

***The Bahá'í International Community's
United Nations Office***

BACKGROUND

Nature of the Persecution against the Bahá'ís in Iran

mid-2008 edition

In addition to presenting a review of the human rights violations to which members of the Bahá'í community in Iran have been subjected for decades, including its historical and legal context, this background document re-examines the upsurge in persecution that has been a matter of great concern since 2005.

The abuses involve not only civil and political rights, but also a wide range of social, economic and cultural rights, as listed below.

Please note that the latest developments are regularly presented in our *UPDATE* document.

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Situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran – historical and legal context

The Bahá'ís have been persecuted throughout their history in Iran. Early followers faced violent opposition from both the religious authorities and succeeding dynasties; some 20,000 perished in pogroms during the 19th century. The persecution continued intermittently thereafter, often coinciding with the need of governments to shore up support with elements of the Islamic leadership.

Still today, some conservative Islamic leaders view the Bahá'í Faith as a threat to Islam and brand Bahá'ís as apostates. The progressive ideas of the Faith on women's rights, independent investigation of truth, and the absence of clergy are of concern to many Muslim clerics. In addition, for Iran's Shia establishment (and some of their Sunni Muslim counterparts) the emergence of an independent religion that postdates the Qur'an is not only theologically abhorrent but also threatens a system of patronage, endowments, influence and perquisites. Members of the Shia establishment in Iran have long been determined to extinguish the new faith and suppress its followers.

Following the Islamic Revolution, human rights violations against the Iranian Bahá'ís greatly increased. Since the early 1980s, over 200 have been executed or killed, thousands imprisoned and tens of thousands deprived of jobs, pensions and educational opportunities. The government banned the Bahá'í institutions, and the community's holy places, cemeteries and property were confiscated, vandalized or destroyed.

The government memorandum on "the Bahá'í question"

The official nature of the persecution came to light in 1993 with the publication, by the former UN Special Representative on Iran, of a government memorandum establishing a policy on "the Bahá'í question". Drafted by the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council and approved by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (as well as by Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, then President of Iran), the memorandum gives explicit instructions to ensure that the "progress and development" of the Bahá'í community "shall be blocked." Its provisions include directives denying access to higher education and employment to anyone known to be a Bahá'í.¹

As we have often stated, the Bahá'í community poses no threat to the authorities in Iran. It is not aligned with any other government, ideology or opposition movement. The principles of the Faith require Bahá'ís to be obedient to their government and to avoid partisan political involvement, subversive activity and all forms of violence. The Bahá'ís seek no special privileges but only their rights under the International Bill of Human Rights (to which Iran is party), in particular the right to life, liberty and security of person, the right to profess and practice their religion, and the rights to education and work.

¹ 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
English translation: http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/5_TheISRCCdocument_en.pdf

Constitutional issues

With some 300,000 members, the Bahá'í community is the largest religious minority in Iran, but is not recognized as such by the authorities. The Islamic regime refers to the Bahá'í Faith as a heresy and a conspiracy and classifies its followers as "unprotected infidels", who have no legal recourse.

Officials quote Articles 14² and 20³ of the Iranian Constitution to prove that all citizens "enjoy all human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights". However, these provisions are not enforced in cases involving Bahá'ís. They are restricted by Article 13, which stipulates that Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only *recognized* religious minorities. When government officials use the term "religious minorities", it is understood to mean only these three. Indeed, though the government claims to promote the rights of religious minorities, such measures do not apply to Bahá'ís. For example, the parliament approved a bill in January 2003 granting equal compensation in "blood money" to the recognized religious minorities, but a court has since ruled that Bahá'ís cannot benefit from this legislation.

Finally, it should be noted that Article 23 of the Iranian Constitution reads as follows: "The investigation of individuals' beliefs is forbidden, and no one may be molested or taken to task simply for holding a certain belief." Nevertheless, the authorities have launched a vast information gathering campaign over the past three years, specifically to identify and monitor the activities of all the Bahá'ís, as detailed below. There has been no admission by the government of this latest campaign against the community.

Continued international monitoring remains the only form of protection for the Iranian Bahá'ís. Any lessening of international support for the Bahá'í community will be perceived wrongly by the Iranian authorities, as a license to continue violating the human rights of these citizens with impunity. Only when legal and public steps are taken to firmly establish the complete emancipation of the Bahá'ís will Iran be able to claim full compliance with its oft-stated commitment to universal human rights.

Denial of the right to life, liberty and security of person

A national effort to identify and monitor members of the community throughout Iran apparently began towards the end of 2005.

² Article 14 reads: "In accordance with the sacred verse "God does not forbid you to deal kindly and justly with those who have not fought against you because of your religion and who have not expelled you from your homes" [60:8], the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and all Muslims are duty-bound to treat non-Muslims in conformity with ethical norms and the principles of Islamic justice and equity, and to respect their human rights. This principle applies to all who refrain from engaging in conspiracy or activity against Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran."

³ Article 20: "All citizens of the country, both men and women, equally enjoy the protection of the law and enjoy all human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, in conformity with Islamic criteria."

