

## Information on the Situation of Bahá'í Children in Iran

71st Session of the Committee on the Rights of the Child

*(With regards to Iran's written replies to the List of Issues)*

December 2015

In October 2015, the Islamic Republic of Iran replied to the list of issues presented to it in advance of the 71st session of the Committee on the Rights of the Child. Lacking in this report was a response from the Iranian government to the request of the committee regarding the systematic and widespread persecution of children and youth belonging to the Bahá'í Faith, the largest non-Muslim religious minority in Iran.

Since the Islamic revolution of 1979, Bahá'ís have faced persecution, intimidation, and discrimination solely on account of their religious beliefs. Bahá'í children are particularly affected by the government's policies towards that community: they have been singled out and maliciously excluded, shunned, and intimidated in their schools because of their beliefs; expelled when they correctly and honestly fill out mandatory declarations of religion on registration forms, or when they express their opinion and do not remain silent while teachers make false accusations about their religion in class. Young Bahá'ís continue to be barred from accessing higher education and those few who are accepted are expelled once it becomes apparent that they are Bahá'ís.

Today, 100 Bahá'ís remain in Iranian prisons many of whom have minor children. Young Bahá'ís bare the brunt of the persecution their parents endure, whether it is the loss of employment and economic hardship, imprisonment, or when they are faced with violent raids on their homes. In fact, a number of infants have been and still are imprisoned with their parents. Finally Bahá'í children do not have the right to practice and profess their religion in community with others. The extent and systematic nature of the persecution – and the fact that it constitutes deliberate government policy – have been documented in reports issued by various UN bodies.

### Iran's Response to the List of Issues

Under Part I, item 9 of the Committee's list of issues Iran was requested to submit the following information:

*"Please explain the concrete measures taken to guarantee freedom of religion and belief and efforts undertaken to protect children belonging to religious minorities, in particular Baha'i, Sufis and Yarsan children as well as children from atheist and agnostic families. Please comment on*

*information received according to which the Advocacy Council for the Right to Education announced in 2012 that many Iranian students had been banned from education for their religious beliefs. Please comment on information received that Baha'i teachers have been arrested and detained."*

In response, items 68 and 69 of Iran's replies stated:

*68. As for question 9, the criteria to support persons by Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation is their need with no discrimination as to their religion or religious beliefs and needy families from religious minorities such as Christians, Zoroastrians, Jews and Sunni are supported by this organization.*

*69. In the courses, held by the municipality, no question were asked regarding the ethnicity or religion of the children.*

Furthermore, item 60 of Iran's list of replies stated:

*"60. Based on Articles 12 and 13 of the Constitution, non-Shia Islamic religion, Christians, Zoroastrians and Jews are free to perform their religious rituals and traditions and have their own religious education. Based on Article 14 (Ibid), the Islamic government and Muslims are obliged to honor rights of Non-Muslims. Besides, at no stage in school registration, students are asked about their religion."*

This, of course, is not true. The general principle of anti-discrimination contained in Article 2 of the Convention on the rights of the child stipulates that States parties should ensure all the rights of the Convention to each child without any discrimination "irrespective of the child's or his or her parents' or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, **religion**, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status" [emphasis added].

Article 13 of the Iranian Constitution stipulates that, Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only recognized minorities who are free "within the limits of the law", to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education. As such, Bahá'ís are not a recognized minority under the Iranian Constitution and since religious practices are effectively limited to those three religions, Bahá'ís and other religious minorities not recognized under the Constitution are essentially stripped of Constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression, association and assembly and the freedom to practice their religion.

The following sections cover examples of the forms of persecution that have impacted the lives of Bahá'í children since the beginning of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979.

### **Imprisonment of Parents and Hardship on their Children**

There are currently over 80 Bahá'ís in prison in Iran, all solely because of their beliefs. Many of these prisoners have minor children who suffer when one or both parents are imprisoned. In a most recent

case, Ms. Azita Rafizadeh and Mr. Kamran Koushk-Baghi, a couple with a six year old child were both sentenced to four and five years imprisonment respectively in May 2015. Their crime was supporting an informal initiative to provide young Iranian Bahá'ís deprived of higher education with the opportunity to study. Ms. Rafizadeh began her sentence on 25 October 2015 and Mr. Kamran Koushk-Baghi is awaiting summons to go to prison. When Mr. Koushk-Baghi begins imprisonment, their son, Bashir, will have to be placed in the care of others. Below are two other similar cases:

