

Update on the Situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran and Arab Countries

The Bahá'í community of Iran has endured persecution throughout its 161-year history, including executions, imprisonments, torture, and confiscation of property; denial of the right to operate as a peaceful, law-abiding religious community; and violation of its fundamental human rights. These acts of repression and persecution continued during 2004 and 2005.

Destruction of Bahá'í holy places

In the spring of 2004, the house-like structure that marked the resting place of Quddús, or Mullá Muḥammad-‘Alí Bárfurúshí, who is revered by Bahá'ís as the foremost disciple of the Báb, was razed to the ground in Bábul, with the full sanction of the authorities. When Bahá'ís appealed to the national government to halt the action, they were assured that the remains would not be disturbed and that the site would be covered with a green lawn. However, although it appeared that the desecration had stopped, the dismantling of the gravesite continued surreptitiously until it was entirely demolished. The Bahá'í community was not even permitted to retrieve the remains of Quddús so that they could be interred with respect at another site. The Principal Representative of the Bahá'í International Community at the United Nations remarked that this act utterly

contradicted the Iranian government's claim that the human rights situation in that country is improving.

The destruction of Bahá'í holy places continued two months later, with the demolition of the house of Mírzá Buzurg-i-Núrí, the father of Bahá'u'lláh, in Tehran. This residence occupied an important place in the history of the Bahá'í Faith, as it was where Bahá'u'lláh recovered from His imprisonment in the Sáyáh-Chál before beginning His journey of exile to Baghdad. Unlike the quiet, gradual destruction of the grave of Quddús, the demolition of the house of Mírzá Buzurg was carried out quickly and in the open—perhaps a measure of the Iranian government's confidence in its ability to carry out its stated plan to slowly but surely “strangulate” the Bahá'í community.¹ The demolition of this particular residence did, however, raise an outcry in several major Iranian newspapers. *Hamshabri* published a lengthy article about the life of Mírzá Buzurg and the architecture of his house, and another paper, *Etemaad*, referring to the house as a “matchless model of art, spirituality, and architecture,” termed its destruction “a tragic national and cultural calamity” because of Mírzá Buzurg's connection to the court of Fath-'Alí-Sháh and his eminence as one of Iran's greatest calligraphers.

In response to the Iranian government's destruction of Bahá'í holy places, national Bahá'í communities around the world sponsored the publication of the statement *Cultural Cleansing: Destroying a Community, Erasing Memory* in September 2004. It stated, in part, “The hatred of the extremist mullahs for the Bahá'ís is such that they, like the Taliban of Afghanistan who destroyed the towering Buddhist sculptures at Bamiyan, intend not only to eradicate the religion, but even to erase all traces of its existence in the country of its birth.”² The goal of the publication was to call the world's attention to the destruction of cultural landmarks that are part of the heritage of the entire world. The statement appeared in newspapers in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Norway, the United States, and the United Kingdom, including the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Times* and the *Washington Post* in the US; the *London Times* in the UK; *Le Monde* in France; *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, and *Die Zeit* in Germany; the *Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, *Le Devoir* and *La Presse* in Canada; and *The Australian*.

Letter to President Khatami

By August 2004, pressure on the Bahá'í community by authorities had intensified to the point where individual members were being threatened and the Bahá'í community was ordered to suspend all social, educational, and community-related activities—anything beyond individual observance of religious obligations. They were told that even introducing themselves as Bahá'ís would be considered an attempt to teach their religion and was therefore an illegal act.

In this climate of repression, on 15 November 2004, the Iranian Bahá'í community addressed a letter to the president of Iran, Hojatoleslam Siyyid Mohammad Khatami. It was also widely distributed to governmental and nongovernmental authorities and agencies throughout the country. The letter, courteous in tone, reviewed the history of the persecution of the Iranian Bahá'í community, outlined the relevant principles in the Iranian constitution, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and various other international covenants and conventions, quoted several pertinent verses from the Qur'án, and clearly stated the principles of the Bahá'í Faith—including loyalty and obedience to government. The letter concluded by stating that throughout the quarter century during which the Islamic government has held the reins of power, the Iranian Bahá'í community has always stood firm—and ready to contribute to the progress of the country:

To every act of injustice, Bahá'ís have responded with magnanimity. Faced with widespread and intense persecutions and multi-faceted iniquities, the Bahá'ís have never deviated, even by a hair's breadth, from the straight divine path, and they continue to hold fast onto the cord of patience and tolerance as dictated by their Faith and belief. They fain would expect that, over such a long period of time, which should have been sufficient to remove suspicions and misunderstandings, the esteemed authorities would have realized that the Bahá'ís firmly believe in the oneness of God and the divine nature of all religions and prophets, as well as the realm beyond as confirmed in all the divine scriptures; they obey the laws and regulations of their country in accordance with the principles of their religion; they strive to preserve the interests of their homeland by offering

cultural, social, economic, and developmental assistance; and they would never refuse any service to establish human virtues and perfections which fulfil such universal visions as world peace and the oneness of humanity.

In conclusion, the Iranian Bahá'í community made the request that the government, “based on the Constitution, will take immediate action to ensure the emancipation of the Iranian Bahá'í community, reinstating their human rights and restoring the privileges of which they have been deprived.”

Upon receiving the letter, the majority of governmental and nongovernmental authorities reacted with sympathy; however, a number of the Bahá'ís who were involved in distributing the message were arrested. In the case of one young man, authorities initially demanded approximately US\$3,400 bail to secure his release; the individual did not wish to comply, since experience indicates that such payments contribute to establishing a system of extortion from people who have no constitutional protection. Largely owing to international pressure by various governments, this young man and the other individuals who were arrested were released without bail after several weeks of imprisonment.

Arrests, attacks on individuals and communities, confiscation and destruction of individuals' property

Attacks on individual Bahá'ís, Bahá'í communities, arrests, and the confiscation and/or destruction of Bahá'í-owned property increased during 2004–2005.

The case of an individual Bahá'í in Hamadán is particularly chilling. In July 2004, a Bahá'í optician in that city was kidnapped several times and brutally attacked by strangers who threatened him with death if he did not recant his faith and become a Muslim. He went to the police, who documented the case, which was then referred to a Revolutionary Court. However, the court investigator returned the documents to the police station and instructed that such cases not be documented in the future, since the Bahá'ís would then be able to demand their rights and complain to international authorities. The Bahá'í eventually persuaded another police official to file a complaint, and this time the judge warned him repeatedly to withdraw

his complaint or “it would cost him dearly.” Although the judge eventually allowed the complaint to be filed, the complainant was then taken to the “information division” where he was interrogated about his beliefs, strongly advised to convert to Islam—and warned that he should remember what had happened to another Bahá'í in Hamadán, who had been killed under mysterious circumstances the previous month.

It is therefore clear that Bahá'ís cannot expect protection from the government. In fact, Bahá'ís have found that government officials often express and foster negative attitudes towards Bahá'ís. For example, a report in *The Irish Times* on 20 May 2004 quotes a passage from the question and answer section of the new Website of the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei:

Q. “We have Baahi [Bahá'í] neighbors,” writes one, referring to Iran’s largest religious minority that is routinely persecuted by the authorities. “Our neighbours are good people and we have excellent relations with them. What should we do?”

A. “These people are *harem* [harám] (forbidden, unlawful) and are the enemy of our religion and beliefs,” replies Khamenei. “You should end your relationship with them.”

Several months after the distribution of the letter to President Khatami, a new wave of arrests began. Two individuals who had been arrested in November and then released were re-imprisoned; this time they were convicted in court—without legal representation—and sentenced for periods of one to three years. In early March, three prominent members of the Bahá'í community in Tehran were arrested after their homes were ransacked by the Iranian intelligence agency and documents pertaining to the Bahá'í community were confiscated.

In January and February 2005, in the city of Yazd, Bahá'ís were harassed and assaulted, and the Bahá'í cemetery was destroyed, with tombstones smashed and the remains of the interred left exposed. Bahá'í business premises were burned to the ground.