In March 2006, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ms. Asma Jahangir, expressed her grave concern about a “confidential letter sent on 29 October 2005 by the Chairman of the Command Headquarters of the Armed Forces in Iran”⁴. It had been addressed to the Ministry of Information, the Commanders of the Revolutionary Guard, *Basij*, Police, Army and others, copied to the Head of the Judiciary and to the Chairman of the Office of the Supreme Leader. Signed by *Basij* Major General Seyyed Hossein Firuzabadi, the letter refers to “the misguided sects of Baháism and Babism” and states that “according to the instructions of [Iran’s] Supreme Leader”:

“...the Command Headquarters of the Armed Forces has been given the mission to acquire a comprehensive and complete report of all the activities of these sects (including political, economic, social and cultural) for the purpose of identifying all the individuals of these misguided sects. Therefore, we request that you convey to relevant authorities to, in a highly confidential manner, collect any and all information about the above-mentioned activities of these individuals and report it to this Command Headquarters.”

Towards the end of July, Amnesty International issued a statement about the letter and provided the opportunity to obtain a copy. Amnesty indicated that it had sought further information by writing in mid-May 2006 to Major General Firuzabadi and to those listed as the recipients, but had not received any response.

We later heard about governmental implementation orders sent out in 2006. For example, the Ministry of the Interior wrote to the provincial deputies of the Department of Politics and Security in Offices of the Governors’ General throughout Iran in August. These officials were instructed to complete a questionnaire about local Bahá’ís and to order “relevant offices to cautiously and sensitively monitor and supervise” all Bahá’í social activities. Detailed information was sought: places of residence, occupations, education, all the members of each family, how they relate to their Muslim neighbours and colleagues, and so on.⁵

During 2007, officials of the Ministry of Information (Intelligence Ministry) or police interrogated dozens of Bahá’ís in over 20 localities. Some officials came to Bahá’í homes and workplaces; others telephoned or summoned them to their local police station. Bahá’ís known to the Intelligence Ministry were harassed to give personal information about other Bahá’ís. Attempts were also made to obtain information through surreptitious means, by people who posed as journalists or questioned children playing in the street. Moreover, officials came to the homes of non-Bahá’í neighbours, seeking the same kind of information and asking some of them to monitor the movements of Bahá’í families.

In parallel, persecution against the Bahá’ís increased, with numerous human rights violations throughout the country. Physical assaults and many acts of harassment and intimidation targeted Bahá’ís (and some of their non-Bahá’í friends) of all ages, including children, adolescents and military trainees. Individuals who wished to join Bahá’ís in their activities were interrogated and threatened. Other groups also suffered as the authorities conducted a crackdown on civil society, targeting in particular academics, women’s rights activists, students and journalists.

⁴ The text of the letter (in both the original Persian and English translation) can be accessed through the following page: <http://www.bahaiworldnews.org/story/473>

⁵ To read the English translation of the August 2006 letter, [click here](#)
To view the original August 2006 letter in Persian, [click here](#)

The most recent violent incidents are detailed in our latest *UPDATE*. At the beginning of the period under specific review in this background document (in December 2005), we were outraged to hear about the death of Mr. Dhabihu'llah Mahrami in his prison cell in Yazd. He was 59 years old, had no known health concerns, and the cause of his death is not known.⁶ This occurred at a time when persecution against the community was already increasing and a major media campaign had begun, vilifying the Bahá'í Faith and its adherents. There had been some physical violence, including a serious outbreak early in 2005 in Yazd (where Mr. Mahrami was imprisoned), during which individuals attacked two Bahá'ís, inflicting severe injuries, and set a Bahá'í shop on fire, destroying all the merchandise. The Bahá'í cemetery in the same town was destroyed the following month, with cars driven over the graves, tombstones smashed and the remains of the interred left exposed.

Attacks later occurred in other localities, as well, including a kidnapping that strongly suggested support from the authorities. In February 2007, two Bahá'í women were murdered in separate incidents. While the motive remains unknown, both were elderly women home alone, and both were brutally assaulted.

Officials tend to say that the Iranian people consider Bahá'ís as infidels and wish to attack them. On the contrary, it has been the experience of the Iranian Bahá'í community that many of their fellow countrymen respect and admire Bahá'ís for their ideals, good character and steadfastness. Negative attitudes are much more often expressed and fostered by government officials.

Arbitrary arrests and imprisonments

The latest arbitrary arrests and detentions are regularly presented in our *UPDATE* document. The following section covers events from 2005 to 2007.

Since early 2005, there has also been a significant increase in the number of Bahá'ís arbitrarily arrested and detained – sometimes for only a day or two, sometimes for weeks or months – before being released on bail. Bail demands have been high, usually requiring members of the community to hand over deeds to property, business or work licences. Government officials are persistently retaining the assets of people who have not been officially charged with any crime and for whom no trial dates have been set.

