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## **Baha'is face continuing harassment**

by Golnaz Esfandiari

REF/RL (06.12.2004)/HRWF (08.12.2004) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - Website: <http://hrwf.net> - Baha'is are Iran's largest religious minority, but their faith is not recognized in the country's constitution and they have long faced harassment and persecution. The European Union recently lodged a formal complaint with Iranian authorities over the arrest and harassment of journalists as well as members of religious minorities such as the Baha'is.

Some 300,000 Baha'is live in Iran, where their religion was founded in the mid-19th century. Iran is also where Baha'is have long faced harassment and persecution for their beliefs.

"Baha'is have no rights in the Islamic republic, even rights that other recognized [religious] minorities enjoy in Iran," said Abdolkarim Lahiji, vice president of the International Federation of Human Rights Leagues. "For example, a Baha'i teenage cannot enter Iran's universities; either he would have to lie and say that he is not a Baha'i, or else be deprived of the right to higher education. The Baha'i community of Iran had organized computer-based correspondence classes for youth, the authorities have repeatedly disrupted these [classes] and confiscated teaching materials and generally they have made life for the Baha'i minority difficult."

Diane Alai is the United Nations representative of the Baha'i International Community.

"For 20 years, Baha'is have been imprisoned, condemned to death," Alai said. "Their properties have been confiscated. People have been expelled from their jobs. Elderly people are not receiving their pensions. Baha'i properties have been confiscated. Baha'i holy places have been demolished, cemeteries desecrated."

The Baha'i faith was founded by Mirza Hussein Ali Nuri, known as "Bahauallah" -- Arabic for "the Glory of God." The unity of all religions, the unity of humanity, and the equality of men and women are among the main teachings of Bahauallah.

"Since the beginning of the Islamic Republic we can say that there are approximately 200 Baha'is that have been executed only for their beliefs, thousands that have been jailed."

Some Muslims consider Baha'is to be heretics. Many see theological conflicts with Islam as the main motive for the persecution of Baha'is. Muslims believe that the

Prophet Muhammad is "the end of prophesy." The Baha'i faith, founded several centuries after Islam, states that divine revelation will continue.

"People are free to choose their way, and the Holy Koran has clearly stated: 'There is no compulsion in the religion,'" said Abbas Mohajerani, a professor of Islamic theology and philosophy in London. "The Baha'is or any other sect are free to take the direction they want, but when it comes to the principles of a religion and law you have to bear in mind that Islam explicitly says that Muhammad is the last prophet sent by God and whoever does not believe it is not a Muslim."

Baha'is believe that God has revealed himself to humanity through a series of divine messengers. The messengers have included Abraham, Krishna, Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad. According to the Baha'i faith, Bahauallah is the latest of these messengers.

The Baha'i faith has about 5 million followers in more than 200 countries and territories throughout the world.

In Iran, the situation of the Baha'is worsened after the 1979 revolution. In the early 1980s, authorities banned the Baha'i religious and spiritual administration and declared membership in it to be crime. Diane Alai, the Baha'i International Community's UN representative, says after the revolution in Iran the harassment of Baha'is became systematic. However, she adds that in recent years the execution of Baha'is and long-term detention have decreased.

"Since the beginning of the Islamic Republic we can say that there are approximately 200 Baha'is that have been executed only for their beliefs, thousands that have been jailed," Alai said. "But in recent years, we have seen a great decrease in the number of executions and long-term detention."

The European Union, in its recent statement on the human rights situation in Iran, protested the recent desecrated of Bahai holy sites.

Alai said that in the past year, two Baha'i holy places have been desecrated in Iran.

"The first one was actually earlier in the year and it was a resting place of Guddus, who was one of the important figures of the Babi Baha'i movement," Alai said. "And then, more recently, the house of Mirza Bozorg Noori [the father of Bahauallah] in Tehran was totally demolished."

Mirza Abbas Nuri, known as Mirza Bozorg, was a provincial governor and a famous calligrapher. Baha'is around the world have strongly denounced the destruction of these places and published a statement in "The New York Times" noting that Mirza Abbas Nuri's house was an "historical monument and a precious example of Islamic-Iranian architecture."

In July, the Iranian daily "Hamshahri" published an article about the life of Mirza Abbas Nuri and the architecture of his house and noted that Iran's cultural heritage organization is due to rebuild the house.

There has been no official reaction by the Iranian government.

On 2 December, Iran's Baha'i community, in a letter to Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, called for their human rights to be respected.

Alai hopes that international pressure on the Islamic establishment of Iran will help improve the situation of Baha'is living there.

