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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) expressed concern for the fate of a Christian pastor who has been jailed for over one year and is currently being threatened with execution for apostasy. USCIRF urged the Obama Administration to press for his immediate and unconditional release.

“This case is further evidence that there is no transparency or justice in Iran’s so-called legal system for religious minorities,” said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair. “The Obama Administration must continue to speak out, as Secretary of State Clinton did in August, for Iran’s religious minorities. International pressure impacts Iran, and the regime has shown leniency in some cases where there is international scrutiny.”

Youcef Nadarkhani, a pastor from Northern Iran, was arrested in October 2009 after he questioned the Muslim monopoly on religious instruction his children were receiving in school, arguing that the Iranian constitution permits parents’ to raise children in their own faith. Mr. Nadarkhani, and later his wife, Fatemeh Passandideh, were charged with apostasy. While his wife was released earlier this month after four months in prison, according to sources in Iran and the U.S. government, Mr. Nadarkhani has been charged and reportedly tried and informed orally that he is to receive the death penalty, although no formal verdict has been handed down.

During the past year, the Iranian government’s already poor religious freedom record deteriorated, especially for religious minorities such as Baha’is, Christians and Sufi Muslims. Physical attacks, harassment, detention, arrests, and imprisonment intensified. Even the recognized non-Muslim religious minorities – Jews, Armenian and Assyrian Christians, and Zoroastrians – protected under Iran’s constitution faced increasing discrimination and repression. Since the disputed June 2009 elections, the Iranian government has intensified its campaign against non-Muslim religious minorities.

“This pattern of arrest and harassment of religious minorities, coupled with increasing inflammatory rhetoric from President Ahmadinejad and other leaders has not been seen since the early years of the Iranian revolution,” said Leo. “Time is of the essence here. This man’s life is at stake. We call upon our government and the international community to press for his release and ensure that Iran takes no extreme action in this case or in others like it.”

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF’s principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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