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WASHINGTON, DC – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) expressed deep concern about the fate of Christian pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, who this week has appeared daily before an Iranian court demanding that he recant his faith or face execution for apostasy. USCIRF also is concerned about deteriorating conditions for all religious minorities in Iran.

After being arrested in October 2009 and receiving an informal, oral death sentence for apostasy soon after, Mr. Nadarkhani eventually was tried and sentenced in September 2010 and, in November 2010, received a written verdict with a sentence of execution by hanging. After an appeal, in June 2011, the Iranian Supreme Court upheld the verdict but sought an investigation to determine whether or not as an adult Mr. Nadarkhani had converted to Christianity from Islam. Despite finding that he had not converted as an adult, an Iranian court this week demanded that Mr. Nadarkhani recant his Christian faith because of his Muslim ancestry. While his immediate fate is uncertain, a previous official fatwa issued in Iran gives a defendant three days to recant his or her faith after which a sentence can be implemented any time thereafter. His fourth and final appearance is scheduled for today, Wednesday.

“Despite the finding that Mr. Nadarkhani did not convert to Christianity as an adult, the court continues to demand that he recant his faith or otherwise be executed,” said USCIRF chair [Leonard Leo](#)

. “The most recent court proceedings are not only a sham, but are contrary to Iranian law and international human rights standards, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is a party,” said Leo.

Other religious minorities in Iran face increasing repression and discrimination. About 100 Baha'is currently are in prison solely because of their faith, and trials began this week for several staff members of the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education, an entity which has given Baha'i professors and teachers – debarred by the Iranian government from practicing their professions – the opportunity to teach Baha'i youth who are themselves banned from any form of education beyond high school. In addition, seven Baha'i leaders are serving the fourth year of a 20-year prison sentence on baseless charges, including espionage, propaganda activities against the Islamic order, and cooperation with Israel.

Arrests of Sufi Muslims have accelerated this year. Earlier this month, a Sufi Muslim from the Gonabadi order was killed and several were injured during a government crackdown in southwestern Iran, during which the Basij militia arrested at least 60 Sufis.

Officially recognized minorities, including Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews, also are badly mistreated, their religious services targeted for arbitrary raids, and some have been jailed. Just

last month, a Zoroastrian man began serving a four and a half year prison term, charged and convicted of propaganda of the Zoroastrian faith; a number of his relatives were convicted and imprisoned last year on blasphemy and other charges. Early this month, several leaders of a Christian house church network in various parts of the country were arrested, and their whereabouts are unknown. A number of other Christians arrested this year remain in prison. In addition, the Iranian government's incessant anti-Semitic propaganda continues to foster a hostile atmosphere for Jews.

"These recent developments demonstrate how the Iranian government is ratcheting up its repression of religious minorities across the board," said Leo.

"While it is imperative that the U.S. government and international community demand the immediate release of Mr. Nadarkhani and other prisoners of conscience, it is equally important that the U.S. government and the European Union push for accountability by continuing to identify and impose sanctions on Iranian officials and entities responsible for human rights and religious freedom abuses," said Leo.

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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