Many of those arrested were members of small teams that coordinate community affairs on an ad hoc basis and/or supervise Bahá'ís in studying their Faith. In the years following the Revolution, the government banned the Bahá'í institutions and executed or abducted scores of Bahá'í administrators. In recent years, “revolving-door” arrests and imprisonments have systematically targeted the few Bahá'ís who do what is minimally required to manage community affairs. An Iranian intelligence official foretold this in 2005, when he stated during an interrogation: “We have learned how to confront you [the Bahá'ís]. We no longer pursue ordinary [Bahá'ís]; we will paralyse your inner core.” Twenty-six imprisonments

⁶ In the mid-1990s, Mr. Mahrami had been tried and sentenced solely on the grounds of being an “apostate” for believing in the Bahá'í Faith, and sentenced to death. The authorities never bowed to international pressure calling for his release, but in 1999 they commuted his sentence to life imprisonment. He had received death threats in prison on more than one occasion.

singled out those involved in community affairs during the last six months of 2005; similar “revolving door” detentions continued throughout 2006, 2007 and into 2008. In nearly all these cases, the homes and/or places of business of those arrested were searched and personal belongings were confiscated, in particular Bahá’í books and materials, copying machines, computers and supplies.

Other Bahá’ís have been arrested and detained, as well: in all, over 180 Bahá’ís have been imprisoned since late 2004, with 37 taken into custody during one three-month period between March and May 2005, including six in Shiraz, eleven in Semnan and nine Bahá’í farmers whose homes and land had previously been confiscated in the village of Kata. In addition, police or Intelligence Ministry officials have summoned many more for interrogation without officially arresting or detaining them: 196 such cases were reported in just one year (2007).

The Iranian courts took up a large number of Bahá’í cases in 2007. The judgements handed down last year totalled:

- Suspended sentences: 62 cases
- Sentences to be determined by the judge: 8 cases
- Acquittals: 7 cases
- Imprisonments: 19 cases
- Pecuniary punishment: 5 cases

Bahá’ís in certain localities are particularly affected by the crackdown. In Shiraz, for example, the number of imprisonments has been very high, and some have involved ill treatment while in custody. In May 2006, authorities in Shiraz arrested 54 Bahá’ís who had been engaged (together with some of their Muslim friends) in an educational programme for underprivileged children. One Bahá’í was released the same day, 14 were imprisoned for five days, 36 for six days, and three – Ms. Haleh Roohi, Mr. Sasan Taqva, and Ms. Raha Sabet – were detained for one month at that time.

In August 2007, the entire group was summoned to receive the court’s judgement. All the Bahá’ís were accused of having engaged in “indirect teaching” of the Bahá’í Faith, on the grounds that their programme was based on a Bahá’í-inspired publication. However, a number of the Muslim participants had signed official statements attesting that they had been unaware of the fact that the Bahá’ís with whom they worked had been “teaching” – and the court acknowledged that the material used in the programme included no explicit mention of the Bahá’í Faith. Nevertheless, the court stated that the permit for the programme had been obtained “by deceiving the city’s cultural and executive organizations, such as the Cultural Council and its auxiliary [branches], in the name of activities related to education and culture...” and that the intention had in fact been to “teach [the Faith] indirectly”.

Ms. Roohi, Mr. Taqva and Ms. Sabet were each sentenced to four years’ imprisonment (three years for organizing illegal groups and an additional one year for teaching on behalf of groups that are against the Islamic regime). On 19 November 2007, they were told by telephone to go to the Intelligence Ministry office in Shiraz to retrieve items that had been confiscated when they were arrested in May 2006. They were detained upon arrival and are still being held at this Ministry’s detention centre in Shiraz, where family members have been able to visit them. The reason for their detainment at this facility is not known, as in

principle the Ministry does not have the right to imprison citizens under Iranian law, but only to detain them for interrogation.

The remaining 50 Bahá'ís were each sentenced to one year in prison: four months for forming illegal groups and an additional eight months for spreading propaganda on behalf of groups that oppose the regime. Their sentences were suspended for three years (all of them are young people with no record of any previous criminal conviction). However, suspension of the sentence is dependent upon their attending classes organized by the Islamic Propaganda Organization. All 53 Bahá'ís have appealed the verdicts against them, but at this time the status of their appeals is not known.

Responding to pressure from the international community, the Iranian authorities have not sentenced any Bahá'ís to very long prison terms in recent years. Two Bahá'ís sentenced to one year in prison (following appeal) in 2005-2006 served out their sentences and were released in 2007. More recent sentences have varied from several months to several years; some have received additional time in internal exile.

Finally, it should be noted that three earlier cases remain officially unresolved:

- Mr. Manuchihr Khulusi, arrested in 1999, sentenced to death in 2000 but later released, was subsequently sentenced to four years imprisonment and incarcerated again for nine months in 2002. He was released on bail in 2003, on condition that he would be summoned to appear before the appeals court in future.
- Mr. Musa Talibi, freed from prison in May 2003, following the visit to Iran by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention in February – he had been arrested in 1994, sentenced to death for apostasy in 1996, a sentence commuted to life imprisonment several years later. He has been given no written document verifying his status.
- Mr. Ramadan-Ali Dhulfaqari, imprisoned in 1993, condemned to death for apostasy and then released in 1994 (the apostasy charge has never been resolved).

