

Sweden Denies Asylum to Christians Facing Persecution

Christians in Iran face arrest, torture, even death. But that doesn't seem to matter to Swedish immigration officials.

Sweden wants to send Iranian Christian asylum seekers, who left Islam, back to Iran where they could be killed.

Iran is one of the most dangerous places in the world for Christians. As apostates from Islam, they face grave danger in this country.

But their requests for asylum status that could save their lives have been denied.

Reza Jabbari has been in hiding after his asylum request was rejected. He knows what could await him in Iran.

"Islam teaches that every man who leaves Islam must be killed because that man is an apostate," he said.

His pastor, Cai Berger, still can't believe Reza's asylum request was denied.

"I thought, this should be a piece of cake. This man [Reza] has brought other Muslims to the Christian faith," Berger said.

"He has brought Muslims to the Christian faith and Christian baptism. I mean, if he's a fraud he's a very bad one since he's bringing people to the Christian faith," he said. "But still they [the Migration Board] denied him. And that made me look into what is going on?"

Anti-Christian Bias

What's going on, according to veteran Swedish immigration lawyer Gabriel Donner, is a badly run asylum process and, in

some cases, an anti-Christian bias.

“When you apply for asylum you have to present your case,” Donner told CBN News. “If you claim to be a convert you need to show some evidence of having converted: certificate of baptism, membership in a congregation, or something else of that sort.”

But Donner said the crucial evidence is often missing from asylum applications because too many state appointed lawyers simply will leave it to the convert to take care of it themselves.

The asylum seekers are then at the mercy of immigration officials who may not understand Swedish law, what it means to be a Christian, or how dangerous Iran is.

Asylum Process: A lottery?

“All of these, together, result in a sort of lottery where some people win and some people lose,” Donner said.

Some of the losers are Ali Roshan, Mahtab Shafadi, and their little girl. They are Iranian Christians who left Islam. They now face deportation and danger in Iran.

“We have told our families in Iran that we are Christian now, and they have disowned us. So we don’t have a family to return to. Our blood is now halal; it is holy for Muslims to kill us,” Shafadi said.

A Swedish immigration official tried to comfort her by saying they would probably be thrown into an Iranian prison, but not killed.

Homeira, another Iranian Christian facing deportation, told CBN News she no longer officially exists in Sweden.

“My asylum request was denied and I was ordered to leave the country. I don’t have any identity. I can’t even use medical services. I can’t work,” she said.

She's now in hiding. She said when she tried to testify about her Christian faith to immigration officials, they thought she was lying.

"Officials do not seem to understand why a Muslim would become a Christian. They asked me, 'Why didn't you become a Jew?'" Homeira said.

Jabbari said an immigration official told him that when he is deported to Iran, all he needs to do to keep from being arrested is tell everyone he's a Muslim, not a Christian, and he'll be fine.

To that Jabbari replied, "After I'm baptized? I'm a Christian. You cannot say these things to me."

"There's a lot of bias regarding Christian converts because the standard argument is, 'Well, nobody converts to Christianity out of true belief. Why would anyone do anything of the sort?'" Donner said.

Easier to Deny Christ

Swedish Pastor Bengt Sjoberg, who spends most of his time trying to rescue Christian asylum seekers facing deportation, said migration officials "are ignorant about religion."

"They don't know the difference between Catholic Church and Pentecostal. They ask a lot of stupid questions about the Christian faith," he said.

"Almost every week about five or six churches call me and say these [immigrants] who are coming to our church they are real converts. They are members in our church," he explained. "But the Migration Board doesn't believe these people are Christians. What shall we do?"

Mikael Ribbenvik, director of Operations for Swedish Migration Board, in an interview with AP Television News, described an agency that seems to be overwhelmed by asylum seekers.

"We have about a thousand people coming every week from many countries of the world and that's our first challenge," he said. "Then, of course, we have to have a proper procedure and give people answers in due time."

"If we say no, you can go to the courts but of course the volume in the system is a challenging task for us," he said.

But it shouldn't be hard for Swedish officials to grasp that Iran is a very dangerous place for Christians.

The case of Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani brought worldwide attention when he was convicted of apostasy and sentenced to death before being acquitted finally in 2012.

