



9.7.17

IRAN | Christian Children Face Education Ultimatum

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) was informed that children from families belonging to the Church of Iran denomination in the cities of Rasht and Shiraz were told they must either study Shi'a Islam or leave school.

The majority of these children are second generation Christians. As part of a minority faith community recognized in the Iranian constitution, they are allowed, by law, to have access to religious instruction designed by members of the Christian community and approved by the Ministry of Education.

Until recently, their families were able to present a signed letter from the denomination that exempted them from studying Shi'a Islam. The authorities are now rejecting this letter on the grounds that the church is an "illegal organization," and are insisting the children either agree to study Islam or go home. Sources in the denomination have told CSW that "the message is clear: convert or leave."

Under Article 30 of the Iranian constitution, the government is obligated to provide free education for all children until they complete secondary school. However, the policy adopted by school authorities in Rasht and Shiraz effectively deprives children who are currently in primary and secondary school of education unless they agree to religious instruction that does not conform with their own faith.

Iran is party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which recognizes the right of parents to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in line with their own convictions and has ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which also recognizes this right. The country has also ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which commits signatories to ensuring access to primary, secondary and tertiary education.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "It is worrying that the education of so many children will be unduly interrupted until their parents agree for them to study a religion different to their own. Education is a basic right which Iran has undertaken to guarantee to all of its citizens. Children should not be

victimized in an effort to penalize their parents for exercising the right to adopt a religion of their choice. Since education is the responsibility of central government, we urge the Special Rapporteur on the right to education and other key international human rights experts to make urgent representations with President Rouhani, with a view to ensuring the country fulfils its national and international obligations to respect the right of the child to education, and particularly to religious education commensurate with the convictions and beliefs of their parents.”

In other news, Church of Iran member Suroush Saraie, who was rearrested July 18, is now in Adelabad Prison. He was initially taken to Pelak 100, a notorious detention center run by the Intelligence Services. CSW was informed that while there, attempts were made to pressure him into making an unspecified "confession."

Saraie was rearrested at his home in Shiraz after being released early from Adelabad Prison in November 2015. Another Church of Iran member, Eskandar Rezaie, was rearrested July 6 after being released temporarily from Adelabad Prison in December 2015. Both men were initially arrested Oct. 12, 2012, along with five other Christians, during a raid on a prayer meeting, and were found guilty of “action against national security” and “propaganda against the order of the system.” Saraie received a two-and-a-half year sentence on July 16, 2013, later upheld on appeal, which he began serving in July 2014. Rezaie was given a one-year sentence, which he began serving in July 2015.

“These re-arrests and the initial transfer of Mr. Saraie to the notorious detention center are deeply disturbing. Despite the country’s constitutional and international obligations, Iran continues to criminalize members of the Christian community for exercising their right to the freedoms of religion or belief and association. Once again, we call on the international community not to neglect human rights issues during dialogues with Iran, and to urge the government to release all prisoners of conscience, and to respect the right of every citizen to freedom of religion or belief,” Thomas said.