Information about Bahá'ís currently in prison is given in our *UPDATE* document. More background can be found at: <http://www.bahai.org/persecution/iran>

Denial of right to organize as a peaceful religious community

Since 1983, the Bahá'í community in Iran has been denied both the right to assemble officially and the right to maintain its sacred institutions. In other countries, these democratically elected governing bodies organize and administer the religious activities of the community. The Bahá'í Faith has no clergy. Its institutions perform many of the functions reserved to clergy in other religions and are the foundational element of Bahá'í community life. In Iran, they continue to be banned.

Iranian Bahá'ís gradually made arrangements to worship in small groups, conduct classes for children and take care of other community needs in their homes. Authorities continued to harass them by disrupting meetings, arresting teachers of children's classes, and giving

Bahá'ís suspended sentences to be carried out should they again commit the "crime" of attending religious instruction in a private home.

The authorities have long attempted to prevent Iranian Bahá'ís from participating in monthly religious gatherings and other group activities. Already in 2004, the authorities intensified their pressure on the community (in ways that included threatening individual believers) and ordered the Bahá'ís to suspend all social, educational and community-related activities – in other words, all activities that went beyond the individual observance of religious obligations. For Bahá'ís, however, many of these activities are an integral part of their religious practice.

Moreover, the community was told that its members would face the government's withdrawal of protection if they did not ban all collective activities. The officials stated that the most compassionate act of the Islamic Republic had been to establish laws that protect the Bahá'ís from the people of Iran, who might otherwise take the law into their own hands and "follow the dictates of their Islamic sentiments". Beginning in 2005, human rights violations against members of the community began to increase. As reported in other sections of this document, their situation has been gradually but steadily worsening ever since.

Denial of access to education

Elementary and secondary schools

We are particularly concerned about the fact that Bahá'í students in primary, middle and high schools throughout Iran have been subjected to harassment, vilification and severe psychological pressure during the past three years – all the more intolerable because these abuses were committed by those who should rightfully hold their trust: their teachers and school administrators.

Many students were forced to state their religion and then insulted, threatened with expulsion and, in some cases, dismissed from school. Some were pressured to convert to Islam, required to listen to slander of their beliefs, or taught and tested on "Iranian history" using authorized texts that denigrate and falsify their religious heritage. Many were singled out or called to the front of the classroom as their Faith was insulted, causing some to break down in tears. Those who responded were severely reprimanded. One third-grade student was told (by her teacher) that she was an apostate, which is punishable by death in Iran. In the most violent cases, on separate occasions, two students were accosted, threatened and severely beaten by individuals – who identified themselves as Ministry of Information (Intelligence Ministry) officers in one case, and, in the other case, appeared to be from that same Ministry.

While abuses in elementary and middle schools were perpetrated against both boys and girls, in high schools, girls were targeted to a far greater degree. Incidents were also reported at university level. Some may have been isolated attacks, but the extent and remarkably similar nature of the activity suggests an organized effort. In only two months, January/February 2007, some 150 incidents were reported in ten different cities (and many more may have gone unreported).

All high school students completed a registration form at the start of the 2007 school year, but the Ministry of Education later introduced a new form with a section on religion. Teachers strongly urged Bahá'í students not to declare their religion on this form. Those who did and many others who identified themselves as Bahá'ís in other ways, for example by correcting misrepresentations of their Faith in class, have since been refused registration or expelled from their schools.

In parallel, many schoolteachers were being “educated” about the Bahá'í Faith. The materials provided for them perpetuate the same falsifications of Bahá'í history and teachings used by enemies of the Bahá'ís since their early days in Iran – and are remarkably similar to the defamatory propaganda disseminated through the media over the past three years.

During the same period, anti-Bahá'í leaflets were distributed in schools in three different towns, and efforts were made through the school system to identify Bahá'í students of all ages and the members of their families. For example, a form circulated by the Education Department Management Security Office in Shiraz was to be completed for all students “who belong to religious minorities and the perverse Bahaist sect”. The form required information not only about the student and his/her parents, but also about all of the student's siblings. The entry for *Religion* listed only four options: “Christian”, “Jew”, “Zoroastrian”, and “Perverse Bahaist sect”.

Higher education

It should be recalled that for decades the government had maintained, as a requirement for entrance to public and private universities in Iran, that Bahá'í students renounce their Faith. The authorities are well aware that Bahá'ís will not do so, as a matter of principle. Because of this, an entire generation was denied access to higher education.

In 2004 and 2005, Bahá'ís were finally able to take the national university entrance exam without having to declare their religious affiliation, but were identified as Muslims on the result forms. In 2006, the community decided to take at face value statements, made by the government to international agencies, that “Islam” on these forms was not meant to indicate the students' religion but only the “cultural and religious studies” selected as part of the entrance exam (a choice once again limited to recognized religions).

