

Update on the Situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran and Egypt

While the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran proclaims its willingness to engage in a human rights dialogue with the West and to safeguard the rights of Bahá'ís—even while denying them recognition as a religious minority within the country's constitution—events tell another story. During the year in review, the officially sanctioned oppression of Iran's 300,000-member Bahá'í community continued, without any monitoring by international agencies.

In the spring of 2004, the grave of the foremost follower of the Báb, Mullá Muḥammad-'Alí Bárfurúshí, known as Quddús (“the most holy”), was destroyed, with the approval of Iranian authorities. The razing, which began in February, was temporarily stopped when local Bahá'ís asked to see the necessary legal permit for the demolition. The dismantling continued, however, in a covert manner, in spite of the Bahá'ís' appeal to national authorities and efforts of the international Bahá'í community. Bahá'ís were also prevented from retrieving the remains of Quddús, to inter them with respect elsewhere.¹

By the end of the year in review, one Bahá'í, Zabihullah Mahrami, remained imprisoned on account of his belief. Mr. Mahrami

was arrested in Yazd in 1995 and is serving a life sentence. Three other prisoners were freed during the year. Manuchehr Khulusi, whose four-year sentence had commenced the previous March, was released conditionally in December 2003 after he posted bail equal to US\$62,800. However, he is still required to appear before the appeals court at an unspecified future date. Bihnam Mithaqi and Kayvan Khalajabadi, both imprisoned since April 1989 on charges based completely on their membership in the Bahá'í Faith, were released in February 2004. Their original sentence of eight years had been commuted to three years plus 50 lashes, but when they appealed the Islamic Revolutionary Court condemned them to death. Eventually their sentences were reduced to 15 years for “association with Bahá'í institutions.” They both served this term in full.

Early in 2003 the Iranian government's passage of a new ruling concerning equal compensation in “blood money,” or money paid to victims of crimes, to recognized religious minorities received international media attention. However, Bahá'ís have been excluded from this legislation, in spite of being the largest religious minority, because their Faith is not “recognized” by the government.

Other recent repressive actions taken by the Iranian government are detailed in the Bahá'í International Community's written statement to the 60th session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, held in Geneva from 15 March to 23 April 2004. These actions include injunctions against the operation of two Bahá'í-owned businesses—specifically because the owners are Bahá'ís; rejection of the appeal of an individual Bahá'í for the return of his confiscated property, which had been seized because of the property's alleged use as a venue for teaching the Bahá'í Faith and for holding classes of the Bahá'í Institute of Higher Education (BIHE), established for Bahá'í students who are denied access to Iran's universities because of their religious beliefs; similar rejections of individuals' appeals for restoration of seized pensions; denial of inheritances; and continuing arbitrary arrests and imprisonments. The poisoned climate being fostered by the government is evident in a series of newspaper articles that incite hatred of Bahá'ís and are based on clear falsehoods. Furthermore, questions remain concerning the exclusion of Bahá'í students from university entrance examinations, in spite

of what appears to be a change in the registration form requiring identification of religious affiliation.²

International agencies and governments around the world continued to show their concern for Iran's Bahá'ís.

In November 2003 Abdelfattah Amor, the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, submitted an interim report to the 58th session of the UN General Assembly, which stated, in part:

While noting some promised improvements in treatment of the Baha'i minority, the Special Rapporteur is of the view that the measures taken by the Iranian authorities to end the persecution of Baha'is, including by non-State entities, and to guarantee them the same rights as any other Iranian citizen are still inadequate. He again reminds the Iranian authorities of the need to ensure respect for the relevant provisions of international law, including article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. In addition, as a religious minority, Baha'is are entitled to the respect due to all other religious minorities.

Also in November, the United Nations' Third Committee passed a resolution, initiated by Canada, expressing its concern regarding the human rights situation in Iran. The following month the General Assembly adopted a resolution with identical wording, which made reference to the Bahá'ís in three paragraphs. The resolution expressed "serious concern at . . . the continuing discrimination against persons belonging to minorities, including against the Bahá'ís, Christians, Jews, and Sunnis, including cases of arbitrary arrest and detention; denial of free worship or publicly carrying out communal affairs and disregard of property rights." It called upon the Iranian government "to eliminate all forms of discrimination based on religious grounds or against persons belonging to minorities, including the Bahá'ís, Christians, Jews, and Sunnis, and to address this matter in an open manner, with the full participation of the religious communities and minorities themselves." Finally, the General Assembly resolved "to continue the examination of the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, paying particular attention to further devel-

opments, including the situation of the Bahá'ís and other minority groups, at its 59th session, under the agenda item entitled "Human Rights Questions," in the light of additional elements provided by the Commission on Human Rights." The resolution was adopted with a vote of 68 in favor, 54 against, and 51 abstentions. It was cosponsored by 29 countries.