Other disturbing events during the period under review include the suspension, by an Islamic court, of the sentence given a man who murdered a Bahá'í. While the court recognized, based on

the defendant's own testimony, the crime as a "quasi-intentional" murder, and he was convicted, the sentence was suspended as time served and it was further decreed that no "blood money" should be paid to the family because they are apostates. The worry is that the theological basis of the decision will be used by Muslims to support the belief that they can kill Bahá'ís without fear of serious punishment by Iran's courts.

And in October 2004, six Bahá'í homes in the village of Katá in the Buyír-Aḥmad region were confiscated by the authorities—solely on the basis of the owners' membership in the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'ís in this village have previously endured shootings, mob attacks, and the burning of their properties; since the early days of the Islamic revolution they have been subjected to pressure intended to force their conversion to Islam.

Persecution of Bahá'í students and efforts to hinder their pursuit of education

One of the social, educational, and community activities that the Bahá'ís were ordered to suspend in August 2004 was the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education, which has functioned as a private university for Bahá'í youth in Iran, who are routinely denied entrance to the country's universities.

During the same month, an individual was arrested arbitrarily for printing Bahá'í studies material. Kept for over a month in prison, he was released only after bail amounting to US\$114,000 had been posted.

Also at that time, the Iranian government devised a devious scheme to demoralize students who were applying for university admission. In the past, university entrance forms required applicants to identify themselves as members of one of the officially recognized religions in Iran—Islam, Christianity, Judaism, or Zoroastrianism. No other choices were permitted, and Bahá'ís, who refuse to lie about their religious affiliation, have thus been prevented for more than 20 years from entering universities in Iran. In 2004, the Bahá'í community was assured by government officials that the forms would be changed and that religion would not be a barrier to Bahá'í students taking the university entrance exams. Instead of being required to fill

in a slot for their religious affiliation, university applicants were simply asked which of the four approved religious subject examinations they wished to take. Bahá'ís were assured that by choosing Islam as the subject on the examination, there would be no implication that students were members of that faith. However, after the students took the exam, officials proclaimed that their action constituted a declaration of themselves as Muslims.

When the Bahá'í students learned of this duplicity and approached the authorities to correct the mistake, the government at first seemed helpful, then stalled, and finally responded that the students either had to accept the identification as it stood or give up their efforts to enter university. Eventually, the authorities offered to admit only 10 of the 800 Bahá'í students who had applied for admission to university; those 10 refused, in solidarity with their fellow Bahá'í youth. In the end, no Bahá'í students were admitted to university, in spite of government promises and the Bahá'ís' high scores on the entrance examinations. In fact, Muslim students with much lower scores were routinely admitted.

It seems clear that the entire exercise constituted a ploy on the part of the Iranian government to placate Western governments and convince them that Iran is improving the lot of the country's Bahá'í community. This is clearly not the case. One recalls the statement in the 1991 Golpaygani memorandum from the Iranian Supreme Revolutionary Council on "the Bahá'í question," which states that Bahá'ís "must be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Bahá'ís."³ Indeed, on one Iranian Ayatollah's Website, in response to a question about whether registering Bahá'ís in educational institutions is in the interests of Islam, the Ayatollah responded, "Their registration as Bahá'ís, which is an anti-Islamic intelligence organization, is not allowed and is contrary to the interests of Islam and the principles and values of the Islamic Revolution."

Media

An upsurge in attacks beginning in January 2005 appears to have been coordinated with the launching of a campaign of defamation against the Bahá'ís in the government-controlled media—and was,

in part, a response to the letter presented by the Bahá'í community in November 2004. In December 2004, an article entitled “Behind the Shadowy Letter of the Bahá'ís” on the batzab.com Website responds to the letter to President Khatami by accusing the Bahá'ís of being “used as a tool by the Zionists” and hints darkly that “if Baha'ism [sic] becomes a political tool in the hands of foreigners, it is only natural that the officials of the Islamic Republic would have to change their method of dealing with the Bahá'ís.” During the same month, another article on the same Website makes similar accusations regarding “links of the Bahá'ís with the Zionists, which pose a danger to Iran” and hopes “that the security and justice officials of Iran will pay more attention to uprooting this corrupt sect.” In an article in *Jomhouri-e-Eslami* (the Islamic Republic Newspaper) on 8 January 2005, the Bahá'í appeal to the Iranian President is characterized as a “provocative” activity and “part of a plan by the United States” to exert pressure on Iran. In fact, the article accuses the US government of financing the distribution of the letter to remove the government of the Islamic Republic, since it cannot do it by military force. Another article, on the Website of the Cultural Foundation of Rahpouyan of Shíráz, is devoted entirely to attacking aspects of the Bahá'í Faith and threatens retribution against Bahá'ís, saying that the Iranian people have tolerated the presence of the Bahá'ís in Iran for the past two decades but have reached the limits of their patience and will no longer refrain from assaulting them. The conclusion of the article requests the government to be proactive in preventing “apostate” Bahá'ís from manipulating the religious sentiments of the country's Muslim population.

