

Your insight into religious freedom

CSW everyone
free to believe

response

April-July 2023

Free at last!

**Pastor Nadarkhani and Professor
Tarfa released from prison**

Professor Tarfa (photo taken prior to his unjust arrest)





Pastor Nadarkhani (second from left) and three other Christians arrested with him.

Free at last!

Professor Tarfa and Pastor Nadarkhani

■ If you've been supporting CSW for a while, you may be familiar with the cases of two unjustly imprisoned Christians: Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani in Iran, and Professor Richard Solomon Tarfa in Nigeria. Even if you've only recently discovered our work, you can still rejoice with us at this long-awaited victory – that these two men are finally free at last!

This is the news we've been praying, advocating and campaigning for over many years. The work doesn't end here, but we're so grateful to everyone who has stood alongside them and not given up.

Pastor Nadarkhani was first arrested in December 2006. He was charged with evangelism and apostasy (leaving a religion; in this case Islam) even though he had never been a Muslim as an adult. He was released two weeks later – but this was just the first of many times he would be denied his freedom over the next 16 years.

The pastor was again arrested for apostasy in October 2009, while trying to register his church, and due to his questioning of the Muslim monopoly on the religious instruction of Iranian children. He was tried the following year, found guilty and handed the death sentence.

In 2011 the Supreme Court re-examined Pastor Nadarkhani's case, giving him multiple opportunities to renounce his faith and save his own life. Under immense pressure, the pastor refused every time. The court ruled that, despite never having practised Islam before becoming a Christian, Pastor Nadarkhani was still guilty of apostasy because of his Muslim ancestry.

Urgent advocacy and prayer

We were advocating for Pastor Nadarkhani throughout this ordeal, knowing that he could be executed at any time. Thousands of people across the world joined our urgent call for prayer and action on his behalf.

Eventually, thanks to mounting international pressure, the pastor was acquitted of apostasy in September 2012. He was finally released in January 2013 after completing the rest of his sentence for evangelism – yet he only enjoyed a brief period of freedom before being returned to prison once more.

Arrested while worshipping

In May 2016, Pastor Nadarkhani, his wife Tina Pasandideh, and three other Christians were arrested when security agents raided Christian homes in Rasht, northern Iran. Tina Pasandideh was released the next day.

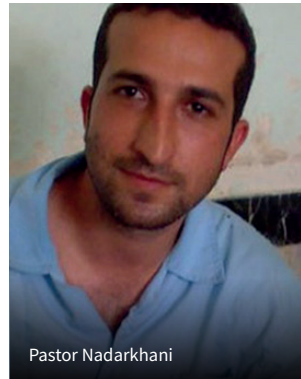
There was no reason or justification for Pastor Nadarkhani or the other church members to be taken into custody. In fact, the authorities failed to explain why they were being arrested at all.

The four men were later given ten-year sentences for 'acting against national security' by 'promoting Zionist Christianity'. The pastor was imprisoned with a number of other Christians in Tehran's notorious Evin prison – known for appalling conditions and mistreatment of prisoners.

Over the following years, the pastor would be released and re-arrested several times, for example when out on bail, on prison furlough, or awaiting appeal. The years of injustice and harassment he experienced are typical of Iran's treatment of religious minorities – especially converts from Islam.

Long-awaited breakthrough

In 2021, there was a ray of hope. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention ruled that Pastor Nadarkhani was indeed being held arbitrarily; in part because no legal justification was given at the time of arrest. They urged the Iranian authorities to release the pastor unconditionally.



Pastor Nadarkhani

This international recognition of his unjust treatment was especially encouraging as we had been regularly raising his case with United Nations experts since his arrest.

In February 2023, Pastor Nadarkhani was released as part of a national amnesty. Deacon Saheb Fadaie, who had been arrested with the pastor in 2016, was also freed.

Pastor Nadarkhani told non-profit organisation Article 18 he was happy to be home and ‘very grateful for all those who prayed for me and remembered me while I was in prison.’

You campaigned and prayed tirelessly alongside us for Pastor Nadarkhani until he was freed – thank you so much. Our work will not be over until everyone in Iran is truly free to believe.

‘Thank you so much for all your prayers and support. I left the court to call you so you can also thank all of my brothers and sisters who prayed and tell them God has answered.’

