

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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WASHINGTON, D.C. -- USCIRF today called for the immediate release of Saeed Abedeni, an Iranian-American pastor reportedly awaiting a January 21 trial on trumped-up national security charges that date back to 2000 when he lived in Iran.

Mr. Abedini married an American in 2004 and has lived in the United States since 2005. He became a U.S. citizen in 2010 and periodically has travelled back and forth to Iran. According to sources familiar with the case, Mr. Abedini was arrested in Iran in September 2012 for his involvement with the underground house church movement. Mr. Abedini's lawyer was unaware of the charges until January 14, when he was informed the trial would be held on Monday, January 21.

"The national security charges leveled against Mr. Abedini are bogus and are a typical tactic by the Iranian government to masquerade the real reason for the charges: to suppress religious belief and activity of which the Iranian government does not approve," said USCIRF chair Katrina Lantos Swett. "USCIRF calls on the Iranian government to release Mr. Abedini immediately and unconditionally."

Mr. Abedeni's trial reportedly is scheduled to be heard by Judge Abbas Pir-Abbassi of Branch 26 of Iran's Revolutionary Court. "Judge Pir-Abbassi is notorious for conducting swift trials and imposing lengthy prison terms, as well as the death penalty, without any semblance of due process," said Lantos Swett.

In 2011, under the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (CISADA), USCIRF called on the U.S. government to impose travel bans and asset freezes on three "hanging judges" -- Judge Pir-Abbassi, Judge Salavati, and Judge Moghiseh -- for committing serious human rights abuses against Iranian citizens, including religious minorities. In April 2011, the European Union imposed sanctions for human rights violations on all three judges. The U.S. government has yet to follow suit.

During the past year, religious freedom conditions continued to deteriorate in Iran, especially for religious minorities, most notably Baha'is, as well as Christians and Sufi Muslims, who have experienced physical attacks, harassment, detention, arrests, and imprisonment. In recent years, high level Iranian government officials and clerics have called for an end to Christianity in the country. Supreme Leader Aytaollah Khamenei publicly stated that "enemies of Islam" are using the spread of Sufism, the Baha'i faith, and Christian house churches to weaken the faith of young people in society.

Since 1999, the State Department has designated Iran as a country of particular concern, or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. USCIRF continues to recommend that Iran be designated as a CPC.

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