Outside Iran, media coverage took a different tone. In France, articles in many different newspapers and on various radio stations reported on the exclusion of Bahá'í students from university and followed up on the *Cultural Cleansing* statement published after the destruction of the house of Bahá'u'lláh's father in Tehran.

In January 2005, the *Luxemburger Wort*, a church-owned paper, published an article entitled “The Hidden Face of Khatami: A Bastion against Religious Proselytism,” following the president's tour of seven African countries that month. The article describes the Iranian government's concern about the “considerable presence” of Iranian Bahá'í immigrants in Africa and reports that President Khatami

“is said to have asked the heads of state of the countries he visited not to encourage the spread of the movement.” In an interview broadcast on Radio France Internationale in January, an academic from the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva also commented on President Khatami’s focus during his African tour, noting that Iranian officials appear to have among the aims of their diplomatic work the exercise of pressure on African countries to halt Bahá’í activities.

In October 2004, Voice of America (VOA) broadcast an editorial, reflecting the views of the United States government, regarding Iran and religious freedom, which mentioned the fact that “Bahá’ís are special targets of abuse” in that country, that they “are not permitted to teach or practice their religion, obtain government jobs, or attend Iranian universities,” that “their property has been seized and they are victims of arbitrary arrest and imprisonment,” and that “several Bahá’í sites of great religious significance have been destroyed by Iranian authorities.” In February 2005, the VOA Persian-language service carried an interview regarding the persecution of Bahá’ís in Iran, following the recent desecration of the cemetery in Yazd.

Actions at the United Nations and by national governments

Once again this year, international agencies—with one lamentable exception—and national governments around the world continued to monitor the situation of Iran’s Bahá’ís and to speak up on their behalf.

The 92nd Session of the International Labour Organization (ILO) was held in Geneva in June 2004, at which the report of the ILO’s Committee of Experts mentioned the discrimination against the Bahá’ís practiced in Iran and urged the government to address the issue. Furthermore, it asked the government to provide current information regarding the education and the position of Bahá’ís in the labor market that will show how it is making efforts to bring their situation into line with the Convention on Discrimination in Employment and Occupation.

On 17 November 2004, the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution on the human

rights situation in Iran, mentioning the Bahá'ís in two paragraphs. The resolution was co-sponsored by 39 countries, with 69 countries voting in favor, 55 against, and 51 abstaining.

On 20 December 2004, for the 17th time since 1985, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution on the human rights situation in Iran, with specific mention of the persecution of the Bahá'í community there. The resolution, introduced by Canada, expressed “serious concern” about the human rights situation and called on Iran to “eliminate all forms of discrimination based on religious grounds,” taking note of the recent upsurge of human rights violations against the Bahá'ís. It specifically mentioned “the continuing discrimination against persons belonging to minorities, including Christians, Jews, and Sunnis, and the increased discrimination against the Bahá'ís, including cases of arbitrary arrest and detention, the denial of free worship or of publicly carrying out communal affairs, the disregard of property rights, the destruction of sites of religious importance, the suspension of social, educational, and community-related activities, and the denial of access to higher education, employment, pensions, and other benefits.” The resolution passed by a vote of 71 in favor and 54 against, with 55 abstentions—a greater margin of votes in favor than in the Third Committee session. The Bahá'í International Community's Principal Representative at the United Nations expressed gratitude for the resolution, commenting that “expressions of concern by the international community such as this remain the chief means of protection for Iran's beleaguered Bahá'í community.”