Mrs Mercy Tarfa



Professor Tarfa reunited with his wife, Mercy

Your prayers answered: Professor Tarfa is acquitted!

After years of advocacy, prayer and campaigning, Professor Tarfa, co-founder of the Du Merci orphanages in Nigeria, was acquitted of an unfounded forgery charge, released from prison and reunited with his wife.

As you know, Professor Tarfa had been serving a two-year prison sentence after being convicted of forgery in March 2022. He has been subjected to years of injustice and harassment which predate his December 2019 arrest.

We know you’ll be rejoicing with his family at this long overdue acquittal, and we cannot thank you enough for all you have done to support this precious family.

Keep praying for the Du Merci children

Twenty-seven children were seized during the police raids on the Du Merci orphanages on Christmas Day 2019. The children were placed in a state-run orphanage in the Kano state capital city; the older ones were later released, leaving 16 in the orphanage. The four youngest were subsequently separated forcefully from their siblings and taken to a remote orphanage reportedly run by the Governor of Kano state, where they were forcibly converted and given Muslim names.

Please continue to pray with us for the return of all the Du Merci children, and for reparations to be made to the family for the trauma they have endured over the last three years.

‘I and my family appreciate all of you for caring and praying for me and my children. I thank God for your support.’

Professor Solomon Tarfa

Our advocacy will continue until no one in Nigeria or Iran has to face injustice because of their religious beliefs.

Make a gift towards freedom. Today.

Pastor Nadarkhani and Professor Tarfa are free today in no small part because of your prayers, campaigning and support. Without your financial support, it would not have been possible for us to continue advocating for them in every advocacy arena during their imprisonment.

The sad reality is that there are countless other people around the world today who are unjustly imprisoned because of their religion or belief.



Give

Your £8 gift will help us to continue speaking out to secure justice and freedom for people suffering because of their beliefs all over the world.

25-31 December 2019: Armed officers raided, without a warrant, the Du Merci orphanages in Kano and Kaduna states. 27 children were forcibly moved to a government-run children's home.

Professor Tarfa was eventually detained on accusations of illegally operating the orphanage, which were proven to be false.

January 2020: CSW UK launched a letter writing campaign to the Nigerian High Commissioner, urging him to request the intervention of the Nigerian government to ensure Professor Tarfa's release. **Over 6,800 emails have been sent to the High Commissioner since the launch of the campaign.**

June 2020: James Duddridge MP confirmed that the British High Commission in Abuja had raised Professor Tarfa's case with the National Human Rights Commission of Nigeria and the Kano State authorities, and the UK Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief had raised the case with the Nigerian Federal Government at a senior level.

October 2020: CSW Nigeria created an online petition for Professor Tarfa's release, which has received **3,088 signatures worldwide.**

December 2020: Professor Tarfa was released on bail after meeting new bail requirements set in November 2020.

January 2021: **1,531 supporters emailed** Lord Ahmad and Fiona Bruce MP, asking them to put pressure on the Nigerian government to ensure the safe return of the Du Merci children.

January 2021: CSW UK organised an online prayer event for Professor and Mrs Tarfa, which was attended by over 90 people, including the Tarfas themselves.

June 2021: **Professor Tarfa was acquitted** on charges of 'running an illegal orphanage' and 'criminal conspiracy and abduction of minors'.

March 2022: **Professor Tarfa was sentenced to two years in prison** on a false charge of forging a certificate of registration from the Kano state Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development.

January 2022: CSW worked with an MP who tabled two written parliamentary questions to the UK government on the Du Merci children.

17 November 2022: Many of our supporters joined us at an online prayer event with Mrs Tarfa ahead of her husband's appeal hearing.

24 November 2022: An appeal against Professor Tarfa's prison sentence was heard in court.

January 2023: **Professor Tarfa is acquitted of the unfounded forgery charge levelled against him, released from prison and reunited with his wife.**



Bishop Rolando Álvarez. Photo: DIVERGENTES/Carlos Herrera

Prison or exile: The cost of speaking out in Nicaragua

- **On 9 February this year, Nicaragua removed 222 political prisoners from prison – including several Christians – stripped them of their citizenship and sent them into exile in the United States. Yet Bishop Rolando José Álvarez Lagos was not one of them. He refused to be expelled from Nicaragua, and the very next day received a shocking sentence: more than 26 years in prison, on unfounded charges.**

Bishop Álvarez has a history of being targeted by the government because he has been a vocal critic of human rights abuses committed under the government of President Daniel Ortega. Last August, he was one of 12 people forcibly confined in the Diocese of Matagalpa curia, including priests, seminarians and church cameramen.