- Mr. Artin Rahimian, the five-year-old son of Mr. Kamran Rahimian and Ms. Faran Hesami (both were sentenced to four-years imprisonment. Mr. Rahimian was recently released after finishing his sentence but Ms. Hesami is still in prison) and Jina, the 15-year-old daughter of Mr. Kayvan Rahimian – the brother of Mr. Kamran Rahimian – (serving a five-year prison sentence), were forced to live with their grandmother, Ms. Rahimian, as all of their parents are in prison at the same time. Their father was executed by the government for being a Bahá'í in the early years of the Islamic Revolution. Mr. Keyvan Rahimian lost his wife, Fereshteh Sobhani, to cancer a few years ago.
- Mr. Shamim Naimi charged with propaganda against the regime and activity against national security is now serving a three years prison sentence in Gawhardasht prison. He has two minor children aged one and seven. Shamim and his parents (Mr. Adel Naimi and Mrs. Elham Farahani Naimi) are all in prison.

### **Home Raids of Households with Children**

Bahá'í children are traumatized when their homes are raided by government agents. In recent years, we have received regular reports of home raids on Bahá'í households. These raids are tactics by the government to strike fear and intimidation into the members of the Bahá'í families. In all such cases, religious books and material are confiscated, demonstrating the fact that such attacks are religiously motivated. The following two examples demonstrate home raids of Bahá'í houses with minor children.

- On 15 November 2015, Intelligence agents raided the houses and workplaces of many Bahá'ís in various cities and arrested 20 individuals. The agents carried warrants that allowed them not only to undertake these searches and arrests, but also empowered them to seek individuals in places of hiding and to arrest anyone that they felt should be arrested. The agents removed items including computers and a variety of documents from the workplaces of these individuals.
- At 8 am on 13 October 2013, agents of the Ministry of Intelligence in Shiraz, with the collaboration of agents of the Ministry of Intelligence in Abadeh, raided the homes of 14 Bahá'ís. The homes were searched; and personal belongings, including Bahá'í books, CDs, computers, photographs, and other items were confiscated. The agents summoned one youth from each home for questioning and all were asked similar questions regarding the activities of the Bahá'í community. During the questioning, agents encouraged the youth to leave Abadeh with their families. It is believed that the goal of these attacks was to intimidate and create fear through contrived threats that residents would possibly attack the Bahá'ís.

They were told that people “don’t like them” and that if they were attacked on the street the authorities “cannot guarantee their safety.”

### **Denial of the Right to Higher Education**

The Iranian government’s policy towards the Bahá’ís is summarized in an Iranian government memorandum obtained by the then Special Representative on Iran in 1993.<sup>1</sup> Produced in 1991 by Iran’s Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council and approved by the Islamic Republic’s Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, this document sets forth specific guidelines for dealing with the Bahá’ís. Stamped "confidential", the memorandum was signed by Hujjatu’l Islam Seyyed Mohammad Golpaygani, Secretary of the Council, and approved by Mr. Khamenei, who added his signature to the document. The memorandum specifically calls for Iran's Bahá’ís to be treated so "that their progress and development shall be blocked." The document indicates, for example, that the government aims to keep the Bahá’ís illiterate and uneducated, living only at a subsistence level. The section that defines the “educational and cultural status” of adherents to the Bahá’í Faith includes the instruction:

(...) 2. They must be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Bahá’ís. (...)

The memorandum also states that all "employment shall be refused to persons identifying themselves as Bahá’ís."

Every year hundreds of Bahá’í students are denied enrolment to universities under the pretext of “incomplete file”. These individuals participate in the national examination and receive high scores, making them eligible for entry into university and yet they are denied the right to education only because they are Bahá’ís. For the 2015-2016 academic year, a considerable number of Bahá’í youth who scored high grades in the national examination were either denied entry into university or were expelled during the academic year once it was identified they are Bahá’ís. Below are some recent examples:

- At the end of spring semester 2015, Ms. Dorsa Gholizadeh, resident of Sari and a university student in architectural studies, was summoned to the Information Office headquarters<sup>2</sup> and faced with the following choices:
  - a. Maintain your belief and be expelled from university,
  - b. Go abroad to continue your studies, or
  - c. Recant your beliefs and continue your studies.

Ms. Gholizadeh chose the first option and she was expelled from university.

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<sup>1</sup> The text of the 1991 government memorandum can be accessed through the following links:

Persian original: [http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/5\\_TheISRCCdocument.pdf](http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/5_TheISRCCdocument.pdf)

English translation: [http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/5\\_TheISRCCdocument\\_en.pdf](http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/5_TheISRCCdocument_en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [Information Office (headquarters): Refers to offices of the Ministry of Intelligence in other government departments]

- It was reported in October 2015 that a Bahá'í from Payam-e-Nur University in Sari, and another Bahá'í, who was studying computer engineering in the Babol University of Science and Technology, were both expelled because of being Bahá'ís (they have asked to remain anonymous).
- It was reported in November 2015 that two Bahá'ís students who have asked to remain anonymous, both residents of Shahinshahr, were encouraged by an officer of the Office of Intelligence to indicate that they were of the Islamic Faith in order to gain admittance to university. They did not agree to this request.

