



[ENGLISH TRANSLATION]

His Holiness, Patriarch of Moscow and All of Russia Kirill

Your Holiness,

The Slavic Centre for Law and Justice, which has been defending the rights of religious believers in Russia and abroad for many years, calls on you to intervene in the fate of a young Iranian Christian by the name of Youcef Nadarkhani, who, by the decision of an Iranian court, has been sentenced to death due to the fact that he converted from Islam to Christianity.

Russia has always considered Iran to be more than a good neighbor and, despite the many criticisms voiced by Western countries, Russia is one of the few major countries that has not turned away from Iran, but instead continues to maintain good neighborly relations with it. There have been many times when Iran has turned to Russia for help and, in large part, thanks to Russia and the position that our country holds on the UN Security Council with respect to Iran, the latter has been able to avoid complete political isolation and an outright blockade by the rest of the world.

It is not only in the economic and political sphere that Russia and Iran enjoy good relations, but also in spiritual and religious sphere. For example, in 2006, representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church also stated its support for Iran and denounced the scandal that caused a worldwide resonance in connection with the publication in several European media caricatures of the Muslim prophet Muhammad.

However, while paying due respect to Islam as the state religion in many countries, including Iran, as Christians we cannot turn a blind eye when Iran engages in the

open persecution of Christians. The most severe forms of discrimination against the Christian minority by the non-Christian majority are clearly seen in the Middle East and North Africa.

You have repeatedly stated that the struggle to improve the situation of Christians in the world is one of the priorities in terms of the foreign activities of the Russian Orthodox Church, noting with concern the growing manifestations of hatred expressed against Christians in various parts of the world.

The situation for Christians in the world will not be left without the attention of the Russian Orthodox Church. We all remember how, in May 2011, the Holy Synod issued a statement in connection with the attacks on and arson of churches owned by the Coptic Church in Egypt.

At present, we are experiencing a new era of persecution of Christians, which some experts have even compared with the times of the Roman emperors in the first three centuries of our era. Every year, there are an estimated 105,000 Christians who die a violent death as a result of inter-religious conflict: Christians are currently the most persecuted religious community on the planet.

But amid all these persecutions, perhaps the most striking case today is that of Youcef Nadarkhani in Iran. This is a case documented in modern times, when a death in the name of Christ will not be the result of inter-religious conflict, but the result of a legal judgment, supported by higher authorities, that is deemed both as a spiritual one and a governmental one.

Youcef Nadarkhani has already spent nearly three years in prison on charges that he has officially refused Islam in order to convert to Christianity. After being met by an indignant reaction on the part of many countries of the world, the Iranian authorities were quick to assure the public that Youcef Nadarkhani was appearing in court not due to the fact that he converted religions, as was claimed by “the Western media.”

On November 11, 2011, the Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Moscow, Reza Sajjadi, after call for release of Youcef Nadarkhani that we had initiated, tried to convey that Iran does not intend to execute Youcef Nadarkhani, that he is being put on trial for engaging in “political activities against the Republic of Iran” and that his case has nothing to do with the fact that he has converted from Islam to Christianity. Moreover, at that time, the Ambassador offered assurances that the sentence against Nadarkhani had still not been issued.

While respecting the position that the Ambassador had outlined, we, nevertheless, have received information from reliable sources, indicating that Nadarkhani has been sentenced to death for denying Islam and for converting to Christianity.

Now, the Iranian authorities are apparently claiming that Pastor Nadarkhani was charged for being a traitor and a Zionist spy, whose activities have posed a threat to the national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran. While these new charges are most likely an attempt to divert international attention away from the case, this essentially means that his life is now in greater danger than it has been at any other time since the legal proceedings against him first got underway.

Of course, this is not the only case in Iran or in any other Islamic country when people have accepted Christ and renounced Islam. In most cases, these people end up facing persecution and are sometimes forced to leave the country due to the fear of persecution and, nonetheless, many of these people have still found themselves in prison. As far as Youcef Nadarkhani is concerned, the “anger” that has been directed at him by this Islamic state is directly linked with the active work that he has been carrying out as a Christian pastor. This man is not simply an ordinary believer, but was carrying the word of Christ to other Iranians and regularly supported the activities of another 400 Christian home groups. He also insisted that his children be excused from attending classes on Islam at their school.

After being sentenced to death under the laws of Iran, he was given three chances to recant his beliefs and return to Islam, but, on all three occasions, he refused to do so and continued to abide by his belief in Jesus Christ.

And now, our sources believe an order for his execution has been issued. In other words, we can say that all authorities in Iran, which might have otherwise shown mercy upon him or which somehow had the opportunity to intervene in his fate, have chosen not to do so. Ayatollah Khamenei has also refused to reconsider the death sentence in this case (by the way, the Ayatollah over the Judiciary also recently expressed regret that Iran had previously ratified the Universal Declaration of Human Rights).

Many world powers, including the United States, have already tried to impact the Iranian authorities so that they reverse their decision to execute Pastor Nadarkhani. But Iran has, for many years, held an openly anti-Western stance and clearly does not accept any “persuasion” coming from them. However, this same situation does not apply in the case of Russia, which has, all these years, sometimes even to the detriment of its own reputation, called for peace in the Middle East, regardless of whether the subject of such discussion is Syria or Iran. And now, when there

remains no other hope for a peaceful resolution to this particular story, when, for the pastor, every day could end up being the day that he is executed, where the state intends, through a court judgment, to deprive a person of his life for exercising his inalienable right to freedom of conscience, it is finally time for Russia to intervene in this situation, and whose opinion Iran cannot simply just ignore.

We now appeal to you, Your Holiness, so that you, with your undeniable authority, try to influence the Iranian state authorities and possibly appeal to the Foreign Minister of Russia Sergey Viktorovich Lavrov so that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, in turn, proceeds to officially express its concern with respect to the case of Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani and urges the Iranian authorities to pardon him. If this is not done and if this pastor is ultimately executed for his faith, this would ultimately mean that yet another black page has been written in the dark book of stories on the persecution of Christians.

We are ready to provide all of our materials that you may obtain further details. However, at the same time, we sincerely believe that we are down to the final count in terms of the number of days that this pastor has to live and believe that any delays in this process would lead to consequences that are irreparable. We therefore ask you, Holy Patriarch, to find a way to soon make an appeal on behalf of the Russian Orthodox Church in the case of the persecution of Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani.

Sincerely,

The co-chairs the Slavic Legal Center

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