"This is why we are appealing both to the Iranian government and the Baha'is in Iran are appealing to the Iranian government and we at the international level are calling upon the international community to put pressure on the Iranian government to basically emancipate the Baha'is in Iran so they can just... They don't want more rights than any average Iranian citizen, but they want the right of an Iranian citizen and the right to practice their faith," Alai said.

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## **Pastor moved to military prison**

### ***Fears mount for jailed Christian convert***

by Barbara G. Baker

Compass Direct (15.11.2004)/HRWF (16.11.2004) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - Website: <http://hrwf.net> - Iranian authorities moved Christian prisoner Hamid Pourmand to a military prison last week, deepening fears throughout the evangelical community for the safety of the Protestant pastor jailed nine weeks ago.

Local sources have confirmed that Pourmand was told in late October that he would be released within just a few days. But he remained under detention at an unknown location until a few days ago, when he was transferred to a military jail.

No known charges have been filed against Pourmand, a former Muslim who converted to Christianity nearly 25 years ago. Married with two children, he is a colonel in the Iranian army.

Although Pourmand was allowed one short telephone call to his wife three weeks after his arrest, security police have since refused to permit him any other contact with his family or friends.

"He has been pressured a lot psychologically," one Iranian Christian told Compass, "but we do not know for sure how he has been treated physically." The source said Pourmand's family remains very worried about him, after more than two months of detention *incommunicado*.

Pourmand, 47, has been incarcerated since September 9, when he was arrested with 85 other pastors and leaders of the Assemblies of God Church during their annual general conference in Karaj, near Tehran. Most of the detainees were released by the end of the day, although Pourmand and nine other pastors were held for four days of interrogation before the others were set free.

Pourmand was serving as lay pastor of a congregation in Bandar-i Bushehr, a port city on the Persian Gulf in southern Iran.

During his family's absence in the days following his arrest, Pourmand's home was broken into and searched, with all of the family's papers and photographs removed.

In recent months, prominent government officials have repeatedly denounced "foreign religions," which they accuse of threatening Iran's national security.

In April, one Shiite cleric in the Ministry of Education declared publicly that an average of 50 Iranian young people were known to "convert secretly to Christian denominations" every day.

Dozens of evangelical Christians were arrested in a crackdown against house churches in the provinces of northern Iran in May, including one pastor detained with his wife and children. After several weeks of harsh mistreatment and interrogations, all were eventually released after being ordered to stop evangelizing and meeting for worship. They reportedly remain under close police surveillance.

In Iran's Islamic courts, a Muslim convicted of apostasy is subject to the death penalty. Since the 1976 Islamic revolution, a number of ex-Muslims who converted to Christianity have been covertly assassinated or executed by court order, under the guise of spying for foreign countries.

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## **Assyrian woman's husband faces death penalty**

AsiaNews (18.10.2004)/HRWF (26.10.2004) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Hamid Pourmand is a Protestant minister of the Assemblies of God Church and married to an Assyrian, whose identity is not revealed due to the nature of Rev Pourmand's situation. Rev. Pourmand converted from Islam several years ago. Since September he has been held in prison at an undisclosed location and under Iranian law he can be put to death for "apostasy against Islam". He was arrested on September 9 in Karaj, a town 30 kilometers west of the capital Tehran during a police raid against the annual General Council of the Assemblies of God Church.

Reverend Pourmand is 47-year-old, with two children, and a colonel in the Iranian army based in the city of Bandar-i Bushehr (380 km south of Tehran). If brought before a court martial he could face espionage charges and sentenced to death. Although laws instituted after the Islamic revolution prohibit non-Muslims from holding officer rank, he continued to serve as an officer in the Iranian army. "Hamid did not keep his conversion secret," a friend said, "but he is an honest man and people liked and respected him."

Pourmand was arrested along with 86 other Protestant leaders among whom were three Assyrians; 76 were released the evening of their arrest whilst another 9 were let go three days later. But Pourmand was the only one who is still in prison. According to eyewitnesses, Iranian police had detailed information about each one of them.

Since his arrest, Pourmand has been able to talk briefly to his wife by phone and tell her that he was alright. At the time of his arrest, she and their children were in Tehran visiting relatives. Upon her return home, she found that their home had been searched and family documents and photos taken.

The September raid against the council of the Assemblies of God comes in the wake of several arrests of Christians in northern Iran in May and June.

In July 1994, Mehdi Dibaj, another minister of the Assemblies of God Church who was also a convert from Islam, was killed after spending nine years in prison for refusing to abjure his Christian faith and return to Islam.