Over 800 Bahá'ís took the exam for academic year 2006-2007. Well over half of these students were in principle eligible to register in Iranian universities after having passed the exam, but less than 300 were able to do so. Gradually, one by one, those who enrolled and began their studies were later identified as Bahá'ís and expelled. Many of the students expelled were told verbally that this action had been taken because of their religion, but they found it very difficult to obtain written statements to this effect. However, several official documents indicate that the expulsions constitute official policy.

Chief among these is a communication from the director general of the Central Security Office of the Iranian Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, sent some time in 2006 (the exact month and day are illegible on the copy obtained). Addressed to 81 Iranian universities, the names of which were listed, the letter explicitly instructed them to expel any student who is discovered to be a Bahá'í, whether at the time of enrolment or in the course

of his/her studies.⁷ To enrol at these universities, students were required to fill out forms that included a declaration of religion, and during the academic year university authorities frequently asked students to identify their religion.

The letter stated that the instructions were being promulgated under the provisions of “decree number 1327/M/S, dated 6/12/69 [25 February 1991]”. This refers to the 1991 memorandum from the Supreme Revolutionary Council mentioned earlier (see page 2). Among its provisions was the directive: “They [Bahá’ís] 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”.

Another official letter, from the Central Security Office of Payame Noor University⁸ to its regional branches (dated 2 November 2006), stipulated that:

“...according to the ruling of the Cultural Revolutionary Council and the instructions of the Ministry of Information and the Head Protection Office of the Central Organization of Payame Noor University, Bahá’ís cannot enrol in universities and higher education centres. Therefore, such cases if encountered should be reported, their enrolment should be strictly avoided, and if they are already enrolled they should be expelled.”⁹

A related document (dated 17 March 2007) indicated that the security office of one of Payame Noor University's branches had implemented the instructions. The office directed the President of that branch to “give the necessary instructions to prevent the enrolment of the Bahá’í applicants” and to “have the names of such applicants submitted to this office for its use”.¹⁰

The government has done nothing to reverse or to counter these instructions, which have now been implemented throughout the country. For academic year 2006-2007, of the 480 Bahá’ís who received documentation indicating that they had passed the exam and were eligible for admission, only 289 were accepted, and (by January 2007) over 160 of them either had not been allowed to register or had been expelled when it became clear that they were Bahá’ís.

Regarding the students who took the national entrance exam in June 2007, for academic year 2007-2008:

⁷ The 2006 letter to universities can be accessed at:

Persian: http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/1_LetterFromMinistriesToUniversities.pdf

English: http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/1_LetterFromMinistriesToUniversities_en.pdf

⁸ According to its website, Payame Noor University is “a state distance-education university with Headquarters based in Tehran, 10 Regional Centers, 130 Study Centers, 126 Study Units throughout the country and 1 Overseas Center.” At least 30 Bahá’í students have been expelled from Payame Noor since September 2006.

⁹ The 2 November 2006 letter can be accessed at:

Persian original: http://info.bahai.org/pdf/payame_noor_univ_memo_farsi.pdf

English translation: http://info.bahai.org/pdf/payame_noor_univ_memo_english.pdf

¹⁰ The letter dated 17 March 2007 can be accessed at:

Persian: http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/2_LetterToPayam-i-NurUniversity.pdf

English: http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/2_LetterToPayam-i-NurUniversity_en.pdf

- The application form for technical and vocational institutes throughout the country (which had to be filled out to take the exam in these fields) included a declaration of religion that excluded Bahá'ís. The applicant was given only three choices: Christian, Jewish or Zoroastrian. The form explicitly stated that if none of the boxes were marked, the applicant would be considered Muslim. The registration form for other institutions of higher education allowed Bahá'ís to take the exam without declaring a religious affiliation, in the same way as the previous year.
- Over 1,000 Bahá'í students took the exam in June 2007. About 800 of these students were later informed that their exam papers would not be graded, and the reason given in all cases was “incomplete file”. Whatever this may mean, it was not raised beforehand, and they were all permitted to take the exam. The numbers involved strongly suggest that this is yet another means to bar access to university for students now known to be members of the Bahá'í community.
- Only 237 of those who took the exam were subsequently informed that their marks were satisfactory and that they could apply for admittance. Fewer still – only 121 – were allowed to select their field of study and admitted to universities nationwide. By January 2007, of these 121, at least 36 students had either not been allowed to register or had been identified as Bahá'ís and expelled.

We cannot but conclude that the authorities never intended to take all the measures that would be required to reverse the long-standing policies that continue to block access to higher education for those identified as Bahá'ís. Enrolling a tiny, token number can only be seen as a tactic to counter protest and to deceive the international community. Wasting the time and energy of hundreds of young Bahá'ís also put them through serious emotional and financial stress, and enabled the authorities to identify them as members of the community.

Some students have challenged their expulsions, but none have gained re-admittance. In several cases that we have submitted to relevant UN mechanisms, the authorities refused to take action or gave students the run-around. Some professors expressed sympathy, sorrow and regret – but authorities only told the students to recant their Faith if they wished to pursue their studies and/or encouraged them to leave the country. There is no sign that the government has taken any steps to intervene.

