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PRESS RELEASE
The Bahá'í International Community

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Bahá'í schoolchildren in Iran increasingly harassed and abused by school authorities

NEW YORK – Bahá'í students in primary and secondary schools throughout Iran are increasingly being harassed, vilified, and held up to abuse, according to recent reports from inside the country.

During a 30-day period from mid-January to mid-February, some 150 incidents of insults, mistreatment, and even physical violence by school authorities against Bahá'í students were reported as occurring in at least 10 Iranian cities.

"These new reports that the most vulnerable members of the Iranian Bahá'í community -- children and junior youth -- are being harassed, degraded, and, in at least one case, blindfolded and beaten, is an extremely disturbing development," said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations.

"The increasing number of such incidents suggests a serious and shameful escalation in the ongoing persecution of Iranian Bahá'ís," said Ms. Dugal. "The fact that school-aged children are being targeted by those who should rightfully hold their trust -- teachers

and school administrators -- only makes this latest trend even more ominous."

Ms. Dugal said the Bahá'í International Community has been aware of scattered reports of abuse directed at schoolchildren but has only recently learned that young Bahá'ís are now widely being forced to identify their religion -- and are also being insulted, degraded, threatened with expulsion, and, in some cases, summarily dismissed from school.

"They are also being pressured to convert to Islam, required to endure slander of their faith by religious instructors, and being taught and tested on 'Iranian history' in authorized texts that denigrate, distort, and brazenly falsify their religious heritage," said Ms. Dugal. "They are also being repeatedly told that they are not to attempt to teach their religion."

According to Ms. Dugal, one Bahá'í has reported that the school-age children of a relative in Kermanshah were called to the front of the classroom, where they were required to listen to insults against the Faith.

"Another student, accepted at an art institute, has been followed by the authorities and on three occasions seized, blindfolded, and beaten," said Ms. Dugal.

"While a few of these may be isolated attacks, the extent and nature of this reprehensible activity has led the Bahá'ís in Iran to conclude that this is an organized effort," said Ms. Dugal.

Of special concern, she added, was the fact that a high proportion of the attacks against high school students have been against girls.

"While the attacks reported to have taken place in elementary and middle schools were leveled evenly against boys and girls, those at the high school level targeted girls to a far greater degree: of 76 incidents, 68 were against Bahá'í girls," said Ms. Dugal.

Ms. Dugal added that the ages of the children and junior youth affected are as follows: at the elementary school level, grades 1-5, students 6 to 11 years old; at the middle school level, grades 6-8, students 11 to 13 years old; and at the high school level, grades 9-12, students 14 to 17 years old.

The reports of attacks on innocent Bahá'í schoolchildren come at a time when a growing number of older Bahá'í students seeking to enter Iranian universities have been expelled after being identified as Bahá'ís.

So far this year, at least 94 college-age Bahá'í students have been expelled from

institutions of higher education. That figure is up from 70 as reported in late February.

Since the Islamic Republic of Iran was established in 1979, the 300,000-member Iranian Bahá'í community has faced ongoing and systematic persecution. In the early 1980s, more than 200 Bahá'ís were killed, hundreds were imprisoned, and thousands were deprived of jobs and education.

At the present time, more than 120 Bahá'ís are out on bail and awaiting trial on false charges, solely because of their religious beliefs and activities. Over the last year, as well, international human rights groups have expressed concern at the Iranian government's efforts to step-up their covert monitoring and identification of Bahá'ís.

For more information, go to http://news.bahai.org