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Persecution: Iran - posted by crsschk (), on: 2005/12/1 9:21

IRAN: CONVERT STABBED TO DEATH

Secret police crackdown results in the torture of 10 other Christians

November 28

An Iranian convert to Christianity was kidnapped last week from his home in northeastern Iran and stabbed to death, his bleeding body thrown in front of his home a few hours later.

Ghorban Tori, 50, was pastoring an independent house church of convert Christians in Gonbad-e-Kavus, a town just east of the Caspian Sea along the Turkmenistan border.

Within hours of the November 22 murder, local secret police arrived at the martyred pastor's home, searching for Bibles and other banned Christian books in the Farsi language. By the end of the following day, the secret police had also raided the houses of all other known Christian believers in the city.

According to one informed Iranian source, during the past eight days representatives of the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) have arrested and severely tortured 10 other Christians in several cities, including Tehran. All the detainees have since been released.

One of the arrested Christians was reportedly interrogated about his involvement in relief work after Iran's deadly Bam earthquake in December 2003. Another working with a legal organization defending human rights was accused of using it as a "cover" for church activities.

In addition, MOIS officials have visited known Christian leaders since Tori's murder and have instructed them to warn acquaintances in the unofficial, Protestant house fellowships that "the government knows what you are doing, and we will come for you soon."

A former Muslim of Turkmen descent, Tori had converted to Christianity more than 10 years ago, while in Turkmenistan.

After he returned to his native Iran in 1998, Tori began to share his new Christian faith with friends and relatives. Within two years, a small fellowship of 12 believers was meeting in his home.

But not all welcomed his message; at least one relative attacked Tori, scarring his face. In the past year he received several threats from Islamic extremists vowing to kill him if he did not stop sharing his Christian faith.

Tori is survived by his wife and four children, ages 3 to 23.

He is the fifth Protestant pastor assassinated in Iran by unidentified killers in the past 11 years. Three of the five were former Muslims, under Iranian law subject to the death penalty for having committed apostasy.

Tori's murder came just days after Iran's new hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called an open meeting with the nation's 30 provincial governors. During the session, an Iranian source told Compass, Ahmadinejad declared that the government needed to put a stop to the burgeoning movement of house churches across Iran.

"I will stop Christianity in this country," Ahmadinejad reportedly vowed.

"This was apparently a green light from the president of Iran to go out and start killing Christians," the source said.

Slurring Non-Muslims

Last week a Zoroastrian representative in the Iranian Parliament protested a slur against non-Muslims on November 20

by a top aide to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

According to the government-run Entekhaab website, in a public speech Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati told youthful Basijis (members of a volunteer militia formed to enforce strict Islamic codes) preparing to join suicide missions that “non-Muslims are sinful animals who roam the earth and engage in corruption.” Jannati, who is secretary general of the powerful Guardian Council, is known to be a mentor and close advisor to Ahmadinejad.

Iranian Member of Parliament Kurosh Niknam declared the comment, “an unprecedented insult to religious minorities.”

Over the past month, Ahmadinejad has conducted a broad shake-up within the government establishment, replacing hundreds of governors, ambassadors and senior ministry officials with young and mostly inexperienced Islamists. Yesterday students at Tehran University protested noisily when a religious cleric without even a high school diploma was appointed rector of the nation’s oldest university.

In November, the new director of prisons also transferred a number of political prisoners of conscience into criminal wards with convicted murderers and drug dealers. At least one of these political prisoners has been killed by fellow inmates, sparking the fears of Iranian Christians for the security of Hamid Pourmand, serving a three-year sentence at Tehran’s Evin Prison for refusing to renounce his conversion to Christianity.

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