

October 16, 2008: Yemen: Government Should Release Baha'i and Christian Prisoners; Ensure Baha'is are not Deported to Iran

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

October 16, 2008

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The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom is concerned about the status of Baha'i and Christian prisoners in Yemen, who have been imprisoned for months without charge and could face severe punishments. Some of the Baha'i prisoners could be deported to Iran, where the Iranian government has imprisoned and tortured Baha'is in recent years. The Christians, who are converts from Islam, could face the death penalty if charged with apostasy. According to sources familiar with the cases, the Baha'is and Christians were detained for sharing their faith.

"It is very troubling that conditions for religious minorities in Yemen appear to have recently deteriorated," noted Commission Chair Felice D. Gaer. "If the recent raids of Baha'i residences and the arrests of both Christians and Baha'is were carried out because of the religious identity of the targeted individuals, that constitutes a clear violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Yemen is a party."

In June, six Yemeni Baha'is were arrested in the capital city of Sana'a after raids by security officials on several private homes. Two Baha'is, who are Yemeni nationals, have since been released. Of the four individuals remaining in prison, three are Iranian nationals and one is of Iraqi origin. Three of the four in prison have lived in Yemen for at least 25 years. Yemen is a party to the United Nations Convention against Torture, which in Article 3 bans the deportation of a person to a country where he or she is likely to be tortured. However, there still exists the serious concern that the three Iranian Baha'is face imminent deportation to Iran, a country where Baha'is have been executed and today face severe repression.

Since May, at least three Yemeni Christians, who are converts from Islam, have been arrested in Sana'a and Hodeida and remain in prison. * According to the State Department, some of the Christians were arrested for "promoting Christianity and distributing the Bible," although no formal charges have been filed by Yemeni authorities. The Yemeni government prohibits conversion from Islam and the proselytizing of Muslims. Given that apostasy is a crime punishable by death in Yemen, there is credible fear about the well-being of those imprisoned.

Out of a population of some 20 million in Yemen, approximately half are Sunni Muslims and slightly less than half are Shi'a Muslims. Yemen's minority Christian population numbers nearly 3,000 while the Baha'i community numbers just over 200 adherents. There are also approximately 500 Jews and less than 100 Hindus. In its annual survey on international religious freedom which was released last month, the State Department noted that ongoing violence between the government and one rebel faction of Shi'a Muslims in the northern regions have increased tensions along ethnic and religious lines. While Jews have faced harassment and intimidation by the rebel faction in recent years, the role of the central government as a perpetrator of violations of the religious freedom of Yemen's small minority communities has been infrequent. However, several arrests in the past five months appear to indicate a new, disturbing trend of government-sanctioned intolerance towards religious minorities.

The Commission advises the U.S. government to urge the Yemeni government to immediately release all religious prisoners and to reassure Yemeni religious minorities of its support of religious freedom, as defined in the ICCPR. This includes an individual's freedom to "adopt a religion or belief of his choice," and "manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, and teaching."

*Number based on updated information as of Oct. 29, 2008.