From: Baha"i United Nations Office
To: Baha"i United Nations Office;
Subject: UNITED NATIONS EXPRESSES "SERIOUS CONCERN" OVER HUMAN RIGHTS IN IRAN, INCLUDING THE SITUATION OF BAHA"IS
Date: Wednesday, November 22, 2006 9:34:28 AM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Date: 22 November 2006
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UNITED NATIONS EXPRESSES "SERIOUS CONCERN" OVER HUMAN RIGHTS IN IRAN, INCLUDING THE SITUATION OF BAHA'IS

NEW YORK – A committee of the United Nations General Assembly yesterday passed a resolution expressing "serious concern" over the human rights situation in Iran, including the escalation of violations against Iranian Baha'is.

The resolution passed the Assembly's Third Committee by a vote of 70 to 48 on 21 November 2006. It will now go to the General Assembly plenary for vote, in December. The Third Committee considers human rights issues for the Assembly.

Put forward by Canada and co-sponsored by 43 countries, the resolution calls on Iran to "eliminate, in law and in practice, all forms of discrimination based on religious, ethnic or linguistic grounds, and other human rights violations against persons belonging to minorities, including Arabs, Azeris, Baha'is, Baluchis, Kurds, Christians, Jews, Sufis, and Sunni Muslims."

The resolution takes particular note of the worsening situation facing Iran's 300,000-member Baha'i community, noting that "reports of plans by the state to identify and monitor Baha'is," "an increase in cases of arbitrary arrest and detention," and "the denial of freedom of religion or of publicly carrying out communal affairs."

The resolution also expresses concern over the "destruction of sites of religious importance" to Baha'is and "the suspension of social, educational and community-related activities and the denial of access to higher education, employment, pensions, adequate housing and other benefits" for Baha'is.

"We are extremely grateful to the international community for this significant show of support for the Baha'is of Iran," said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Community to the United Nations.

"The level of persecution and discrimination facing the Baha'i community of Iran has steadily worsened over the past year. The Government has stepped up its covert monitoring of Baha'is, and at present more than 129 Baha'is are awaiting trial on false charges, targeted solely because of their religion.

"The General Assembly and its Third Committee deserve special praise for stepping into the gap created by the slow start of the new UN Human Rights Council, which has not yet made fully operational its mission of upholding the international human rights regime," said Ms. Dugal.

If approved by the General Assembly, which is likely given yesterday's vote, the resolution will be the nineteenth expressing concern over human rights in Iran since 1985. All of these resolutions have taken particular note of Iran's systematic persecution of the Bahá'í community.

Over the last two years, Baha'is have been arrested, released on bail, and are now awaiting trial throughout the country. The bail demands have been

high, in most cases requiring the Baha'is to hand over considerable sums of money, deeds to property, business or work licenses.

As well, evidence has emerged over the last year that the Government has established a program to monitor and identify Baha'is. That program, documented in secret government memoranda that have been made public by human rights defenders, has been the focus of considerable outcry.

Earlier this month, for example, the Baha'i International Community obtained a letter from Iran's Ministry of Interior that ordered officials throughout the country to step up the surveillance of Iranian Baha'is.

The 19 August 2006 letter requested provincial officials to complete a detailed questionnaire about the circumstances and activities of local Baha'is, including their "financial status," "social interactions," and "association with foreign assemblies," among other things. It specifically asked "relevant offices to cautiously and sensitively monitor and supervise" all Baha'i social activities.