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PRESS RELEASE

Baha'i International Community

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Release of seven imprisoned Baha'is demanded

GENEVA – Reports that seven imprisoned Baha'is have been accused of espionage and other crimes and that their case will be referred to the Revolutionary Court next week are deeply concerning, potentially marking a new and dangerous stage in Iran's persecution of Baha'is, said the Baha'i International Community today.

“The accusations are false, and the government knows this,” said Diane Ala'i, the Baha'i International Community representative to the United Nations in Geneva. “The seven Baha'is detained in Tehran should be immediately released.”

Word of a possible trial against imprisoned Baha'is came yesterday in an Iranian ISNA news agency report quoting Tehran's deputy public prosecutor, Hassan Haddad. According to the report, a case will be sent to the revolutionary courts next week accusing the seven Baha'is of “espionage for Israel, insulting religious sanctities and propaganda against the Islamic republic.”

It is presumed that the seven referred to by Mr. Haddad are the group of Baha'i leaders from Tehran who were arrested last year in raids reminiscent of sweeps nearly 30 years ago at the start of the Islamic revolution. Those sweeps led to the execution of dozens of Baha'i leaders at the time.

The seven Baha'i leaders have been held in prison for over eight months and no evidence against them has been brought to light. Further, at no time during their incarceration have the accused been given access to their legal counsel, Mrs. Shirin Ebadi. Mrs. Ebadi has been threatened, intimidated, and vilified in the news media since taking on their case and has not been given access to their case files. In December, the government moved to shut down the offices of the Defenders of Human Rights Centre, which was founded by Mrs. Ebadi. “The government must now allow Mrs. Ebadi access to the prisoners and to their files,” said Ms. Ala'i.

All Baha'i elected and appointed institutions were banned by the government in 1983; most of the members of the previous three national governing councils having successively been executed. In the absence of a national governing council (known as a "National Spiritual Assembly"), the ad hoc leadership group, called the "Friends in Iran," was formed with the full knowledge of the government and since then has served as a coordinating body for the 300,000 Baha'is in that country. The various governments in power in Iran since 1983 have always been aware of this group. In fact, over the years government officials have routinely had dealings with the members of this group, albeit often informally. "To now say that the 'Friends in Iran' is an 'illegal' group is fallacious," said Ms. Ala'i.

The prosecution of the leaders is just one step in a 30-year-long systematic campaign orchestrated by the government to eliminate the Baha'i community as a viable entity in Iran, the birthplace of the Baha'i Faith.

The arrest of the Baha'i leadership takes place in the context of a severely and rapidly escalating campaign of attacks against the Baha'i community that has included the creation and circulation of lists of Baha'is with instructions that the activities of the members of the community be secretly monitored; dawn raids on Baha'i homes and the confiscation of personal property; a dramatic increase over the past two months in the number of Baha'is arrested; daily incitement to hatred of the Baha'is in all forms of government-sponsored mass media; the holding of anti-Baha'i symposia and seminars organized by clerics and followed by orchestrated attacks on Baha'i homes and properties in the cities and towns where such events are held; destruction of Baha'i cemeteries throughout the country and demolition of Baha'i holy places and shrines; acts of arson against Baha'i homes and properties; debarring of Baha'is from access to higher education and, increasingly, vilification of Baha'i children in their classrooms by their teachers; the designation of numerous occupations and businesses from which Baha'is are debarred; refusal to extend bank loans to Baha'is; sealing Baha'i shops; refusing to issue or renew business licenses to Baha'is; harassment of landlords of Baha'i business premises to get them to evict their tenants; and threats against Muslims who associate with Baha'is.

Ms. Ala'i said the nature and timing of the reported accusations against the seven Baha'is and possible trial are ominous.

"The charges of spying for Israel are often used by the Iranian government when it wishes to push forward a false case against Baha'is," said Ms. Ala'i. "Since the early 1930s, the Baha'i Faith's antagonists in Iran have insisted that the religion was instead a political sect created by imperialist governments attempting to weaken Islam. Baha'is have successively been accused of being tools of Russian imperialism, British colonialism, American expansionism, and most recently, of Zionism.

"The international headquarters of the Baha'i Faith is based today within the borders of modern-day Israel purely as a result of the banishment of the Faith's founder, Baha'u'llah, by the Persian and Ottoman empires in the mid-19th century. In 1868, 80

years before the state of Israel was founded, Baha'u'llah was exiled to perpetual imprisonment in the city of Akka.”

“If the Baha'is are accused of spying for Israel, then why do they not hide their identity? Why were hundreds previously executed for refusing to recant their faith and embrace Islam? Why have thousands been deprived of their jobs, pensions, businesses and educational opportunities? Why have holy places, shrines and cemeteries been confiscated and demolished? All of this demonstrates a concerted attempt to destroy a religious community,” Ms. Ala'i said.

The other charges are equally false, she said.

“Accusations of ‘insulting religious sanctity’ are more about the Iranian government’s own intolerance of other religions or beliefs than any imaginary disrespectfulness of Baha'is towards Islam. It is well known that Baha'is recognize the divine origin of Islam and accept Muhammad as a true Prophet.

“As for the idea that the seven have been working against the regime, these people have been under constant surveillance and have been interrogated and detained previously.

“The government knows that the seven, following the principles of the Baha'i Faith, have refrained from involvement in any partisan political activity, whether local, national, or international. Like other Baha'is, they reject violence and any involvement in overthrowing governments. The Universal House of Justice, the international governing council of the worldwide Baha'i community, has recently spoken to this issue in a message to the Baha'is in Iran.

“Because the government knows such accusations are false, we can only conclude that this is yet another step in the escalation of its decades-long crackdown on Iranian Baha'is,” said Ms. Ala'i.

Although news reports did not specify the names of the accused, the seven who were arrested last year are: Mrs. Fariba Kamalabadi, Mr. Jamaloddin Khanjani, Mr. Afif Naeimi, Mr. Saeid Rezaie, Mrs. Mahvash Sabet, Mr. Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Mr. Vahid Tizfahm.

All but one of the group were arrested on 14 May 2008 at their homes in Tehran. Mrs. Sabet was arrested on 5 March 2008 while in Mashhad.

Ms. Ala'i also noted that at this time, some 30 other Baha'is are imprisoned in Iran solely on account of their religion. Close to 80 more Baha'is are out on bail, having posted deeds of property and business licenses as collateral for bail. They are awaiting trial on similarly false charges. They are also innocent and should be released, she said.

For more information, including biographies of the seven Baha'i leaders, go to:

<http://news.bahai.org>