The curia was surrounded by heavily armed security forces for two weeks starting on 4 August, preventing anyone from leaving or entering.

In an amazing response of faith, Bishop Álvarez approached the officers, singing

and praying for them, and asking them to reconsider their actions. But still no one was allowed to leave.

'God is with us'

For 15 days the group was blockaded inside the curia, yet they boldly continued to hold Mass and broadcast it live on social media.

'We are not alone, here in the Episcopal Curia of Matagalpa,' said the bishop in one online service. 'God is with us. We are not alone. You are with us...'

‘There is a multitude of angels accompanying us, but also a multitude, you, who express prayer and supplication and all of those who have written to us...’

After 15 days, security forces stormed the curia and made arrests. Seven people, including priests and seminarians, were taken to a maximum-security prison, while Bishop Álvarez was placed under house arrest.

Prison or exile

On 9 February, the Nicaraguan government announced the release of 222 political prisoners, but immediately deported them to the US and stripped them of their citizenship – which violates international law. Among them were seven of those confined in the curia last August. But why not Bishop Álvarez?

Despite pressure from the government, Bishop Álvarez refused to board the plane leaving Nicaragua to go into exile and was transferred from house arrest to a maximum prison. The next day, he was sentenced to over 26 years in prison on unfounded charges of conspiracy and spreading false information. He is being held in solitary confinement in a punishment cell with very little light.

‘It is clear from the timing and severity of the sentence that the treatment of Bishop Álvarez is in direct retaliation for his refusal to leave Nicaragua,’ said Anna Lee Stangl, CSW’s Head of Advocacy.



Bishop Álvarez. Photo: Diocese of Matagalpa

Why was Bishop Álvarez targeted?

Bishop Álvarez should never have been arrested at all, let alone forced to choose between continued imprisonment or exile. He is one of many brave Nicaraguans who dare to defend human rights and speak out against authoritarian rule.

Over the past five years, President Daniel Ortega has cracked down on independent voices as he consolidates power. This escalated dramatically in 2022, with religious leaders being a particular target, especially those the government views as critical of its policies.

David, an exiled human rights defender, told CSW:

‘The dictatorship dominates the radio and television media... It has eliminated religious channels and radio stations little by little. It has done the same thing with private radio stations in order that what is really happening in the country goes unreported.’

And it seems that this is the reason for the police action on the curia of Matagalpa last August.

On 1 August – three days before the blockade began – eight Roman Catholic radio stations were ordered to stop broadcasting immediately. The forced closure was based on a claim that the stations had not held valid permits since 2003. This was untrue, and Bishop Álvarez had in fact provided the required documentation to the authorities in 2016, but his requests for official acknowledgement went unanswered.

Wider crackdown on civil society

Thousands of other civil society organisations arbitrarily lost their legal status last year, including faith-based groups, independent television stations and charities; many of them supported vulnerable communities in Nicaragua. As you’ll read on p.10 of Response, those in power sometimes see civil society as a threat, despite or perhaps because of the important work these groups do.

President Ortega is going to great lengths to silence independent voices and hide the truth of his actions from his own people and the rest of the world. As David said, ‘He wants to give countries abroad the impression that everything is in order and that there is no problem in Nicaragua.’

However, the fact that you’re reading this article shows that this cover-up is not succeeding; the truth is being

heard. We are thankful for our contacts who choose to keep reporting the human rights situation in Nicaragua, despite the significant risks, to make sure that the world sees and holds President Ortega to account.

And as Bishop Álvarez said: the people of Nicaragua living under oppression are not alone. There is indeed a multitude of people standing in solidarity, through prayer, letter-writing, giving, and many other ways, seen or unseen. **Thank you for being one of the multitude.**

At a glance

- **Over 328,000** Nicaraguans left the country in 2022 (4.9% of the population)
- **Over 3,200** non-governmental organisations have been forced to close since 2018.
- Nicaragua is a majority Christian country with Roman Catholics making up about **43%** of the population and Protestants **41%**. President Ortega and his government view religious leaders as a particular potential threat because of the significant influence they have in the population.

Pray using p.8 of the Prayer Diary.

