

PRISONERS OF faith

Mahmood Matin Country: Iran

Prominent Iranian authorities have held two converts to Christianity for eight weeks on suspicion of 'apostasy', or leaving Islam. In Iran, apostasy is a crime that can be punishable by death. Mahmood Matin, 52, and Arash Bandari, 44, have been imprisoned in a secret police detention centre known by its address, Sepah Street 100, since their arrest May 15 in Shiraz, a city of more than 1.75 million people. A draft penal code currently under discussion in Iran's parliament could make the death penalty mandatory for those who leave Islam or use the Internet to encourage others to do so. On July 22 a lawyer agreed to take up Matin's case and requested his release. His lawyer expressed concern about the length of time the two prisoners had been held without charges and said that the clock is ticking against them.

Following a phone call from the secret police Matin's wife was permitted a brief visit on June 24, a journey that would take around 17 hours by bus from her home in Tehran. She was able to speak with him for five minutes while officials listened in. Seated in a dimly lit room behind a glass window, Matin told his wife that there had been a misunderstanding and he could not teach Christianity anymore. *'They are pushing me to tell them that I am connected to a church outside [Iran] and that I am receiving a salary, but I told them that I am doing it on my own'*, he said. Despite his claims that he was being well treated, his wife believes otherwise. *'He was just trying to make me calm; that's what I could see, because he's my husband and I know his face'*, she said. Her husband apparently did not know where he was being held until his wife told him. The June 24 meeting was the first and only face-to-face contact Matin's family has had with him since his arrest in May when both men were detained along with 13 other Muslim converts while meeting together in a

park in Shiraz. Police confiscated the group's cell phones and 'temporarily' released everyone except Matin and Bandari over subsequent days. The released believers are effectively under house arrest and authorities have called them in several times to question them about their alleged political activity and Christian faith. Officials have informed them that there is an ongoing case against them but have not told them of the specific charges. The nature of the questioning however suggests that they are suspected of apostasy and crimes against the government. Matin has had no further contact with his wife and three children, ages 22, 18 and 12, since the June 24 jail visit.

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for prayer & action
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Photo: Compass Direct

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PLEASE PRAY

- ▶ That no charges will be brought against any of these believers
- ▶ For the families and for the release of the two detained believers
- ▶ That Iran's government will uphold the rights of Christians to worship God freely

'But while Peter was in prison, the church prayed very earnestly for him'
Acts 12:5

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THE VOICE OF THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

Hebrews 13:3 'Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow-prisoners, and those who are ill-treated as if you yourselves were suffering'

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Our desk officer for Iran explained that it is crucial for the prisoners to be released before they appear in court. Lower level police often arrest Christians simply to frighten and to extort money from them and then release them without charge. But if a case goes to court, charges are brought against the Christians, who are then at the mercy of the religious judges. This is a difficult time for all concerned especially with the possibility of new legislation making the situation even more grave. The authorities may be considering using this case as an example of how they view apostasy and how they intend to deal with it in the future. Pray for a prompt and positive dismissal of any case against these Iranian Christians.

Please send a card or short letter of encouragement to the family

The card or letter should be addressed as follows;

The Family of Mahmood Matin (Iran)
c/o Release International
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