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IRAN | Christians Receive Prison Sentences

Four Iranian Christians received prison sentences on Aug. 1 for “actions against national security,” “attending home churches” and “spreading Zionist Christianity.” Ramin Hassanpour was sentenced to five-years imprisonment, while Hadi Rahimi (Moslem) received four years. Mr. Rahimi’s wife, Sakine Behjati (Mehri), and a fourth Christian, Saeede Sajadpour (Kathrin), were each given two-year sentences.

The four Christians were initially arrested in February, reportedly in relation to their membership of a house-church. On May 14, they were sent to Lakan Prison in Rasht, after failing to meet bail, which was initially set at approximately \$30,000. Later Saeede Sajadpour, Hadi Rahimi and Sakine Behjati were released on bail set at approximately \$11,500 on May 20, and Ramin Hassanpour was released on May 21. However, the Iranian authorities refused to drop the charges against them, and they have since been returned to prison.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “The sentencing of these four Christians marks the latest development in a relentless crackdown on specific religious groups in Iran. We urge the Iranian government to release these Christians and all others who are currently detained on excessive charges relating to their religion or belief, and to end the judicial harassment of members of minority faith communities. We also call on Iran to lift every restriction on freedom of religion or belief, and to respect the right of its citizens to adopt a religious belief of their choosing or none at all.”

In a separate development, CSW learned that prison authorities have refused to release Mohammadreza Omidi (Yuhan) on his scheduled release date. Omidi initially received a verdict reducing his 10-year sentence to two years and was expecting to have been released in July. He was subsequently informed by prison authorities that the sentence had been reduced to six years. If correct, this would mean he will have four more years to serve. CSW’s sources believe this is an attempt by the secret police to prevent his release and to increase pressure on church leaders.

Omidi was initially arrested in Rasht on May 13, 2016 during a series of raids by security agents on Christian homes. Three other members of the Church of Iran denomination, Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, Deacon Saheb Fadaie and Yasser Mossayebzadeh, were arrested at the same time. In July 2017, they were found guilty of “acting against national security” by “promoting Zionist Christianity” and given 10-year sentences by Judge Ahmadzadeh, the head judge of the 26th Branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Court in Tehran. Pastor Nadarkhani and Omidi each received an additional two years of internal exile, which was to be served in remote and inhospitable locations in the south of the country.

In June, the four Christians received the verdict of their latest appeal, which reduced Omidi’s sentence to 24 months. He was expected to be released in July.

Mervyn Thomas added, “It is deeply disturbing that Mr. Omidi, who should never have been imprisoned in the first place, has been denied release despite having served the sentence handed to him, allegedly on the basis of a sentence of which he had no previous knowledge. We call on the Iranian authorities to guarantee Mr. Omidi’s release immediately and without condition, and overturn the convictions of Mr. Omidi, Pastor Nadarkhani, Deacon Fadaie and Mr. Mossayebzadeh. We also reiterate our call to the international community to maintain intense scrutiny on the situation of human rights in the country, and particularly of freedom of religion or belief, raising these and other miscarriages of justice with the Iranian authorities at every opportunity, both bilaterally and multilaterally.”