

Threat of Prosecution Remains for Some Christians Freed in Iran

✖ Iranian authorities have released about half of the Christians arrested for their faith across the country in December and January, as well as one held in Shiraz since June, sources said.

In December and January authorities arrested up to 120 believers after Iranian religious and political figures acknowledged the existence of home fellowships and condemned them as a threat to the state. Sources estimate at least 62 of those arrested during late December and January have been released, some on bail. A typical bail amount in Iran can range between a few thousand dollars and the deed on a house.

Some of the Christians who were released reported they were subjected to solitary confinement and harsh interrogation, according to a statement by Elam Ministries on Feb. 4. The statement said some Christians held at Section 209 of Tehran's notorious Evin Prison suffered up to 34 days in solitary confinement.

"Ex-prisoners who have endured Section 209 testify it is the worst part of the whole grim experience of arrest and imprisonment," read the Elam statement. "They say the mental pressure is unbearable."

The exact number and condition of those who remain in prison is unknown, and on Feb. 13 Iranian authorities reportedly detained another 45 Christians for one night in several towns and cities, apparently as part of a policy of harassing non-Muslims, according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide.

On Feb. 15 authorities released Pastor Behrouz Sadegh-

Khandjani, detained in Shiraz since mid-June. Sadegh-Khandjani's family reportedly paid a large bail for his release.

Arrested in 2006 with other members from the Church of Iran, Sadegh-Khandjani was in prison for 22 days. During that time government officials asked the church members to work as spies for them and threatened to charge them with apostasy (leaving Islam) and to hang them, said a source close to Sadegh-Khandjani's family on condition of anonymity.

Reports from other Christians who were in prison confirm that this type of psychological pressure is not uncommon.

Between 2006 and 2010, authorities called Sadegh-Khandjani to the police station for interrogation twice a year, said the source. During the first months of his recent eight-month-long detainment in Shiraz, his family had no news of his whereabouts or condition. Authorities also arrested his wife, Mariam, and held her for two months last year. The Christian couple has a 4-year-old daughter.

Throughout this time, Sadegh-Khandjani endured severe prison conditions and harsh treatment, including solitary confinement, said the source. He was accused of apostasy, insulting Islam and having converted Muslims to Christianity.

The source said that when he called Sadegh-Khandjani, the released Christian chuckled and said "243 days," referring to the days he spent in detainment. The source said Sadegh-Khandjani had a pleasant disposition and a good sense of humor, despite his hardships.

"He is very kind and respects the spirit of people," said the source.

Iranian Christian news agency Mohabat News reported on Monday (Feb. 21) that authorities had released on bail a Christian

couple in their 60s in Mashhad. Secret security police arrested Hassan Razavi Derakhshi and Parya Jamali on Dec. 27, 2010 and held them for 35 days. The couple was accused of converting to Christianity, holding Christian meetings in their home and organizing a Christmas celebration at their home, according to Mohabat.

Condemned for Apostasy

More than 30 Christians remain in prison in different cities, including Tehran, Mashhad, Karaj, Shiraz, Ahvaz, Rasht, Hamedan and Arak, according to Middle East Concern. Most of these Christians come from a Muslim upbringing.

Among them is Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani in Rasht, who was handed the death sentence for apostasy on Nov. 13, 2010. His lawyer has filed an appeal with the Supreme Court, and Nadarkhani is awaiting a trial date. Arrested in October 2009 and serving time in Lakan prison, Nadarkhani is married and has two young children.

"Yousef isn't in a good situation," said the anonymous source, referring to the status of his case. "I asked about his morale. They said it is good, and that he is providing moral support to others."

Authorities have allegedly treated Nadarkhani harshly both physically and mentally.

"They told him he is a Christian and dirty, and he can't have contact with others," said the source. "He has suffered, been beaten and had bad conditions."

Nadarkhani's wife, Tina, also spent time in prison last year for four months.

Asked to evaluate the outlook for Nadarkhani, the source said authorities have secretly killed many people and will not hesitate to do the same with Nadarkhani if the international community stops advocating for him and other Christians.

"We think that if we stay silent, they will kill him, but if we keep talking about him, it will be difficult for them to make the decision to execute him," he said. "Silence is the worst thing about the situation of Christians in Iran. The Christians in Iran suffer from the silence of the international community."