court in Rasht to determine if he was a practicing Muslim before his conversion. The court declared that Nadarkhani was not a practicing Muslim before his conversion, but that he was still guilty of apostasy due to his Muslim ancestry.

The Supreme Court had also determined that his death sentence could be annulled if he recanted his faith. The Rasht court gave Nadarkhani three chances to recant Christianity in accordance with *Shariah* (Islamic law), but Nadarkhani refused to do so. His final appeal hearings ended on Sept. 28, and the court was expected to make its final decision two weeks from the final hearing.

"For the moment, we are waiting," said the Church of Iran source. "We have no response for now. The only thing his lawyer told me is that the file went to the Supreme Court, but normally we should have had a response by now."

There are two more Christians from the Church of Iran, a denomination that Iranian Christians accuse of being "non-

Trinitarian," who are also serving prison sentences. Behnam Irani has been in prison since he was arrested on April 14 in Karaj, charged with "propaganda against the system." Authorities were due to release him on Oct. 20, but instead they handed him a letter just days before informing him that a five-year prison sentence from 2008 for "action against national security," which had been suspended, was effective immediately due to the second conviction on a similar charge, according to Mohabat News.

The other incarcerated Christian, Mehdi Foroutan (also known as Petros), has been in prison in Shiraz for two months, serving a one-year sentence for propaganda against the state and "action against national security," according to sources.

As Christians in Iran are held hostage to the government's political whims, the source said, the key to their freedom is continued pressure from the international community.

"The pressure is the most important thing," he said. "When the Iranian state sees pressure, they will understand the world hasn't forgotten Yousef, Behnam and Petros."

Nadarkhani's lawyer, Mohammad Ali Dadkhah, also faces charges for "actions and propaganda against the Islamic regime," due to his human rights activities.

In the past week U.S. State Department Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Suzan Johnson Cook called for the release of Pastor Nadarkhani, according to CBN.

"I want to echo President Obama's and Secretary Clinton's – and repeat my own – condemnation of his conviction and our calls on Iranian authorities to release Pastor Nadarkhani immediately," Cook said, according to CBN. "I urge all of you to do the same."

Arrests of Christians

Another wave of arrests is expected this December and January,

a favorite time for Iranian authorities to make the rounds at Christian house group meetings, according to the Church of Iran source. He said the best Christmas gift for Iranian Christians this year would be for Western powers and Christians to continue to lobby for their freedoms.

Historically, the Iranian government has cracked down on Christians during the Christmas season, when house group members gather in larger numbers. Last year in a two-month period over the holidays, authorities arrested more than 120 Christians belonging to Iran's underground church.

All have been released, with a few known exceptions. One of those arrested, Farshid Fathi, 32, has been in the notorious Evin Prison in Tehran since Dec. 26, 2010. He has spent much of that time in solitary confinement and has been mistreated, according to Mohabat News. He is married and has two young children.

Noorollah Ghabitizadeh (also spelled Qabitizade) has been in prison since Dec. 24, 2010. Authorities originally held him in Dezful and later transferred him to Ahwaz as punishment for starting a Bible study at the Dezful prison, Mohabat News reported.

Authorities have reportedly put Ghabitizadeh under intense pressure to renounce Christianity and return to Islam. In his first trial hearing two months ago, a judge pressured him by telling him his death penalty for apostasy would be decided in that court hearing, according to Mohabat News.

On Oct. 17 authorities arrested another Christian convert, Fariborz Arazm, 44, in Robat Karim, according to Mohabat News. His whereabouts and condition are unknown.

Earlier this week, Amnesty International issued a statement denouncing the continual degradation of human rights in Iran and the unwillingness of the government to espouse international human rights practices.

The official religion of Iran is Shiite Muslim, and the country's laws and regulations are based on sharia.