

Update on the Situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran

On 19 December 2001 the 56th Session of the United Nations General Assembly adopted yet another resolution defending the rights of Bahá'ís in Iran. With a vote of 72 in favor, 49 against, and 46 abstentions, the General Assembly once again expressed its concern “at the still-existing discrimination against persons belonging to minorities, in particular against the Bahá'ís, Christians, Jews, and Sunnis.” The resolution called upon the Iranian government “to eliminate all forms of discrimination based on religious grounds or against persons belonging to minorities and to address this matter in an open manner, with the full participation of the minorities themselves, as well as to implement fully the conclusions and recommendations of the Special Rapporteur on religious intolerance relating to the Bahá'ís and other minority religious groups until they are completely emancipated.” It further indicated the General Assembly’s decision to continue to examine the human rights situation in Iran during its next session.

The 1996 report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Abdelfattah Amor, called for the Bahá'ís to be given the rights to bury their dead, to enjoy freedom of movement, to have

unimpeded access to education and employment, to have security of the person and physical integrity, to have the freedom to manifest their belief, to receive equal treatment by the judiciary, and to have equal rights with other citizens. Dr. Amor also called for the review and setting aside of all death sentences pronounced against Bahá'ís on the basis of their belief, the return of community properties and compensation for the destruction of places of worship, and the reestablishment of Bahá'í institutions. These recommendations have been reiterated by Dr. Amor throughout the years since and have also been endorsed by the UN's Special Representative on Iran, Maurice Copithorne, but they have never been implemented by the Iranian authorities.

While the Iranian government has introduced some reforms that have lessened the severity of the persecutions against the Bahá'í community in that country, the changes are largely cosmetic in nature. The death sentences against all imprisoned Bahá'ís have been commuted, but as of April 2002 five Bahá'ís remained in jail solely because of their faith—two facing life imprisonment. While the number of long-term imprisonments has decreased, the government continues to pursue a policy of random short-term arrests and imprisonments, creating an atmosphere of insecurity and uncertainty among Bahá'ís, who never know when they or their loved ones may be detained—or for how long.

While Mr. Copithorne had suggested in his report the previous year that the situation in connection with the confiscation of the Bahá'í cemetery in Tehran had been rectified by the government, this was, in fact, not the case. In his January 2002 report to the General Assembly, he wrote: "...as a complex has been built over the old Bahá'í cemetery in Tehran, the Iranian authorities had allotted other land for this purpose. It is now reported that the land offered is in fact wasteland, with no access to water. Further, the community has been denied permission to mark individual graves or to construct mortuary facilities."

Mr. Copithorne also noted, "Despite some promising reports, the Special Representative understands that the Bahá'í community continues to experience discrimination in the areas of, *inter alia*, education, employment, travel, housing, and the enjoyment of cultural activities. Bahá'ís are still prevented from participating

in religious gatherings or educational activities.”

Citing the example of a judicial decision in September 2001 regarding the confiscation of Bahá'í properties, Mr. Copithorne wrote:

...the verdict declares that the “seizure and confiscation of the properties belonging to the misguided sect of Baha'ism is legally and religiously justifiable” and states that “the cultural activities of the misguided sect of Baha'ism—as prescribed by the order of His Excellency the Supreme Leader—do need to be seriously opposed.” This would seem to indicate that the 1991 memorandum on “The Bahá'í Question,” issued by the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council and approved by the Supreme Leader, is still in force and therefore that discrimination against Bahá'ís continues to be official practice, a situation that the Special Representative deeply deplores.

This same judicial decision, delivered in connection with the confiscation of properties used by the Bahá'í Institute of Higher Education, also underscores the Iranian authorities' active efforts to prevent Bahá'í children from identifying themselves as such if they wish to attend school, to prevent Bahá'í youth from pursuing a higher education in officially recognized institutions of learning, and to close down any kind of program set up by the Bahá'ís themselves to provide for the education of their children and youth.