Write to Bishop Álvarez in prison: csw.org.uk/ConnectEncourage

Share what you’ve read with someone else.

What is civil society?

■ You may have heard the term ‘civil society’ before – perhaps in our blogs, articles or press releases. But what does this mean, and how does it relate to freedom of religion or belief?



Nguyen Van Dai

Civil society essentially means any individuals or organisations who are not the government, companies or households, but have a presence in public life. This includes journalists, individual activists, charities such as CSW, and faith-based organisations like churches. It is the space where social movements are organised, where governments and others in positions of power can be held to account, and where people can support issues such as freedom of religion or belief.

That is why we are so concerned when there is a crackdown on civil society. If these independent voices are silenced, who will be left to speak truth to power?

What can a crackdown on civil society look like?

Restricting freedom of the press is a common way that governments shrink the space for civil society to operate. Think about how you know what the UK government is doing. You probably get most or all of your information from the media. But imagine if the authorities informed editors that their papers would be shut down, or their reporters would face penalties, if they reported anything critical about the government. Perhaps a few editors would take the risk, but overall it would become much harder to find out the truth about the government’s actions.

And that is just one aspect of civil society. In India, the government has used the Foreign Contribution Regulation (Amendment) Act 2020 (FCRA) to prevent non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from receiving funds from overseas, in order to hamper the activities of those that question the government or its policies.

As a result, tens of thousands of organisations working on human rights have had their funding frozen or licence revoked. Amnesty International was one of these, and was forced to halt its work in India because of the FCRA.

We spoke to a few members of civil society in different countries on which CSW works.

Madhu* is a journalist in India, where the government has pressurised advertisers and even shut down TV channels in order to control the information the population receives.

She told us that several journalists have been arrested on false charges, while others have been stopped from leaving the country; some have even been killed.

Madhu said, ‘Obviously any democracy thrives when the press is allowed to do their job. That has become an extremely dangerous mission in India over the last few years.’

Read more from Madhu in the January 2023 issue of Response (p.15).

Nguyen Van Dai is a Vietnamese Christian lawyer who gave legal advice to and represented victims of human rights abuses, including religious minorities. Human rights defenders like Dai often face harassment and worse in Vietnam; and as a result of his work, Dai was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

CSW raised Dai’s case at every advocacy meeting, UN submission, and dialogue briefing on Vietnam we attended, as well as organising a letter writing campaign and co-ordinating protests in London, Ireland and the Czech Republic. We refused to let this courageous civil society voice be forgotten.

Finally, in June 2018, Mr Dai was released into exile in Germany after two and a half years in prison. He said, ‘Thanks to your prayers, God intervened.’

Read the whole story at csw.org.uk/FreeNguyenVanDai

Professor Tarfa is the co-founder of the Du Merci Christian orphanages for vulnerable children in Kano and Kaduna states, Nigeria. Faith-based organisations such as the Du Merci orphanages are a key part of civil society, often providing vital services that the state cannot provide. Yet governments sometimes see this as a threat, and try to shut them down.

This is why Professor Tarfa was targeted. The fact that the current



Yoe Suarez

government in this overwhelmingly Muslim state is deeply sectarian also counted against him. The professor was arrested without a warrant on Christmas Day 2019, and subsequently faced a series of false charges. He was finally acquitted of all charges and released from prison in January 2023.

Read about Professor Tarfa's case on p.2 of Response.

Yoe is a Cuban journalist and activist. He explained how the government's restrictions limited the work of civil society during the COVID-19 pandemic: 'There are [church] ministries which are primarily dedicated to distributing food to those in need, especially to the older generations that are in the high-risk group for COVID-19. These ministries have been restricted from distributing

aid. Outside of its supervision, the state has not permitted the distribution of food or other basic necessities.'

Each of these people and their work forms part of a functioning civil society – and when they're hindered from doing their work, everyone suffers. That's why civil society is so important, and why upholding it is such a crucial part of our work.

Your support is helping us to defend and equip civil society around the world. We want to see these independent voices and spaces flourish so that everyone can fully enjoy their fundamental human rights – including freedom of religion or belief.

**Name changed for security reasons*

Watch our interview with Yoe, 'Voices from Cuba', at youtube.com/cswuk

We will all leave a legacy but what will it be?

