

Police Arrest 5 Pentecostals, Sparking Fear Among Families

Five Iranian Christians were arrested on Friday Aug. 26 during a trip to the Alborz Mountains north-east of Tehran, the latest in a recent spate of arrests. Their wives and families have expressed concern for their safety.

One of them, Afshar Naderi, had been arrested before, on Dec. 26, 2014. Also arrested that day was Pastor Victor Bet-Tamraz, whose son, Ramil, was part of the group arrested on Aug. 26.

Victor Bet-Tamraz led the Tehran Pentecostal Assyrian Church before it was shut down by Iran's Ministry of Interior in March 2009. He and Naderi—a convert to Christianity—were arrested alongside another convert while celebrating Christmas at the pastor's house. All three were charged with conducting illegal evangelism and kept mostly in solitary confinement in Evin prison, before being released on bail in February and March 2015.

After his son's arrest on Friday, Bet-Tamraz visited some of the prisons and interrogation centers in the area, but so far has not found the group. The names of the other three Christians arrested are Hadi Asgari, Mohammad Dehnavi and Amir Dashti. Their wives were separated from them during the raid by security officials from the Ministry of Intelligence and Security. Middle East Concern reports that Afshar had asked to see an arrest warrant and that, after none was produced, he was beaten. Mohabat News reports that only one of them, Amir Dashti, has been able to call his family. He is reported to have told them that they are being held in Tehran's Evin prison.

"All are understandably concerned, as there seems no reason for the arrest apart from to gather evidence to convict Pastor

Victor and the others arrested at the same time,” MEC’s Rob Duncan told World Watch Monitor. MEC reported that the Christians’ families “see no reason for the arrests apart from the connection to the 2014 Christmas arrests. It is feared the aim of the MOIS officials is to force confessions and to extract ‘evidence’ against [them].”

Victor Bet-Tamraz had previously found it difficult to find a lawyer willing to act as his defense counsel. Some lawyers have experienced a backlash after representing Christians in court.

More than 200 Christians have been detained by Iranian authorities since 2015. Many are in jail, while others, such as Victor Bet-Tamraz, have been released conditionally, pending sentencing or an appeal.

MEC’s Duncan said that at least 43 Christians were arrested in the past month alone.

“The Iranian regime is conducting a very active campaign against house churches at the moment and leaders of house churches are harassed and put under pressure,” he said.

Meanwhile, Amnesty International has criticized Iran’s “cruel” denial of medical care in its prisons. It mentions the case of Maryam Naghash Zargaran, an Iranian Christian who has undertaken two hunger strikes to protest against her being denied the medical treatment she requires for long-standing health issues.

She has twice been released for medical treatment—in October 2015 and in June—and both times was forced to return to prison before the treatment was complete. After her latest hunger strike, which ended on Aug. 2, Middle East Concern said her health had deteriorated further.

UPDATE (Aug. 31): Maryam Zargaran has for the third time been allowed to leave prison to receive medical treatment. Her

family have said they hope that this time she will be given long enough to receive adequate care.