Under Iranian law, capital punishment is reserved for apostasy, murder, armed robbery, rape and drug trafficking.

Some months ago Shiite cleric Hasan Mohammadi from the Ministry of Education said in a speech to Tehran high school students that "on average every day, 50 young Iranians convert secretly to Christian denominations".

There are about 360,000 Christians in Iran out of a population of 65 million.

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## **Iranian police release 10 Evangelical pastors**

### ***No reasons given for four-day detention***

*by Barbara G. Baker*

Compass Direct (13.09.2004)/HRWF (14.09.2004) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Ten evangelical church leaders arrested four days ago by Iranian police were released last night from their unknown detention site.

All pastors and elders in Iran's Assemblies of God Church, the 10 men were set free on Sunday night, "quite late in the night," an Iranian Christian source confirmed.

After their release, the pastors were allowed to return to Tehran to stay with their families or friends in the capital or nearby Karaj. Those living in other cities were returning home today to Rasht, Urumiyeh, Ahwaz and Boshahr, church sources said.

The pastors reportedly were not given any specific reason for their arrest, although they were asked "many questions about themselves and each other," one source said.

Due to police surveillance monitoring their movements and telephone conversations, the pastors have not made direct contact with other evangelical believers since their release.

Together with 70 other Assemblies of God Church leaders, the pastors had convened at a church center in Karaj for their annual general conference on September 9 when the arrests occurred. Police officials swarmed onto the property that morning, blindfolding all the men and women present and taking them off to be fingerprinted and interrogated.

All the detainees were released by nightfall except for the 10 pastors and elders, who were held incommunicado until their release Sunday night.

Reportedly the church leaders had refused to name any one person among them as their top leader, prompting the police to arrest the entire group en masse. Last

week's police crackdown was the largest known arrest of Iranian evangelical believers in the past decade.

The murderers of three of Iran's leading Protestant pastors 10 years ago have never been brought to justice. Assemblies of God leader Rev. Haik Hovsepian-Mehr was murdered in January 1994, shortly after launching a successful international campaign to free Mehdi Dibaj, a long-time convert to Christianity jailed for nine years.

Six months later, Dibaj was also killed, followed days later by the disappearance and murder of Rev. Tateos Michaelian, a Presbyterian pastor.

Since its declaration as an Islamic state in 1979, Iran has clamped down harshly on its Protestant citizens and even closed the Iranian Bible Society. A large number of evangelical churches have been closed for worship, their buildings confiscated and known converts to Christianity put under arrest.

Under Islamic law enforced in Iran, a Muslim who converts to Christianity faces the death penalty.

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## **Police detain 80 Iranian Evangelicals**

### ***Ten pastors remain under arrest***

Compass Direct (10.09.2004)/HRWF (13.09.2004) Iranian police invaded the annual general conference of Iran's Assemblies of God Church yesterday, arresting at least 80 church leaders gathered at the church's denominational center in Karaj, 20 miles west of Tehran.

Without warning, a large number of policemen surrounded the church's garden property yesterday morning, bursting in to arrest all the men and women present at the first day of their annual meetings. "The police came from everywhere," one Iranian Christian said, "and there were a lot of them."

"Every single person present was put under arrest, blindfolded and taken in for interrogation," an Iranian source confirmed to Compass today. The detained Christians were driven around blindfolded for several hours so they would be unable to understand where they were being taken.

Reportedly, each individual was questioned separately by security officials, who had a specific list of questions. The interrogation revealed that the authorities had very precise information about each person, including his or her activities, relatives and other personal data.

By evening, the authorities had released all the arrested Christians except for the 10 pastors among them. The location of these 10 men is unknown, and their families have not been allowed any contact with them.

Six ordained ministers were named among the prisoners, identified by their given names of Vartan, Soren, Harmik, George, Omid and Farhad. Another two men serving as pastors and two church elders were identified as Neshan, Hamid, Henry and Robert.

The pastors serve in congregations located in Tehran, Urumiyeh, Rasht, Ahwaz, Boshahr and Karaj.

All the evangelicals released last night were forbidden to attend church services today, the weekly day of rest in Iran when most churches meet for worship. "Anyway, all their pastors are now under arrest, so there will be no one to preach when the congregations gather for services," the source noted.

"This is the biggest crisis for evangelical believers in the country since three Protestant pastors were murdered 10 years ago," another source told Compass.

As the world's only theocracy, Iran has strictly proscribed the activities of its evangelical Christian citizens, closing down their churches and arresting known converts to Christianity. Under Islamic law, apostates who leave Islam are subject to the death penalty.