In its session in January 2005, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child considered the second periodic report of Iran on its implementation of the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. While the report asserted that there is general improvement in the rights of Iranian children, the committee expert who served as country rapporteur raised the issue of discrimination against the Bahá'ís in Iran, expressing the committee's concern about restrictions regarding freedom of religion and noting that Bahá'ís were reportedly discriminated against in regard to education, employment, travel, housing, and cultural activities. The Iranian delegation responded that since Bahá'í children were

required, along with all other children in the country, to complete eight years of schooling, there was no case of discrimination against them and that the government promotes human rights education in Iranian schools.

Unfortunately, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, meeting in Geneva in March and April 2005, once again refused to put forward a resolution condemning the human rights abuses in Iran. In an oral statement, the Bahá'í International Community urged the Commission to table and pass such a resolution, saying that "the gross, flagrant, repeated violations of human rights in Iran—including the abuses that target Bahá'ís in that country—warrant the re-establishment of a monitoring mechanism." The Bahá'í International Community's Representative in Geneva also noted that "human rights violations in Iran have again become so grave that, in our view, they warrant a clear signal from the international community"; and the Principal Representative commented, "In view of the sharp increase of human rights violations against the Bahá'í community of Iran, it is nothing less than shocking that the Commission on Human Rights has for the third year in a row failed to renew international monitoring of the situation . . . We are very disappointed at the failure of the Commission on Human Rights to live up to its mandate."

During the year, governments around the world also expressed their support for Iran's Bahá'ís. In the United Kingdom, for example, parliamentarians tabled an Early Day Motion expressing concern over the destruction of the house of Bahá'u'lláh's father in Tehran and the government's actions to prevent Bahá'í students from entering university. Parliamentary Questions were raised on the issue, and it was also brought forward in a debate on European Union relations with Iran. Dr. Denis MacShane, Member of Parliament and Minister for Europe, commented, "I hope that the whole House will send a message of solidarity to people of the Bahá'í Faith. It is a great, noble, tolerant, and peace-loving religion, and its treatment at the hands of the Iranian authorities is an insult to human values anywhere in the world." The situation of Iran's Bahá'ís was also mentioned in the government's 2004 Annual Human Rights Report, released in November 2004.

The situation of the Bahá'ís in other Muslim countries

The Bahá'í community in Egypt, which is severely circumscribed in its activities, has also been the target of much negative publicity in the newspapers. In August 2004, after a visit to Egypt by members of the American Committee for Religious Freedom, the magazine *Nisf El-Dunia* published a four-page article attacking the Bahá'í Faith, recirculating old accusations that it is a tool of British imperialism and of Zionism. The article also reported the response of two shaykhs to a question regarding the persecution of Bahá'ís by Muslims, saying,

first of all, Egypt does not know of any persecution of the followers of any denomination or religious sect, and secondly: All that has any relation with the Bahá'ís has disappeared since 1987, following their acquittal by the Egyptian judicial authorities of the accusation of conspiracy, of reopening of the Bahá'í Assemblies that were closed by a presidential decree in 1960, or trying to preach the Bahá'í [Faith]. The file was totally closed.

These assertions are false, as the record shows. And in fact, at a meeting of the Continuation Committee for the organization Interfaith Action for Peace in Africa, held in Nairobi, Kenya, in July 2004, the organization's president reported that in response to the organization's proposal to hold the next continental interfaith summit in Egypt, the Egyptian authorities had stated that they would not allow the summit to take place there as long as Bahá'ís were included among the participants.

In Kuwait, two articles published in the *al-Seyassah* newspaper attacked the Bahá'í Faith with similar false accusations but were countered by an article written by another Muslim who asserted, "It is the right of individuals of any religion or belief to request to teach this religion or belief if the country is democratic and especially if those requesting to do so are citizens."

NOTES

¹ See Bahá'í International Community, *The Bahá'í Question: Cultural Cleansing in Iran* (2005), pp. 16–21, for a more complete discussion of this document and its implications for the Bahá'ís in Iran.

² See pp. 279–280 for the complete text of this statement.

³ See *The Bahá'í Question*, pp. 16–21.