

Update: The Situation of
THE BAHÁ'ÍS
IN IRAN

The situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran during 1998–99 was marked by several major crises. The first of these was the execution of Mr. Ruhú'llah Rawhani in July 1998, and the second was the government's attempted closure of the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) in October. In addition, government authorities confirmed death sentences on two Bahá'ís.

Two comprehensive written statements by the Bahá'í International Community, presented at the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in the spring of 1999, summarize these events and are included in this volume.¹

The execution of Mr. Rawhani brought condemnation from all corners of the globe. The United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson; the President of the United States, Bill Clinton; the Minister for Foreign Affairs in Australia, Alexander Downer; and the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Canada, Lloyd

1. One, a report on the Bahá'í Institute of Higher Education, appears on pp. 287–93; the other, an update on the current situation in Iran, can be found on pp. 279–86.

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Axworthy, all issued statements expressing their disapproval. Mr. Axworthy stated, “This brutal action is a grave disappointment,” while the White House Press Secretary’s statement said, “The United States condemns this action, which violates the most basic international norms and universal standards of human rights.”

Media coverage of the execution was extensive, with articles appearing in the *International Herald Tribune*; France’s *Le Monde*, *Libération*, and *La Croix*; London’s *Sunday Telegraph*; Germany’s *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Die Tageszeitung*; Australia’s *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *West Australian*; Canada’s *Globe and Mail* and the *Montreal Gazette*; and other newspapers in India, Uganda, Botswana, Malta, and Turkey. The *Tehran Times* printed a denial of the execution, while the headline in the independent paper the *Iran Times*, published in Washington D.C., read “First Bahá’í is reported executed in six years.” A *Jerusalem Post* editorial mentioned the execution in the context of hard-line opposition to reform in Iran. Wire services around the world, including AP (the Associated Press), UPI (United Press International), Reuters, Agence France Presse, dpa (the German press agency), the BBC Newsfile, and ARGUS in Switzerland also followed the story.

Radio coverage included pieces on a number of BBC stations, Radio France Internationale and Radio Orient (an Arab radio service in Paris), Radio Canada (the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s French-language radio service), *Voice of America*, a number of Australian Broadcasting Commission stations, and radio stations in Uganda and Botswana. The Australian Broadcasting Commission carried the story as a major item on its television news broadcasts in Western Australia and Victoria, and Botswana’s only television channel reported on the execution in both Setswana and English.

In late August several European newspapers—notably *Libération* in France and *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* in Switzerland—again focused on the situation of Iran’s Bahá’ís, referring to the “brutal persecution of the Bahá’í religious community” in the context of France’s efforts at rapprochement with Iran.

When the raid on the Bahá’í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) occurred at the end of September, the White House Press

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Secretary again issued a statement of condemnation, as did Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs. The government of the United Kingdom also expressed its support for the Institute through an Early Day Motion in the House of Commons.

The raid, which was preceded by the confirmation of death sentences against more members of Iran's Bahá'í community, again attracted significant media attention. In late September and early October, the *Times* of London, the *Luxemburger Wort* and the *Journal*, and the *Irish Times* all reported on the death sentences. UPI in Washington and Reuters in Washington and Paris picked up the story, as did dpa.

The *New York Times*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Boston Herald*, and the *Iran Times* all did stories on the raid, and the *Washington Post* published an op-ed piece protesting Iran's treatment of the Bahá'ís. The *Times* of London published a letter to the editor, signed by five senior professors at Oxford University, expressing their distaste at the actions of the Iranian government in relation to the BIHE. The *Statesman* in India published an article on the closure, as did *Le Monde* and *La Chronique d'Amnesty International*. Several Brazilian newspapers also ran articles.

Wire service coverage came from UPI in Toronto and Reuters in Paris, which both reported on the action, while AP and dpa did dispatches based on U.S. State Department spokesman James Rubin's statement condemning this latest suppression of the Bahá'í community in Iran. The *Voice of America* broadcast an editorial report in support of the Institute and of Iran's Bahá'ís, which reached Iran, and the BBC World Service issued a press release based on the U.S. State Department's statement. An interview on the situation took place on German national radio.

Later, when prison sentences were pronounced against four faculty members of the BIHE in April 1999, AP in Washington again reported the story.

In response to the closure of the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education, Bahá'ís around the world developed a campaign to bring the situation to the attention of university administrators, academics, students, and journalists, urging them to take action to publicize the denial of human rights to the Bahá'ís and to express

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their support for the Institute. As a result, twenty-six university and college presidents, rectors, and deans took action; prominent academics and administrators wrote letters of support; influential academic and administrative unions wrote letters and informed their membership of the situation; student and faculty senates passed resolutions concerning the situation of Iran's Bahá'ís; and a number of media events took place. Other kinds of responses included candlelight vigils, petitions, open letters, information meetings, and interfaith expressions of solidarity. While the campaign involved many countries, Canada, the U.S.A., Australia, Brazil, Germany, Ireland, and Norway were particularly involved in it.

At the United Nations, UNESCO Director-General Federico Mayor wrote several responses to appeals directed to his office as a result of the campaign, assuring correspondents that the agency "is taking its responsibility very seriously in this matter," and the most recent report of the Special Representative on Iran to the UN Commission on Human Rights cited the "orchestrated raid" on the Institute as evidence of a deterioration of the situation of Iran's Bahá'ís.