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IRAN | Anti-Christian Campaign Continues

Three more Iranian Christians were arrested in the city of Rasht in Gilan province, as part of an ongoing official campaign of repression targeting the country's Christian community.

CSW sources report that two members of the Church of Iran, Babak Hosseinzadeh and Behnam Akhlagh, were arrested while attending a church service on the evening of Feb. 23. A third member, Mehdi Khatibi, was arrested the same day, following a summons from the secret police.

The arrests bring the total number of Christians arrested in Rasht over the past five weeks to six. Hossein Kadivar (Elisha) and Khalil Dehghanpour were arrested Jan. 29. On Feb. 10, Pastor Matthias Haghnejad was arrested by Islamic Revolutionary Guard members who entered the gathering where he was leading a service, detaining him after it had concluded. Since 2006, Pastor Haghnejad was arrested and tried on several occasions in the cities of Rasht, Shiraz and Karaj.

In other news, the appeal by Shamiram Issavi against a five-year jail sentence imposed in January 2018 for "acting against national security" was postponed after an initial hearing Feb. 19 at Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran. According to Iranian religious freedom organization Article 18, the presiding judge, Ahmad Zargar, appeared confused regarding the details of her and ruled that the next hearing would take place after Persian New Year and in conjunction with that of her husband, Pastor Victor Bet-Tamraz, and three Christians who were sentenced alongside him.

Shamiram Issavi and her husband, who is a well-known ethnic Assyrian pastor, led the Assyrian Pentecostal Church of Shahrara in Tehran before it was forced to close in March 2009. The Pastor and two members of their congregation, Kavian Fallah-Mohammadi, and Hadi Asgari, were given a 10-year sentence in July 2017, while a third, Amin Afshar-Naderi, was given an additional five years for "insulting the sacred" (blasphemy against Islam). All three are converts to Christianity.

On July 11, 2018 their son, Ramiel Bet-Tamraz, was sentenced to four months in prison for "spreading propaganda against the system" through "membership of illegal house churches," and is also appealing his conviction.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "The arrests in Rasht are the latest in a heightened campaign of repression that has seen Christians receiving excessive charges and sentences merely for exercising their right to manifest their religion in private and in community with others and in a peaceable manner. Many more are being punished for adopting a religion of their choice in accordance with article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is party. CSW urges the Iranian authorities to ensure the immediate and unconditional release of all who have been arrested or imprisoned unjustly. These arrests and sentences constitute a grave violation of the Iranian constitution, as well as of the nation's international legal obligations."