In the late 1980s, members of the community in Iran had established the Bahá'í Institute of Higher Education (BIHE), offering classes in private homes, with a number of specialized classrooms, laboratories and libraries scattered throughout the country. The authorities interfered with the functioning of this institution several times and then, in 2004, ordered the Bahá'ís to suspend all educational activities and specifically to close the BIHE and the Advanced Bahá'í Studies Institute.

The Bahá'í Faith places a high value on education. Being denied access to university-level studies is demoralizing, and an erosion in educational levels inevitably leads to impoverishment. Further information can be found at: <http://denial.bahai.org/index.php> and <http://www.bahai.org/persecution/iran>.

Confiscation and destruction of community property

Bahá'í cemeteries, holy places, historical sites, administrative centres and other assets were seized shortly after the 1979 revolution. No community properties have been returned, and many have been destroyed. Seizure of cemeteries in many localities has had particularly painful consequences, as many Bahá'ís are now given access only to areas of wasteland designated by the government for this purpose.

The destruction of the cemetery in Yazd in 2005 has already been mentioned above. Other Bahá'í cemeteries were attacked and extensively damaged in 2006-2007 and early 2008; some were partially or entirely demolished, and desecrations of Bahá'í cemeteries or graves were reported in 19 different localities. The most recent information about these events can be found in our June 2008 *Update* document.

In January 2004 in Babul a sacred site was destroyed that had great religious significance to all Bahá'ís, as it is the resting place of Mulla Muhammad-'Ali Barfurushi, known as Quddus (the most holy).¹¹ The destruction was carried out with the full cooperation of local and religious authorities, despite appeals to national officials and intervention by local Bahá'ís. The Bahá'ís in Babul were subsequently prevented from retrieving the sacred remains of Quddus, and excavations took place in and around the area where it was understood that the remains were interred. This occurred contrary to the assurance the Bahá'ís had received that the sacred remains would not be disturbed.

In June 2004, another site sacred to the Bahá'ís was demolished: the house in Tehran that had belonged to the father of Bahá'u'lláh, a holy place associated with an important period in the history of the Faith. Following the instruction issued by Ayatollah Kani, demolition was carried out in the presence of Ayatollah Kani's sons and Intelligence Ministry officials. The Iranian Bahá'ís went to see the mayor, who said that his office had received written instructions not to interfere with events pertaining to that building, and who suggested that they stop pursuing the matter. The Bahá'ís then talked to a few reporters, who discovered (through a computer search) that the demolition of this house was included in the list of topics about which they were not permitted to report.

These demolitions are of concern because the same thing could happen to other holy places associated with the early history of the Faith and confiscated over the years.

Confiscation of property belonging to individual Bahá'ís

The property rights of individual Bahá'ís are generally disregarded. Bahá'í homes are frequently searched and documents and possessions seized. Many of those arrested during the past three years have had their homes raided and belongings confiscated.

¹¹ In 1849, Islamic religious leaders killed Quddus, the foremost apostle of the Prophet-Herald of the Faith, for refusing to recant his beliefs. His resting place was among the many historic and holy places confiscated from the Bahá'ís by the Iranian authorities during the Islamic Revolution.

Since 1979, officials have confiscated a large number of private and business properties, homes and farms belonging to Bahá'ís throughout the country. Some cases were taken to court, but the judgements handed down have demonstrated that the authorities continue to consider the Bahá'í Faith as an illegal movement and to legitimise human rights violations against Iranian citizens who are members of the community.

Information on the most recent cases is regularly provided in our *UPDATE* document.

Denial of employment, pensions and other benefits

The Iranian government has been carrying out a multifaceted scheme – strikingly well organized, widespread and systematic – in an attempt to deny Bahá'ís the right to employment. In hundreds of cases over the past few years, officials have acted in many and various ways to make it impossible for Bahá'ís to earn a living, following the implementation of government orders to identify and monitor all members of the community (reported above).

We have obtained copies of official documents proving that these violations are a result of government policy. In a letter dated 9 April 2007, the Public Places Supervision Office of the Public Intelligence and Security Force (Province of Tehran) gave orders to the commanders of police and heads of public intelligence and security throughout its region. The orders specified restrictions to prevent members of the “perverse Bahaist sect” (as well as members of anti-revolutionary political organizations and other illegal groups) from engaging in particular occupations.

According to these instructions, Bahá'ís are to be denied work permits or licences for over 25 kinds of business, including all trades involving the preparation or sale of food. In addition, Bahá'ís are to be barred from “high-earning businesses” and only granted permits for work providing “an ordinary livelihood”.

Furthermore, an official form must be filled out and signed by all who apply for business licences, requiring the applicant to declare his/her religion and undertake to:

...adhere to and uphold the moral principle of the law and regulations of the Public Places Supervision Office and the laws and authority of the Islamic Revolution...
[and accede that] ...in the case of the slightest wrongdoing, the [same] Office has the authority to impede my activity without adhering to any legal or administrative proceedings, and I, consequently, do not have grounds for any objections.

