

World Evangelical Alliance & Christian Solidarity Worldwide

UPR-Info Pre-session on Iran

Speech of Dabrina Bet Tamraz

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A Personal Story

Christians are receiving lengthy prison sentences for false charges related to the practice of their faith, and their sentences are being upheld by the Court of Appeals. The charge of apostasy is rarely issued by the courts. Instead, converts from Islam often face charges of 'action against national security.' For example, in January 2018 Naser Navard Goltapeh was detained and began serving a 10-year prison sentence in Evin Prison for 'acting against national security through forming and establishing illegal house churches.

Most of these cases involved converts from Islam, but there are also several instances where members of recognized Armenian and Assyrian Christian minorities were imprisoned or sentenced to prison due to their religious activities. My parents, my only brother, and myself included.

My father, Pastor Victor Bet-Tamraz, was an official recognized pastor by the Iranian government. He led a Pentecostal Assyrian Church for more than 40 years conducting services in Farsi and Assyrian. Our church was shut down by Iran's Ministry of Interior in March 2009.

My family was a target of continuous harassment from Iranian authorities for as long as I can remember. On 26th December 2014, my father was imprisoned. They beat him. They shaved his head as a way to humiliate him. They treated him as though he was a criminal—a terrorist. He was kept in solitary confinement for 65 days; at times without any human interaction for over ten days. He was charged with "conducting evangelism" and "illegal house church activities" among other false charges that amounted to "acting against national security." Today, my father is appealing a ten-year prison sentence.

Following my father's arrest, my brother "Ramiel" and 4 other Christians were arrested at a picnic gathering in Tehran. They were interrogated and denied access to their attorneys during the entire period they were held. They too were charged with "acting against national security" and "organizing and establishing house churches." It didn't stop there. Shortly after their arrests, the wives of two of the prisoners were dismissed from work on orders from Iranian authorities.

In 2017, my mother Shamiram Issavi, was summoned to meet with officers of the Intelligence and National Security Organization. She was subsequently charged and sentenced to 5 years in prison for "membership of a group with the purpose of disrupting national security" and an additional 5 years in prison for

“gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security.” My family is awaiting their next court hearing. However, the lawyers have no hope or see a chance of their sentences to be dropped.

I endured a similar experience before leaving Iran. I was detained and held in a men’s detention center without the presence of any female officers. I was ultimately forced to cooperate with the authorities and provide the names of our church leaders and information about their activities. I was then pressured to sign documents and agree to criminal charges against my own family and other pastors.

The situation of Iranian Christians

The Iranian Christian community, along with other religious minorities in the country, continue to be denied their right to freedom of religion or belief. These human rights violations threaten the safety of these communities. Ongoing surveillance of Christians by the authorities is often accompanied by harassment, which takes various forms.

Since 2009, the Iranian regime has worked to end the use of Farsi in recognized churches and has forced churches which held services for Farsi-speaking Christians to close.

As a result of the prohibition on the use of Farsi in church, Christian converts are forced to resort to informal meetings, frequently termed “house churches.” These private gatherings are considered illegal by authorities and are often raided. Attendees are arrested and imprisoned, their personal property such as ID cards and laptops are confiscated and never returned.

The end of 2018 saw an unprecedented wave of raids on private house gatherings, leading to a large number of arrests. In 2018 alone, 171 Christian converts were arrested and charged with similar, baseless accusations. They are now either awaiting trial or serving lengthy prison sentences. At least 37 Christian converts have been arrested so far this year. These people are not religious leaders or pastors. They are not politicians or activists of some sort. They are simply believers attending prayer and worship gatherings. But to the Iranian authorities, any non-Islamic religious gathering is considered a threat to the government.

Today, recognized church facilities remain closed to ethnic Persian Christians, as well as Evangelical Assyrian and Armenia minorities. In a number of cases, church property has been confiscated by authorities. In May of this year, Iranian authorities raided the historic Assyrian Presbyterian Church in Tabriz. They ordered the church warden to leave and proceeded to change the locks, tore down the cross from the church tower, and installed surveillance equipment.

Authorities later reinstated the cross, but have yet to hand back the keys to the leaders of the Assyrian Presbyterian Church.

In addition to Christians, Bahá'ís, Sunni Muslims, Sufis (Dervishes) are minority religious groups that face discrimination and severe restrictions to their religious freedom.

The situation of the Baha'is

The Baha'i Faith is not a recognized religion in Iran, and Baha'is have continued to face systematic discrimination in law and practice. This community, along with the Dervishes, has increasingly been targeted with hate speech from clergy to politicians appearing in every media. Baha'is face arrests and arbitrary detention and are regularly denied due process simply because of their religious beliefs. They face a great number of discriminatory and repressive policies in the areas of economic activity, education, and burial sites. Baha'i owned businesses face forced closures simply for observing their holy days. Baha'i children continue to be denied access to some schools, and are totally denied access to higher education. Some Baha'i children have also suffered physical abuse in school, while others have been incarcerated with their parents. Article 1 of the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council explicitly excludes Baha'is from enrolling in university.

Recommendations

The government of Iran has an obligation under international law to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to freedom of religion or belief. I call on the Iranian authorities to:

- Amend article 13 of the constitution to ensure that all religious minorities are recognized and able to fully enjoy the right to freedom of religion or belief.
- Ensure that Article 18 of the ICCPR is upheld and not contravened by national laws or practices that penalize apostasy or legislate against changing one's belief.
- Immediately and unconditionally release all those detained on charges of blasphemy or apostasy, and on national security charges related to their religion or belief.
- Uphold the right to freedom of religion or belief for every citizen, regardless of their ethnic or linguistic group, including converts from other religions.
- Hand back the keys of the Tabriz Assyrian Evangelical Presbyterial Church to the leaders of the Presbyterian Church.
- Allow Baha'ís the same rights as all other Iranians, including full and equal access to state universities on the basis of academic merit.