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IRANIAN BAHA'IS FACE CONTINUING DISCRIMINATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

NEW YORK - A growing number of Baha'is admitted to Iranian universities this year have been expelled, powerful evidence that Baha'i students in Iran still face severe discrimination and limited access to higher education.

After more than 25 years during which Iranian Baha'is were outright banned from attending public and private universities in Iran, some 178 Baha'i students were admitted last fall to various schools around the country after the government changed its policies and removed religious identification from entrance examination papers.

As of mid-February, however, at least 70 students had been expelled after their universities became aware that they were Baha'is.

"The high percentage of expulsions - which are all explicitly connected to the students' identities as Baha'is - suggests at best that the government is turning a blind eye to discrimination in higher education, and, at worst, is merely playing a game with Baha'i students," said Diane Ala'i, the Baha'i International Community's representative to the United Nations in Geneva.

"While we are happy that for the first time since the early 1980s a significant number of Iranian Baha'i youth have been able to enter and attend the university of their choice, the government's long history of systematic persecution against Baha'is certainly calls into question the sincerity of the new policies," said Ms. Ala'i.

She noted, for example, that another 191 Baha'i students, having successfully passed national college entrance examinations last summer, were unable to enter university this year, either because of the limited number of places for the course of their choice or for other reasons unknown to them.

"International law provides that access to education is a basic human right,

and Iranian universities have no excuse for denying students who have successfully passed their examinations the right to attend simply because they are Baha'is," added Ms. Ala'i.

"As long as any Baha'i is unjustly denied access to higher education, we can say that the years of systematic persecution and discrimination against Baha'i students has not yet ended, and we must call for this injustice to be rectified," she said.

The largest religious minority in Iran, Baha'is of all ages have faced systematic religious persecution since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. More than 200 Baha'is have been killed, hundreds have been imprisoned, and thousands have had property or businesses confiscated, been fired from jobs, and/or had pensions terminated.

According to a secret 1991 government memorandum, Baha'is "must be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Baha'is."

One of the chief means the government has used to enforce this policy was to require that everyone sitting for the national college entrance examination state their religion on the test registration forms. Test forms that listed "Baha'i," or that had no listing, were rejected.

In 2004, apparently in response to continued pressure from the international community, the Iranian government removed the data field for religious affiliation. About 1,000 Baha'i students successfully sat for the examination that year and hundreds passed, many with very high scores.

Later that same year, however, in an action that Baha'i International Community representatives characterize as a "ploy," exam results were sent back to Baha'is with the word "Muslim" written in, something that officials knew would be unacceptable to Baha'is, who as a matter of religious principle refuse to deny their beliefs.

Government officials argued that since the Baha'is had opted to take the set of questions on Islam in the religious studies section of the test, they should be listed as Muslims. Baha'is contested the action and were rebuffed; no Baha'i students entered university that year.

The same thing happened in 2005. Hundreds of Baha'i students took and passed the national examination, only to find that the government had listed them as Muslims. Baha'is again contested the action, but without successful redress, and no Baha'is matriculated in 2005.

Last summer, again acting on good faith, hundreds of Baha'is took the national examination. This time, as indicated in the figures above, hundreds

have passed, and some 178 were accepted into universities.

Throughout the fall, reports came out of Iran indicating that many of those who had been accepted were being refused entry or expelled once the universities learned that they were Baha'is. As of February, the confirmed figure totaled 70 Baha'is expelled.

"Accounts we have received from those who have been expelled or denied registration at the university of their choice clearly indicate the issue is their Baha'i identity," said Ms. Ala'i.

"One student, for example, received a phone call from Payame Noor University on 18 October, asking whether he was a Baha'i. When he replied in the affirmative, he was told that he could not be enrolled.

"Later, after visiting the university, the student was told that the university had received a circular from the National Educational Measurement and Evaluation Organization, which oversees the university entrance examination process, stating that while it would not prevent the Baha'is from going through the enrolment process, once enrolled, they were to be expelled.

"Another Baha'i student at that same university was told that students who do not specify their religion on registration forms would be disqualified from continuing their education there," she said.

Ms. Ala'i also said that the Baha'i International Community has learned that all universities in Iran except one still include a space for religion on their own registration forms.

"This raises the grave concern that the 191 additional Baha'is who passed their examinations this year but were refused places may in fact be the subjects of discrimination," she said.

"We call on the international community to continue to monitor this situation closely," said Ms. Ala'i. "We would also ask for the continued efforts of educators and university administrators around the world who have participated in a campaign to protest the treatment of Baha'i students in Iran."

For more information go to http://www.bahai.org/persecution/iran