### **Incitement to Hatred and Persecution at School**

Another insidious element of the persecution and the discrimination of the Bahá'ís is the government's extensive use of the mass media, school text books and other means to denigrate and vilify that community.

Since the beginning of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, history books and authorized school textbooks have grossly distorted, denigrated and falsified Bahá'í religious heritage. For example, in the history books used in the third year of junior high school and in the third year of high school, information is given about the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths that is not only incorrect but also omits important episodes in the history of these religions.

School administrators in some towns, and teachers (in particular those who teach religious studies) frequently insult, ridicule, harass and intimidate Bahá'í children and adolescents in primary, middle and high schools in Iran. Children are singled out or called to the front of the classroom as their beliefs are vilified, and all those who dare to respond are severely reprimanded. Many have been threatened with expulsion or forced to change schools. In only two months, January/February 2007, over 150 incidents were reported from ten different cities, and from October 2008 to February 2009, we received reports of over 100 incidents in a dozen different localities. In parallel, schoolteachers were being "educated" about the Bahá'í Faith, using materials that contain lies remarkably similar to those used in State-sponsored media propaganda constituting incitement to hatred and intolerance.

In a most recent case of persecution, in October 2015 it was reported that Aref Hekmatshoar, a third grade student, was enrolled in a private primary school in Karaj and subsequently expelled by the School Principal. Despite efforts being made by the family and two human rights activists to allow him to remain at the school, on 11 October 2015 his parents were forced to enrol him in a new school.

### **Economic Hardship**

Since the inception of the Islamic Republic of Iran, members of the Bahá'í community have been banned from work in the public sector. Not satisfied with this, the government has also reached into the private sector through the harassment and intimidation of business owners and shopkeepers, the refusal to issue or renew business licenses, the sealing of premises, giving orders for the destruction of farmlands and livestock, making threats against merchants and professionals to dissuade them from doing business with or awarding contracts to Bahá'ís, the refusal of loans and other banking services,

and the forced closure of a business, with the seizure and sale of all its merchandise by government officials. Since the presidency of Mr. Hasan Rouhani, the economic attacks against the Bahá'ís in Iran have increased. Although it is hard to give an exact figure, it is safe to say that many of these cases include families with children.

Below are some recent examples of economic persecution:

- It was reported in September 2015 that the agents of the Public Places Supervision Office<sup>3</sup> in Babol went to a pharmacy in the town and demanded that the owner dismiss from his employment a Bahá'í, who has 24 years of pharmaceutical experience, because he is a Bahá'í.
- In August 2015 it was reported that three young music teachers were summoned to the Ministry of Intelligence Office in Babolsar and interrogated. One of them was told that she was no longer allowed to teach. Permission to continue to work was granted to two of them to work. However, a few days later they were dismissed by the manager of the institute of music where they were employed.
- In one example which targeted a large group of families, on 25 October 2014, agents of the Public Places Supervision Office in Kerman sealed 80 shops of the Bahá'ís in Kerman, Rafsanjan and Jiroft under the pretext that the shops had been closed during the Bahá'í holy days (23 October and 12 November). In November 2014, twenty days after the businesses of the Bahá'ís in the cities of Kerman, Rafsanjan, Jiroft and Bam had been closed, the authorities continued to threaten those whose businesses had been shut down.

Subsequently, after continuous efforts by the owners, some of the shops in Rafsanjan have been permitted to reopen. However, shop owners in Kerman and Rafsanjan were required to sign undertakings to "pledge that with the exception of public holidays, I will not close my shop."

- In May 2015 it was reported that the agents of the Public Places Supervision Office, sealed off at least 17 shops in the city of Sari because they had closed their business on Bahá'í holy days.

### **Conclusion:**

The persecution and discriminatory practices highlighted above continue to this day. We remain convinced that international support is a key factor in protecting the Bahá'í children in Iran. At its meeting in January, the Committee on the Rights of the Child has a vitally important opportunity to add its voice to international concern and advocacy on behalf of a particularly vulnerable segment of the Iranian population.

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<sup>3</sup> [Public Places Supervision Office (Amaken): Reportedly responsible for the enforcement of accepted moral codes in places of work and other offices]