Just a few weeks ago, a U.S. congressional panel heard from Iranian Christian Nagmeh Abedini, whose husband Pastor Saeed Abedini, an American citizen, has been given an eight-year prison sentence for "threatening Iran's nation security."

He was building an orphanage.

Pastor Saeed's attorney said his client's prison sentence amounts to a death sentence. He's already been tortured and beaten in prison and has internal bleeding.

Jabbari was a famous singer in Iran and refused to help Islamic regime, getting him in trouble before and making him an even bigger target if he's sent back.

"He's been put in prison. They tried to recruit him as an informant, his pastor Cai Berger said. "We don't know what's going to happen to him in prison. Is he being tortured? Is he being left alone? We don't know this."

But these Christians have all confessed they've given the matter to God.

"Jesus accepts me, and now I'm very free about this," Jabbari said.

A Callous Migration Board

CBN News asked the Swedish Migration Board if it understood the danger faced by Christian converts sent back to Iran. It said it did, making what Sweden is doing to these asylum seekers all the more damning, according to Donner.

It appears Sweden has closed its eyes. When Sjoberg told a Swedish Migration Board official that a family they deported was being tortured, the official said the family should call the police.

When Sjoberg explained that they were being tortured by the police, the official hung up.

“The history books will say something pretty nasty about Sweden’s policy in this matter in the future,” Donner said.

The Swedish Migration Board Responds

Magnus Rosenberg, senior legal advisor at the Swedish Migration Board, answered the following questions from CBN News.

criteria are used to determine whether an Iranian Christian convert (former Muslim) is genuinely Christian or not?

Whether or not there is likely a genuine conversion is always based upon a thorough interview and thereafter a credibility assessment where everything in the case is taken into account. Certificates, e.g., regarding membership to a church or congregation is of course taken into account but does most often not per se prove that there is a genuine conversion. The interview should focus on issues regarding the applicant’s religious experiences in his or her country of origin or country of asylum, how he or she was able to express his or her beliefs, the character of the religious beliefs, how is or her worship is conducted and what thoughts and considerations the applicant had or made before taking the step to convert to Christianity – rather than a list of questions regarding theoretical facts about Christianity. Also, the interview

should focus on issues regarding the personal values that the conversion adds to the applicant's life and how he or she today engages him/herself in the religion.

Knowledge of the religion that an applicant may have converted into, might have a value in the credibility assessment, but must be carefully used. Not all converts have a deeper knowledge or details about the religion. However, most converts should have a basic knowledge about the religion he or she has converted into. Also, the requirements of knowledge about the religion should be higher regarding those who claim to be religious leaders or missionaries or have conducted some religious studies.

2. UN guidelines state that apostates from Iran need protection. Does the migration board agree that it is very dangerous for a Christian convert to return to Iran?

In general, yes. Every case is however carefully assessed on its individual merits and claims.

3. Does the migration board know that Iranian Christians detained in Iranian prisons have been tortured or killed?

The Swedish Migrations Board has very good knowledge of the country of origin information stating the most problematic situation in Iran regarding Christian converts.

4. Does the migration board recognize that Christian converts sent back to Iran also face extra-judicial violence or death at the hands of family members or neighbors?

We are well aware of the problems Christian converts in Iran might face on return, not only in relation to the Iranian authorities but also in relation to the family and the community.

5. Does the migration board agree that since Muslims returned to Iran from Sweden will not face prison, torture or death

based solely on their religious faith, so Christian converts, who do face grave jeopardy if returned to Iran because they are apostates, should be given special consideration for asylum?

In general, yes. Every asylum application is however carefully assessed to establish if there is an individual risk on return.

6. Does the migration board agree that Iranian embassy personnel attempt to document Iranian Christians in Sweden through photos, videos and questioning?

The Swedish Migrations Board is very well aware of the reports stating that the Iranian authorities are closely monitoring asylum applicants in the West.

7. If a Christian convert from a Muslim nation like Iran shares their faith publicly on the Internet or on YouTube, thus putting their life at risk if they return to Iran, shouldn't this be a strong factor in their request for asylum?

This is definitely a factor that must be taken into account when assessing the asylum claims and the individual risk on return.