

PRESS RELEASE

Baha'i International Community

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Iranian government report confirms innocence of Shiraz Baha'is

NEW YORK, 24 October 2008 -- An Iranian official who was asked to re-examine the 2006 arrests of a group of young Baha'is in Shiraz, Iran, filed a confidential report dated June 2008 confirming what Baha'is have said all along: that their activities were strictly humanitarian in nature and did not involve the "illegal" teaching of the Baha'i Faith.

The report was published by the Human Rights Activists of Iran on 23 October.

Three of the 54 Baha'is who were arrested were later sentenced to four-year prison terms and are still incarcerated in Shiraz.

The investigator concluded that not only was there no mention of religion in their activities, but that youths who attended the classes told him they wanted to continue. "They stated 'We ... truthfully learned a lot from this group and would like them to come back to us again,'" the investigator said in his report.

A Baha'i spokeswoman said the report underscores the injustice perpetrated against the Baha'is.

"It is a manifest injustice that the young Baha'is of Shiraz continue to remain in prison when the Iranian government's own internal investigation has essentially proved their innocence, even under the twisted terms that define criminality in Iran," said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Baha'i International Community to the United Nations. "The government's lies are indefensible," she added.

The arrests in May 2006 garnered international news media attention and prompted expressions of concern by many governments.

The group, composed of 54 young Baha'is and a number of Muslim friends, had been engaged since 2004 in a series of humanitarian projects to promote literacy and moral

empowerment among underprivileged youth in and around Shiraz, mostly through small-group classes organized on Friday mornings in poor neighborhoods.

Members of the group were rounded up by government agents on 19 May 2006. While their Muslim colleagues and one Baha'i among them were released immediately, 53 Baha'is were held for periods ranging from several days to more than a month.

Then, in mid 2007, they were convicted on spurious charges, apparently relating to accusations that they had been engaged in the "indirect teaching" of the Baha'i Faith, considered illegal in Iran despite international laws upholding freedom of religion. Later, in January 2008, while speaking to journalists about the imprisonment of three of the group, a government spokesman said they had been engaged in anti-government "propaganda."

However, the confidential report, issued 16 June 2008 by an "inspector and legal advisor" and addressed to the "representative of the Supreme Leader in the province (of Fars) and the Imam Jum'ih of Shiraz," states that all of those interviewed for his investigation indicated there was no mention of the Baha'i Faith during the classes – essentially contradicting the government's claim.

The investigator, whose name is given simply as "Rustami," states, for example, that he interviewed local young people who participated in classes led by the Baha'is, as well as a retired police colonel, and all stated that the classes were strictly educational in nature.

"From the beginning of their activities...., these individuals held these charitable, humanitarian classes once a week, helping junior youth and youth," the report said, quoting a retired police colonel by the name of Jeddi. "The activities of these classes were writing, drawing, and teaching hygiene and moral values, and there was no mention of religious or political matters. There was never any mention or any statement regarding Bahaism."

Inspector Rustami also said he interviewed eight of the young people who participated in the classes. "They stated that this group had been involved in activities such as teaching moral education, drawing, calligraphy, social skills, and that there had been no discussion concerning politics, or discussions which were against religious, legal and cultural standards."

The three Baha'is in prison are Haleh Rouhi Jahromi, Raha Sabet Sarvestani, and Sasan Taqva, 32. Last January, Amnesty International issued an action alert on their behalf, suggesting they were prisoners of conscience, held solely for their religious beliefs.

Ms. Dugal said the arrests and imprisonment of the Baha'is have always been wrongful, since in any event international law protects the right to "teach" one's religion.

"However, in this case, no such 'teaching' was done," she said. "The Baha'is and their Muslim colleagues were solely engaged in a humanitarian effort to serve poor children

and young people in their region through free classes in literacy, hygiene, and the promotion of good moral values.

“For this effort, three Baha'is are being held in prison, which, in light of this new report, has become a matter of unconscionable cruelty, One of the individuals imprisoned went for a time without proper medical treatment for an injury to his leg, suffered after an automobile accident.

“Our hope now is that with the public release of this report, the Iranian government will release the three and exonerate them and the other 50 people.”

“Further,” said Ms. Dugal, “we would expect the Iranian government to end its long-running campaign to blacken the name of Iranian Baha'is through similar false charges – and to release others that have been similarly accused, such as the seven Baha'i leaders currently being held in Evin prison.”

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

To visit the Web site of Human Rights Activists of Iran, go to:
http://hraisean.org/Archive_87/1135.html

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