In April 2002 at the 58th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva, various governmental delegations spoke in defense of the Bahá'ís.¹ In her statement on the violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms in any part of the world (item 9), the Canadian ambassador specifically mentioned the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran, noting “the steady deterioration of the human rights situation in the country over the past year.” She expressed Canada's concern for “the discrimination against religious minorities, notably the Baha'is,” urging the government “to proceed down the path of reform and to respect, in word and deed, the human rights of all its people.”

¹ See pp. 291–93 for the text of the statement given by the Bahá'í International Community at the Human Rights Commission.

The Australian ambassador also mentioned the situation of the Bahá'ís in his statement to the Commission on item 9, saying that Australia remains concerned about “violations of due process and suppression of freedom of expression” in Iran. He urged the government “to undertake judicial reform, to allow a visit by the Special Representative of the Commission on Human Rights and to ensure that minorities, most notably Jews and Baha'is, are accorded the full protection of the law under the Iranian Constitution.” The Irish delegation also mentioned “the continued discrimination against members of the Bahá'í faith in many parts of the world.”

One nongovernmental organization, the American Jewish Committee, speaking in defense of Iran's Bahá'í community, cited the report of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, which noted that the Bahá'ís “suffer the worst forms of religious persecution at the hands of the state.”²

Renewed concerns for the welfare and safety of the Bahá'í community in Iran arose at the Human Rights Commission session when it rejected a resolution condemning human rights violations in Iran. Up to that point, the United Nations, through its General Assembly, Third Committee, and the UN Commission on Human Rights, had passed 18 resolutions regarding human rights conditions in Iran, including the situation of religious minorities, and particularly mentioning the Bahá'ís. This leaves Iran's Bahá'ís in an extremely vulnerable position, as they rely heavily on the international community to monitor the situation and prevent the worst forms of the systematic persecution visited by the Iranian government on the Bahá'í community since the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

Bahá'ís in other countries also found themselves in perilous conditions during the year. Two Bahá'ís in Tajikistan were murdered because of their religious convictions,³ and harassment and persecution of Egypt's Bahá'í community continues.

In Tajikistan, Rashid Gulov was shot and killed on 23 October 2001 as he was returning from work to his home in Dushanbe.

² Report of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, 1 May 2001, <www.uscirf.gov/reports/01May01/2001annRpt.pdf>.

³ See pp. 304 and 308 for more information.

Afshin Shokoufeh Mosadegh was shot outside his home, also in Dushanbe, on the morning of 3 December 2001 and died en route to the hospital. Both men were devoted, active members of the Bahá'í community and served as members of the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Dushanbe. Mr. Mosadegh had previously served as a member of the country's National Spiritual Assembly. Only two years previously, another member of Tajikistan's Bahá'í community, 'Abdu'llah Mogharrabi, was also assassinated. Tajik authorities who investigated the two latest killings determined that both men were killed because of their Faith.

In Egypt, Bahá'ís continue to face arbitrary arrests and imprisonment, periodic hate campaigns in the government-controlled media, prohibition from functioning as a religious community, and denial of members' civil and human rights. This latter case was presented to the Human Rights Commission in an oral statement presented by the Bahá'í International Community on 12 April 2002,⁴ with the request that the Egyptian government take the required steps to remove official obstructions and restrictions imposed on the Bahá'ís in that country.

Bahá'ís in countries such as Iran, Tajikistan, and Egypt are not seeking special privileges. All they wish is the recognition of their basic civil and human rights. With the failure of the United Nations Human Rights Commission to pass the resolution condemning Iran's systematic violations of human rights, Bahá'ís throughout the world worry that the international community, whose influence has done much to mitigate the severity of the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran, will not be able to monitor the situation as effectively as it had previously done. Fanatical elements, in Iran and other countries, may become bolder with such an opening. The international community must not neglect its responsibility to challenge governments that either initiate or are complicit in such persecution.

⁴ For more background on the situation of the Bahá'í community in Egypt, see *The Bahá'í World 2000–01*, pp. 257–60.