During the 60th session of the Commission on Human Rights, which met in Geneva from 15 March to 23 April 2003, Professor Amor, serving his final year as the United Nations' Special Rapporteur, gave a special report, in which he mentioned the situation of the Bahá'ís in both Iran and Egypt, citing these two among countries that violate freedom of religion or belief.

In its oral statement to the commission, the Bahá'í International Community spoke of the effectiveness of international support in protecting Iran's Bahá'ís. With the lack of international monitoring in Iran over the past two years, only small steps have been taken in this regard; nevertheless, the Bahá'í International Community expressed its appreciation to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the International Labour Organization (ILO) "for their condemnation of Iran," pointing out that it led to the modification of the university entrance form requiring students to state their religious affiliation. Whether or not this will, in fact, give Bahá'í students full access to higher education remains to be seen, the Bahá'í representative continued, "But we have no reason to believe that the authorities would have taken even this first step, if the international community had not insisted upon it."³ The representative also credited the action of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention with the release of one Bahá'í prisoner, and noted, "Another Bahá'í prisoner was conditionally released just after the General Assembly adopted a resolution expressing 'serious concern' over continuing violations of human rights in the Islamic Republic and specifically mentioning the Bahá'í community."

Unfortunately, however, for the second year in a row the Commission failed to adopt a resolution on the human rights situation in Iran. Conditions in that country have not improved for the Bahá'ís who live there, and while lip service has been paid to addressing the human rights issues that have plagued the Bahá'í community since

the 1979 revolution, persecution has not abated; in fact, in some ways it has intensified.

Arising on the national front to voice their support for the Bahá'ís, both the us Senate and House of Representatives passed their ninth congressional resolution on the human rights situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran, and in April 2004 the us State Department issued a brochure entitled "Iran: Voices Struggling to be Heard," which includes mention of the Bahá'í Faith. In the United Kingdom, a member of the All-Party Parliamentary Friends of the Bahá'ís took action to promote the idea of "benchmarks" in human rights dialogues attempting to assess Iran's progress in improving its human rights record with regard to the Bahá'ís.

The situation of Egypt's Bahá'ís also continues to be of grave concern to the Bahá'í International Community. In December 2003 a *fatwa* was issued by the Islamic Research Academy of Al Azhar University, not only denouncing the Bahá'ís as heretics—unfortunately, a familiar allegation in Egypt—but also accusing them of being active enemies fighting Islam. Ironically, it appears that this focus on the Bahá'í Faith was a response by Egyptian Muslim clerics to a letter written by the Universal House of Justice to the world's religious leaders in 2002, urging them to take decisive action to eliminate religious intolerance.⁴

Egyptian newspapers were quick to publish the *fatwa*. In fact, they have often been vigorous in their denunciation of Bahá'ís as apostates, and some journalists have even written that Bahá'ís deserve to die. The government has done nothing to halt such inflammatory rhetoric, leaving Bahá'ís exposed to the hatred and violence of the misinformed masses. Speaking to this problem in an oral statement to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, the Bahá'í International Community said, "The international community needs to consider how to address such situations, when those who benefit from the right to freedom of expression overstep its bounds—in public statements that incite the public to violate other human rights, such as the right to practice one's religion, or the rights of citizenship regardless of religious affiliation."

In his final report to the United Nations General Assembly, Special Rapporteur Professor Amor detailed the situation of the Bahá'ís of Egypt, noting in particular their inability to obtain identity papers

since the Egyptian constitution recognizes only three religions. He commented that “to exclude any mention of religions other than Islam, Christianity, or Judaism would appear to be a violation of international law.” Yet the Egyptian government has not heeded any of the recommendations of either the Special Rapporteur or the United Nations Human Rights Committee regarding discrimination practiced against Bahá'ís in that country.⁵

It is clear that the informed response of international agencies such as the United Nations and of national governments has played a vital role in preventing the worst abuses of the human rights of Bahá'ís in both Iran and Egypt. Yet more must be done if Bahá'ís in these countries are ever to see the formal recognition of their right to exist as a peaceful, law-abiding religious community and the restoration of their basic human rights.

NOTES

- ¹ Quddús was killed by Islamic religious leaders in 1849 for refusing to recant his beliefs. His gravesite, along with many other historic and holy places, was confiscated by Iranian authorities during the Islamic revolution.
- ² For the full text of the Bahá'í International Community's statement, which contains more information on these instances of oppression, see pp. 213–19 of this volume.
- ³ See pp. 213–19 for more on these reports.
- ⁴ For the full text of this statement, see *The Bahá'í World 2002–2003* (Haifa: World Centre Publications, 2004), pp. 89–98.
- ⁵ See pp. 221–23 for the complete oral statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the 60th session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights regarding the situation of the Bahá'ís in Egypt.