

UN Expert Calls for Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani's Release

The United Nations' independent expert on human rights in Iran voiced concerns over alleged violations in the country's judicial system and called for the release of pastor Youcef Nadarkhani.

In his report on Oct. 19, Ahmed Shaheed, special rapporteur to the U.N., cited torture, degrading treatment of detainees, and the imposition of the death penalty without proper safeguards as reasons for action.

Shaheed also identified denial of access to legal counsel and medical treatment as other issues of concern, in addition to secret and public executions. He urged Iranian officials to consider releasing Nadarkhani, along with other individuals who have reportedly been arrested and prosecuted by the regime.

Nadarkhani is an Iranian pastor whose death sentence for apostasy was upheld in court hearings in late September, and whose case has been sent to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. The Supreme Court is also considering a further appeal.

Shaheed's call for reform is not surprising. Iran is ranked second on the Open Doors' World Watch List, a ranking of the top 50 countries around the world known for their persecution of Christians.

Islam is the official religion in Iran, so under judicial interpretations of Shariah law, any Muslim who leaves Islam to embrace another religion faces the death penalty. Effectively, Iran is a religious dictatorship where little of consequence can occur without the approval of the Guardian Council of Mullahs.

Accordingly, as the country has moved more toward the strictures of Islam, religious persecution of certain minorities has intensified since 2005. This is aimed at the Baha'i, Sufi Muslims and Christians—especially believers from a Muslim background. Almost all Christian activity is illegal.

Pray that the body of Christ will continue to multiply and mature despite persecution. Pray that the government will be open to change and allow full rights and protection for non-Muslims. Pray that those who flee Iran will find refuge and help.