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IRAN Nadarkhani rejects “unconstitutional” terms of release

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has been informed that Pastor Yusuf Nadarkhani recently refused an offer to secure his own release by agreeing to state that the Muslim prophet Mohammed was a messenger sent by God.

Lawyers for Pastor Nadarkhani were unexpectedly summoned to his home city of Rasht on December 30, 2011. During ensuing discussions, local authorities indicated they would release the pastor if he agreed to make the statement regarding the Prophet Mohammed. However, Pastor Nadarkhani has refused to do so, and remains in prison awaiting a final decision on his case.

Pastor Nadarkhani of the Church of Iran denomination was initially arrested in Rasht in 2009. In September 2010 he was tried and found guilty of apostasy, and sentenced to death. After further legal wrangling in 2011 during which the pastor thrice refused to recant his faith to save his own life, his case was eventually referred to Iran’s Supreme Leader, as international pressure mounted on his behalf. Toward the end of 2011, CSW received unconfirmed reports indicating that the case may have been passed on to the head of the Iranian judiciary, and that execution may have been delayed for up to a year to allow time to convince the pastor to renounce his faith.

The terms of the recent offer from the Rasht officials have been described by local sources as amounting to an indirect recantation of faith. CSW sources also point out that the request violates article 23 of the Iranian Constitution, which states that no-one should be molested or taken to task simply for holding a certain belief.

Pastor Nadarkhani’s case was recently highlighted by British parliamentarians on 11 January, during a 90-minute debate on human rights in Iran.

CSW’s Chief Executive, Mervyn Thomas, said: “Just as the initial conviction of Pastor Nadarkhani is illegal under Iranian law, the recent offer made by the authorities in Rasht is a violation of the Iranian constitution, and of international covenants to which Iran is a signatory that guarantee freedom of religion and freedom to change one’s religion. CSW continues to call for the unconditional release of Pastor Nadarkhani, and of all those imprisoned in Iran purely on account of their faith. It is vital that the international community maintains pressure on the Iranian regime until the human rights situation positively and irrevocably improves for the better.”