

Congress pushes for release of American pastor imprisoned in Iran

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Congress is pressing for the release of Iranian-American pastor Saeed Abedini, a U.S. citizen who has been imprisoned in Iran for his religious beliefs since September 2012.

On Wednesday (Nov. 20) the House Foreign Affairs Committee approved a bipartisan resolution condemning Iran's persecution of religious minorities and urging Abedini's immediate release. The resolution will now go to the full House.

The Senate unanimously passed a similar resolution Nov. 14.

The U.S. and Iran are conducting talks in Geneva aimed at reining in Iran's nuclear program, and those backing Abedini hope the time is right for his freedom.

"It is important especially with the nuclear negotiations in Geneva that Congress speak out with one voice on behalf of pastor Abedini in support of his immediate release," said U.S. Rep. Chris Smith, a New Jersey Republican.

The House and Senate resolutions follow Abedini's transfer from Evin Prison, a facility for political prisoners, to Rajai Shahr Prison. He is now held in a ward for rapists and murderers, according to the American Center for Law and Justice, a law firm that represents Abedini's wife, Nagmeh. Abedini has been allowed visits from his Iranian family, who have confirmed he is alive.

The Iranian government sentenced Abedini to eight years in prison after convicting him of "undermining" the government by spreading his religious beliefs. Abedini had previously worked with house churches in Iran; in 2012 he helped at an orphanage and visited family.

Smith said that Abedini promised the Iranian government he would not proselytize — and that Abedini had upheld his side of the bargain.

Since his arrest, Abedini has endured beatings causing internal bleeding and has had medical care withheld, according to the ACLJ.

His wife and two children await his return.

Abedini's persecution is part of a wider policy against religious minorities in Iran, Smith said.

President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry have both spoken out for Abedini's release.