



July 1, 2011

The Honorable Suzan Johnson Cook
Ambassador-at-Large for
International Religious Freedom

Re: Youcef Nadarkhani – Iranian Death Sentence Violates Freedom of Religion

Dear Ambassador Johnson Cook,

On the eve of celebrating independence and freedom in the United States, a man in Iran faces death for changing his faith. In the last few days, the Supreme Court in Qom, Iran upheld the death sentence of Youcef Nadarkhani for converting from Islam to Christianity. His death sentence could be carried out any day. The ACLJ urges the U.S. government to take immediate action. We urge you to call on the Iranian government to unconditionally release Nadarkhani and to reject his sentence as inconsistent with its obligations under international law.

Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani of the Church of Iran denomination was arrested in his home city of Rasht on October 13, 2009, while attempting to register his church. His arrest allegedly resulted because he questioned the Muslim monopoly on religious instruction of children in Iran. The government of Iran had mandated that all school children, regardless of their faith, be taught Islamic teachings. Nadarkhani protested this decision at his sons' school, arguing that the Iranian Constitution granted freedom of religion, which included a parent's right to bring up his children under the religious teaching of the family. Local police demanded Nadarkhani appear before a political tribunal in Rasht, Iran. Upon his appearance, police arrested Nadarkhani and detained him in a prison located in Lakan, Iran. Despite being formally charged with unlawful protesting, Nadarkhani's charge changed to unlawful apostasy and evangelism to Muslims.

On September 21- 22, 2010, a court convicted Nadarkhani and verbally sentenced him to death. He is to be executed by hanging for the crime of apostasy. A written verdict was delayed and delivered on November 13, 2010, by the 1st Court of the Revolutionary Tribunal. Nadarkhani appealed his sentence to the Supreme Court in the Shia holy city of Qom, Iran. On June 28, 2011, the third chamber of the Supreme Court in Qom upheld the apostasy conviction and the death sentence. The Iranian regime often enacts death sentences without advance notice to prisoners' families; thus time is of the essence as Nadarkhani's death sentence could be carried out any day.

Imposing the death penalty for changing religion blatantly violates one of the most fundamental of all human rights. The right to freedom of religion is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Iran has

pledged to uphold. Moreover, this fundamental right is enshrined in Iran's Constitution. Article 23 of the Iranian Constitution provides that the "investigation of individuals' beliefs is forbidden, and no one may be molested or taken to task simply for holding a certain belief."

This death sentence has tremendous implications for all Christians and religious minorities in Iran, and is yet another indicator of the regime's disregard for basic human rights and freedoms. As the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recently reported, "[t]he government of Iran continues to engage in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, including prolonged detention, torture, and executions based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accused." Before another innocent man loses his life, we urge you to take a stand against Iran's violation of human rights and demand the unconditional release of Nadarkhani.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tiffany N. Barrans". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Tiffany" being more prominent than the last name "Barrans".

Tiffany N. Barrans, Esq.
International Legal Director
Colby M. May
Senior Counsel
AMERICAN CENTER FOR LAW & JUSTICE