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## **Iranian Pastor released from prison**

### ***Last two jailed Christians set free***

by Barbara G. Baker

Compass (07.07.2004) / HRWF (12.07.2004) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) -- Iranian pastor Khosroo Yusefi was released from prison in northern Iran yesterday, six weeks after he was arrested with his wife and children in Chalous, a city along the Caspian Sea coast.

Yusefi and another Christian believer are the last of several dozen evangelical Christians known to be arrested throughout May and then finally freed by police officials in the province of Mazandaran.

Although Yusefi's wife Nasrin had been informed five days ago by local authorities that her husband was to be set free, he only arrived home yesterday, July 6. She and their two teenage children had been released after a week in detention.

As with other religious prisoners, Yusefi was driven out of his undisclosed jail location with his eyes blindfolded. Then before he was set free, he was driven around for some time so that he would be confused. "So first he had to find out where he was, and then find his way back home," a source said.

In his late 40s, Yusefi converted to Christianity from the Baha'i religion nearly 20 years ago. As a lay pastor, he oversees several unregistered Assemblies of God house churches in the Caspian region.

Local authorities in northern Iran have reportedly used physical mistreatment and heavy interrogation methods against all the Protestant Christians arrested and jailed since early May.

Although none of the jailed Christians are believed to have appeared in court or had formal charges pressed against them, they have been ordered to stop

evangelizing and meeting for worship, and to “stop talking about Jesus,” one source reported.

“In most political and religious cases, there is no court at all,” an Iranian Christian told Compass. “They just send you to interrogation.”

Another church leader jailed with Yusefi was believed to have been released two days earlier, sources said, although few details have been confirmed so far. “They are afraid to talk right now, because they are under control, their telephones and everything,” a friend admitted.

The recent police crackdown in northern Iran targeted the region’s spreading house-church movement, made up mostly of former Muslims who have come to faith in Christ.

As the world’s only theocracy, the Islamic Republic of Iran forbids proselytizing among Muslims. Any Muslim who converts from Islam to another faith faces the death penalty.

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## **Two Iranian evangelicals still jailed in isolation**

*Families, lawyer forbidden access to prisoners*

by Barbara G. Baker

Compass (29.06.2004) / HRWF (30.06.2004) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) -- More than five weeks after their arrest by local police officials, Iranian Christian pastor Khosroo Yusefi and another church leader remain imprisoned in an unknown jail location in northern Iran.

Yusefi and a fellow Christian from Chalous are believed to be held in the vicinity of Sari, a city near the Caspian Sea coast in Mazanderan province.

But since June 8, when two other church leaders who had been jailed with them were released, local Christians have been unable to contact the two remaining prisoners.

“Nobody can visit them yet,” an Iranian Christian told Compass, “and they have not been allowed to see a lawyer. We have no hope how they can be set free.”

No known charges have been filed against Yusefi, a convert to Christianity from the Baha’i religion, nor against the dozens of other evangelical Protestants arrested in early May.

Yusefi had been arrested and imprisoned in the town of Chalous on May 23 with his wife Nasrin and two teenage children. A week later, Yusefi’s wife and children were released and allowed to return home, along with two church leaders who had been put under arrest a month earlier.

But another evangelical Protestant leader from Nowshahr was arrested that same day, on May 30, and then hauled off to join Yusefi and the two others still in jail. Now only Yusefi and his colleague remain in custody, cut off from making any contact outside their cells.

Reportedly the families of Yusefi and other church leaders arrested during May now have no means of regular financial support, since the husbands have either lost their jobs or had all their regular business contracts revoked.

A Christian for nearly 20 years, Yusefi is in his late 40s. He was overseeing a number of unregistered Assemblies of God house churches in the Caspian region at the time of his arrest.

Most of the Protestant Christians arrested in recent police sweeps against house churches meeting in northern Iran are former Muslims. Under Islamic law enforced in Iran, a Muslim who leaves Islam for another faith is guilty of apostasy, punishable by the death penalty.

The world's largest republic adhering to strict Islamic laws of governance, Iran has seen steady erosion in its human rights stance over the past four years in terms of restricted freedom of expression, prolonged detention without trial and systematic torture.

"Government actions create a threatening atmosphere for some religious minorities," notes last year's religious freedom report on Iran from the U.S. State Department, "especially Baha'is, Jews, and evangelical Christians."

According to the 2003 report, "The government vigilantly enforces its prohibition on proselytizing activities by evangelical Christians by closing evangelical churches and arresting converts."

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