

Persecuted Pastor's Wife Not Hopeful About Iran Prison Release

The wife of an American citizen sentenced to an Iranian prison for eight years expects she won't hear from her husband until 2021, unless U.S. pressure is able to pry him free.

Naghmeh Shariat Panahi told World Watch Monitor that the last time she heard Saeed Abedini's voice was Jan. 9, during a three-minute cellphone call between Boise, Idaho, and Tehran, Iran. Abedini's family in Iran held two cell phones together—one linked to Panahi in America, the other to Abedini in a holding cell—so the two could exchange words.

"He wanted to hear the kids' voices," Panahi said Tuesday from her Idaho home. The couple has a 6-year-old girl, Rebekkah, and a son, 4-year-old Jacob. After the three minutes were up, "we heard there will be no more phone calls," she said.

Abedini, 32, was sentenced Sunday by a Revolutionary Court judge who concluded that Abedini's work to establish Christian churches threatened Iran's national security. A native of Iran and born Muslim, Abedini converted to Christianity in 2000 and spent several years establishing small "house churches."

He was arrested in September, though his advocates say Abedini had agreed in 2009 to stop organizing churches. Since then, they say, he had turned his attention to building a non-religious orphanage and had made several trips to Iran for the purpose.

His trial began Jan. 21. Though he testified that he had no political intent in sharing his faith, he and his Iranian lawyer were barred from the next day's proceedings, in which other Christians were called upon to testify about Abedini's

church work. He has been sent to Iran's Evin prison, where the country has locked up a long list of political prisoners over the years.

Panahi said her husband's lawyer is preparing an appeal of the conviction. The window of opportunity won't be open for long, she said.

"Appealing his case, the sentence, we have limited time to put pressure on Iran," she said. But neither she nor Tiffany Barrans, a international lawyer who represents Panahi, said they hold out much hope for persuading the Iranian Revolutionary Court to overturn the decision of one of its most prominent judges.

The judge, Pir-Abbassi, is known in the West primarily for his harsh sentences, including execution, of students who participated in protests after Iran's 2009 elections. The European Union has branded Pir-Abbassi, among other Iranian judges, a human-rights violator. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has recommended that the State Department make a similar declaration, but it has yet to do so.

Barrans told World Watch Monitor on Tuesday the more promising route to freedom runs through American diplomatic pressure. She said the United States, which does not have diplomatic relations with Iran, can exert leverage by enlisting the help of U.S. allies that trade with the Islamic Republic.

"They are in an economic bind now," Barrans said. "They cannot afford to risk an economic partnership. It's key that the U.S. look to economic partners with Iran."

While Barrans said such arm-twisting should occur behind the scenes, she said the U.S. administration should speak loudly about principles.

"They need to be a world leader in religious freedom," Barrans

said. "There needs to be a higher priority in our government, in the White House, for religious freedom."

Barrans is international legal director for the American Center for Law and Justice, a Washington, attorney group that uses litigation to press for religious and speech freedom. The group represents Panahi and the family's children.

Panahi said the State Department has been in regular contact with her since mid-December, sometimes to update her with new information, but more often to ask her for information, which she said she obtains from near-daily phone contact with Abedini's family, under house arrest in Iran.

"Their response has been there's not much they can do," Panahi said about American authorities. "They're saying they're working on it. It seems they are dragging their feet."

"They have said they are concerned," she said. "But there is not a lot of information on what they are doing."

State Department spokesman Darby Holladay issued a statement Sunday condemning "Iran's continued violation of the universal right of freedom of religion."

Katrina Lantos Swett, chairwoman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an appointed advisory body to Congress and the State Department, called the ruling "yet one more damning piece of evidence pointing to the rampant denial of religious freedom and the absence of any semblance of rule of law in Iran."

Panahi, born in Iran but raised in the United States and a naturalized U.S. citizen, met Abedini during one of her visits to family in Iran. The couple married in 2004, and moved to Idaho in 2005 after Abedini endured an interrogation session over his church activities, Barrans said. As the spouse of an American citizen, Abedini too was granted citizenship.

Panahi said she cannot phone her husband in prison. Nor can she visit him.

"This is the very hard, heartbreaking part of it," she said. "As a wife, my first reaction was to travel and be there. Unfortunately, I was threatened that if I step one foot in an airport in Iran, I would be arrested, and then the children would have no mother or father."

She said she and the children are living with her parents, in Idaho. Her church community, Calvary Chapel of Boise, has rallied around the family with prayer, she said.

"The greatest support has been prayer," she said. Urgent prayer.

"Unless we get him out quickly," she said, "we won't have a chance to release him for years to come."

Iran is ranked No. 8 on the 2013 World Watch List, an annual roster of the 50 countries where Christians are persecuted most harshly.