The woman who anointed Jesus with perfume is for the most part unnamed – yet she gets a special mention in the gospel. This may not have been her motivation, but still her actions have been remembered for nearly two thousand years. Did she ever imagine that she was leaving such a legacy?

After her beautiful, costly expression of worship, Jesus responds:

'Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.' (Matthew 26:13)

In a similar way, when you leave a gift to CSW in your will, you become part of a work that will last for generations to come.

Our legacy is freedom and justice

As a CSW supporter, you are already leaving a legacy! With every act of solidarity – in praying, campaigning and giving – you are making a difference to the lives of people around the world who are facing injustice because of their beliefs.

You are making an impact as part of a movement of people who love justice; who champion freedom of religion or belief for all; and who raise the voices

of those who are not being heard. This is a beautiful legacy already, and when you leave CSW a gift in your will, that impact is multiplied.

'That kind of world is the best legacy I can imagine...'

Simon George is one supporter who decided to leave a gift to CSW in his will. He told us he was inspired by how we are working to 'create a freer, fairer world...for people of all faiths and none. That kind of world is the best legacy I can imagine, and that's why I have left a gift in my will to CSW.'

Discover how you can leave a lasting legacy through CSW at csw.org.uk/legacy

China
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On 12 January, four Christians were taken into custody by police in the Nuijiang Grand Canyon, in China's Yunnan Province. They were detained for participating in a Bible study in August 2022. They have since been released.

Five Christians who led the group have been detained since it took place, and they are awaiting trial for 'organising and sponsoring an illegal gathering.' In reality, all they did was organise prayer meetings and free Bible and music lessons for young people.

There are significant numbers of Protestant Christians in the Nuijiang Grand Canyon, and the area is known as 'the Gospel Valley'. However, a source told us that it seems the authorities want to 'root out the Christian faith' from the area.

Pakistan
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In January, the National Assembly of Pakistan voted without debate to make the country's controversial blasphemy laws even more stringent.

The punishment for insulting the Prophet Mohammed's companions, wives and family members has now increased from three years to ten years imprisonment, along with a fine approximately equivalent to £3,500.

For years, blasphemy laws have criminalised anyone who insults Islam, which carries either the death penalty or life imprisonment. These laws are often used as a weapon of revenge against both Muslims and non-Muslims to settle personal scores, and minority leaders fear that the amendments will only exacerbate this.

Syria
.....

'We have suffered a lot over centuries, and we just want to live in peace with our Muslim neighbours.' – Mrs Mesgin Josef, Chair of the Council of the Syrian Yazidis

On 16 December, Islamist extremists vandalised a Yazidi cemetery in a village near Afrin, northwest Syria. The incident coincided with the Yazidi feast of Ezi, and is just one example of the human rights violations being perpetrated by jihadist groups loyal to Turkey.

The situation for Syria's Yazidi community deteriorated rapidly after the Turkish invasion of Afrin in March 2018.

Mrs Josef told us that many Yazidi families have stopped sending their children to school because of the imposed Islamic education. Meanwhile 'killing, kidnapping, forced marriages and conversions and looting have become part of daily life.'



Pastor Lorenzo and family

Good news from Cuba

'He looks a little different to us, better. Step by step.'

Maridilegnis Carballo, wife of Pastor Lorenzo

Thank you for praying and campaigning for Pastor Lorenzo! The independent church leader has been moved from a maximum-security to a minimum-security prison which is closer to his family. Pastor Lorenzo is still unjustly imprisoned – serving a seven-year sentence after participating in the peaceful protests of 11 July 2021 – but he is now in better conditions.

Maridilegnis said that the family were 'a little more at peace' now that her husband is closer to home, and they are able to visit more often. Pastor Lorenzo's son David was even able to leave hot food at a security post for them to give to him.

Three ways to take action for Pastor Lorenzo:

Pray using p.4 of the Prayer Diary.

Campaign for freedom: csw.org.uk/PastorLorenzo

Write a letter of encouragement: csw.org.uk/ConnectEncourage

Our manifesto #3

**We believe that as Christians
we must stand with everyone
facing religious persecution.**

**CSW everyone
free to believe**

CSW is a human rights organisation advocating for freedom of religion or belief. As Christians we stand with everyone facing injustice because of their religion or belief.

T +44 (0)20 8329 0010

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csw.org.uk

PO Box 99
New Malden
Surrey, KT3 3YF
United Kingdom

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