In this manner, the authorities are attempting to deny legal recourse to those targeted by the discriminatory regulations.

In early 2006, reports from a number of cities and towns indicated that the Iranian Association of Chambers of Commerce (*Ettehadíyeye Asnaf*) was compiling a list of Bahá'ís in every trade and employment. Other trade associations were also acting along these lines – for example, in a letter from the Trades, Production, and Technical Services Society of Kermanshah to the Union of Battery Manufacturers, dated 2 May 2006, the Society requested “a list of the names of those who belong to the Bahá'í sect and are under the jurisdiction of your union”.

Identification was followed by repressive action. Within a few months, officials in six different localities told Bahá'í business owners to close down or to place limits on their businesses.

The number of incidents increased steadily thereafter, involving dozens of officials who:

- closed Bahá'í-owned businesses;
- refused to issue or renew business licenses, work permits and/or trade membership cards for Bahá'ís in a wide range of sectors;
- warned private-sector employers against hiring Bahá'ís and/or harassed such employers to dismiss Bahá'í employees, threatening them with closure of the business if they did not do so (some businesses were closed; others banned from advertising, some owners were prohibited from leaving the country, etc.);
- issued instructions to chain stores, government offices, regional electricity boards and other organizations to avoid purchasing from or to stop all business dealings with companies and independent establishments because its owners or managers were Bahá'ís;
- incited the population to shun Bahá'í-owned businesses;
- asked landlords of stores to refuse lease renewals to Bahá'í tenant shopkeepers;
- acted to prevent Bahá'ís from working in the service industry and banned Bahá'ís working independently from continuing their activities in a whole series of sectors;
- conducted unexpected inspection visits to workplaces, summoning and interrogating Bahá'ís, raiding and even vandalizing Bahá'í-owned stores.

During 2007, such abuses occurred in 41 different localities. Moreover, Bahá'í directors or managers of companies – and private employers with Bahá'í employees – received death threats and/or threats that family members would be killed or abducted. Threatening letters were distributed at Bahá'í-owned shops and businesses calling upon the Bahá'ís to recant their faith. Banks in several different towns refused to proceed with loan approvals for and/or froze the assets in checking accounts belonging to Bahá'ís.

In one case, when a government official informed the Bahá'í owner of a grocery store in Hamedan (operated by his family for the past 48 years) that business licenses for grocery stores would no longer be issued to Bahá'ís, the store owner requested a confirmation in writing. The official replied, "Wherever you go, even to the United Nations, you will end up here, where you will get the same clear answer." Then he added that, if the Bahá'í wanted the business license, he could change his religion.

One Bahá'í employer arrested in September 2006 was accused of having smuggled into Iran optical lenses manufactured in Israel. To be released, he would have had to provide bail set at 950 million tumans (equivalent to over one million US dollars). The Iranian media covered this arrest, claiming that the Bahá'ís intended to monopolize the importation of optical lenses and to weaken the economy. Reports received from Iran and Canada indicated that the goods seized consisted of some 265,000 lenses imported from 40 different countries, packaged in over 1,800 boxes. One box did contain 300 - 500 lenses manufactured in Israel. Both the exporter, a Bahá'í living in Canada, and the importer were

unaware that the assortment included Israeli-made lenses. The shipment had been cleared through customs upon arrival in Iran.

The case is cited here as it involves an attack against not only a member of the community but also his company and its Bahá'í employees. Many Bahá'í business and factory owners launched private enterprises because they and other members of the community could not obtain employment in Iran. In the 1980s, over 10,000 Bahá'ís were dismissed from positions in government and educational institutions. Many remain unemployed and receive no unemployment benefits.

The pensions of Bahá'ís dismissed on religious grounds were also terminated. Some Bahá'ís who are still being deprived of their rightfully earned pensions have attempted to pursue legal remedies, but the courts have systematically ruled against them. Copies of court decisions in such cases explicitly state: “payment of pension to those individuals connected with the baha'i sect is illegal” [or an “unlawful act”].

These same policies apply to war veterans, as evidenced by a letter from the government agency concerned (dated 1 March 2007) to an Iranian Bahá'í who had carried out his military service and had suffered extensive disability following incarceration as a prisoner of war during the Iran – Iraq conflict. He had attempted to obtain benefits to which he is entitled as a veteran, but the Veterans' Administration Office informed him that: “persons belonging to the Bahaist sect who became war veterans during the Holy War... will not be eligible for the pension benefits”.

Information on the most recent cases can be found in our latest *UPDATE*.

The intergovernmental body most concerned with the right to employment is the International Labour Organization (ILO), which has repeatedly made reference to the ongoing discrimination against the Bahá'ís in Iran in its reports – often reiterating its concern about “the treatment in education and employment of members of unrecognized religions, in particular the members of the Baha'i faith” in this country.

In 2006 the Islamic Republic of Iran was up for scrutiny with respect to ILO Convention 111 on Discrimination, under the organization's procedure of triennial universal review. The Report of the Committee of Experts submitted to the ILO Conference that year contained a specific mention of the Bahá'í community in Iran, with more detailed recommendations than in the past.

