

Iran tells Christian pastor: recant or face execution

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WASHINGTON (BP)--Iranian pastor Yousef Nadarkhani faces execution unless he renounces his faith in Christ, a written verdict from the country's supreme court has confirmed.

Baptist Press reported July 8 that Christians in Iran were challenging news reports that Nadarkhani's death penalty had been annulled. The Christian Solidarity Worldwide human rights organization reported July 14 that the court's written verdict had been released, confirming that Nadarkhani faces execution unless he renounces his faith.

The original verdict on charges of apostasy was based on "fatwas" by Iran's most powerful religious leaders -- Ayatollahs Khomeini, Khamenei and Makarem Shirazi -- meaning the Supreme Court may have been reluctant to overturn the verdict for fear of inviting controversy, CSW advocacy director Andrew Johnston said in a press statement.

Following reports of the verdict, the U.S. State Department issued a statement expressing "dismay" over the situation, according to Fox News. Human rights advocates, however, say apostasy isn't even identified as a crime under Iranian law.

"From a human rights perspective, you can't criminalize someone's choice of religion, much less execute them for that," Hadi Ghaemi, executive director of the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, told Fox News.

Other religious groups also face persecution for their beliefs in Iran, the State Department pointed out. Seven Baha'i leaders have been sentenced to 20 years in prison for practicing their faith, and hundreds of members of Islam's Sufi sect have been flogged in public because of their beliefs. Iran has been fairly tolerant of the country's Armenian and Assyrian Christian groups, which date from the early days of Christianity, but Muslims who profess faith in Christ have been pressured.

Nadarkhani was arrested in October 2009 while attempting to register his church. His arrest is believed to have been due to his questioning of the Muslim monopoly on the religious instruction of children in Iran, according to news reports. He initially was charged with protesting; however, the charges against him were later changed to apostasy and evangelizing Muslims.

Johnston said Christian Solidarity Worldwide is urging "the Iranian regime to respect the stipulations of international treaties to which it is party, including the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights, which guarantees freedom of religion and freedom to change one's religion or belief.... The international community must act urgently to press Iran to ensure ... that Pastor Nadarkhani in particular is acquitted of a charge that is not in fact recognized under Iranian civil law."

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Compiled by Baptist Press senior writer Mark Kelly.

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