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IRAN | Christians Asked to Renounce Faith

CSW has learned that during a final appeal hearing on Jan. 15 in Tehran, Iranian Christians Saheb Fadaie and Fatemeh Bakhteri were asked by presiding judges Hassan Babaee and Ahmad Zargar to renounce their faith but refused to do so. They were subsequently told to expect a verdict in the appeal against their conviction on charges of “spreading propaganda against the regime” within the next few days.

On Sept. 22, 2018 Fadaie and Bakhteri were sentenced to 18 and 12 months in prison, respectively. Fadaie also received an additional two years in internal exile in Nehbandan, a remote area close to the border with Afghanistan. Local sources reported the verdict confirming the sentences claimed that discussions of Christian doctrine held in house churches were considered attacks on Islam.

Fadaie was transported to court from Evin prison, where he is currently serving a 10-year sentence. He was arrested along with fellow Church of Iran members, Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, Mohammadreza Omid and Yasser Mossayebzadeh, on May 13, 2016, during a series of raids by security agents on Christian homes in the city of Rasht. In July 2017, all four received 10-year sentences “for acting against national security” by “promoting Zionist Christianity,” and in May 2018, Judge Babee and Judge Zargar upheld these sentences.

Judge Babaee and Judge Zargar are both alleged to have played prominent roles in the crackdown on freedom of expression in Iran. Moreover, Judge Zargar, a Hojjatolislam, was among several Iranian officials deemed responsible or complicit in serious human rights violations in 2012. He was also one of six judges accused in 2014 of losing judicial impartiality and overseeing miscarriages of justice in trials involving journalists, lawyers, political activists and members of Iran’s ethnic and religious minorities.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “The conviction of Mr. Fadaie and Ms. Bakhteri for asserting Christian doctrine is not only a grave violation of their right to espouse a religious belief of their choosing, but also criminalizes the Christian faith, which the Iranian constitution purports to recognize. It is deeply concerning that Judges Babee and Zargar are presiding over their appeal, especially in view of the unacceptable demand for them to renounce their faith; the rejection by these judges of a

previous appeal involving Mr. Fadaie, and the allegations that both judges are implicated in human rights violations.”

For over a year prior to her sentencing, Bakhteri was subjected to harassment by security agents and was summoned for interrogation on at least one occasion. On May 25, 2017, several people were arrested during a police raid on her home.

Thomas said, “We call for the verdict against Mr. Fadaie and Ms. Bakhteri to be overturned, and urge the Iranian authorities to ensure due process in cases involving religious minorities. We also continue to urge the Iranian government to cease all forms of harassment and intimidation of peaceable religious communities, and to release all those detained in connection with their religion or belief.”