Even more important: we were grateful to note that the situation of the Bahá'ís received a considerable level of attention in Plenary at the ILO Conference in June 2006. The statements about discrimination on the basis of religion focused almost entirely on the Bahá'ís (and the relevant extract in the Provisional Record of the Conference ran to nearly four printed pages). It seems that the extensive violations against the Iranian Bahá'ís, in the areas of employment and education, were again evoked at the latest ILO Conference in June 2008.

Denial of civil rights and liberties

Under Iranian law, Bahá'ís have no legal protection and thus their rights can be ignored with impunity. Harassment continues unabated, as reported in other sections, above. For nearly all administrative procedures, Iranian citizens must fill out forms requiring a declaration of religious affiliation.

The freedom of Bahá'ís to travel outside or inside the country has often been impeded by the authorities and sometimes denied. Bahá'ís have had their passports confiscated when attempting to travel outside Iran, and some of them – in particular those involved in coordinating community activities – have been placed on “no fly” lists. The passports of the members of one Bahá'í family were confiscated when they were at the airport, en route to Kuwait on a trip. The official with whom they met told them: “You [i.e. the Bahá'ís] are all spies, and we will not let you go abroad [to carry out] spy activities. We will take measures to stop you.”

More Iranian Bahá'ís have been given passports in recent years, but there has been no clear change of policy. Bahá'ís abroad still often find Iranian embassy officials uncooperative. In some countries, Iranian embassies do not require applicants to state their religious affiliation, and thus Bahá'ís find it easier to obtain visas or renew passports. Requiring applicants to declare their affiliation with a “recognized religion” on passport application forms has been used to pressure Bahá'ís to recant their beliefs.

Measures taken by the government in 2000 enabled married Bahá'í couples to register as husband and wife and to register their children. But the relevant law was not changed, so Bahá'í marriages and divorces are still not legally recognized. The right of Bahá'ís to inherit is generally denied.

Incitement to hatred based on religion or belief

Attacks on the Bahá'í Faith regularly appear in the Iranian media and on the Internet, inciting the public to hatred and distrust. We have received reports from many localities indicating that the clergy has preached sermons against the members of the community and their religious beliefs. In addition, Bahá'ís in Abadeh found anti-Bahá'í slogans spray-painted on the walls and doors of their houses and shops last year. The graffiti included such statements as, “Bahá'ís – mercenaries of Israel”, “Death to Bahá'ís, the mercenaries of America and England”, and “Bahá'ís are *Najes* [unclean]”. In Shiraz, insulting and degrading graffiti was written on the fences of orchards belonging to Bahá'ís. Similar graffiti and slogans have appeared on and around Bahá'í homes and businesses in other towns, as well as in anti-Bahá'í letters, pamphlets and posters.

Some of these falsehoods could have been inspired by articles in the press that have engaged in a deliberate distortion of history, made use of fake historical documents, and/or falsely described Bahá'í moral principles in a manner that would be offensive to Muslims. Such articles have been appearing regularly for the past five years in *Kayhan* (one of the oldest and most influential daily newspapers in Iran), published by the Kayhan Institute and

currently managed by Mr. Hossein Shariatmadari, who is also the representative of the Supreme Leader at the Institute. More details can be found at: <http://bahai.org/iranthreat>

We are particularly concerned about the effects of the media campaign because of the incidents, reported above, where Bahá'í children and adolescents were subjected to vilification and other forms of abuse. Bahá'í military trainees have also been harassed, and members of the community across Iran continue to receive blatantly threatening telephone calls, text messages and anonymous letters. In some cases, these messages have been sent to all the members of Bahá'í families, regardless of age.

Conclusion

The situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran reflects the nature of the persecution and its historical context. In the land of this religion's origin, there is an almost universal ignorance of its teachings and history. The public has been subjected to propaganda for over 150 years from the pulpit and press, then from the media and even scholarly publications, receiving a grossly false image of the Bahá'ís and their beliefs – clearly intended to incite hatred and contempt. Factions struggling for political ascendancy have used the Bahá'ís as a scapegoat. Meanwhile, the community has been denied access to means of communication with the public (radio, television, newspapers, films, the distribution of literature or public lectures) and so has not been able to expose the lies and calumnies coming from those who provide the Iranian people with guidance in spiritual matters.

Outside Iran, the persecution against the Bahá'ís became one of the issues repeatedly denounced by the international community – the United Nations, intergovernmental bodies, and civil society – when indicting Iranian government violations of universal human rights standards. For over 20 years, the UN General Assembly has been adopting resolutions that include references to violations perpetrated against minorities in Iran, including the Bahá'ís. During the past few years, half a dozen UN Special Procedures have condemned the upsurge in oppression targeting Iranian Bahá'ís.

As for the UN treaty bodies: in 2003, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) took note “with concern of the reported discrimination faced by certain minorities, including the Bahá'ís, who are deprived of certain rights”, and said that provisions of Iran's legislation “appear to be discriminatory on both ethnic and religious grounds”. The Islamic Republic last presented reports to the Human Rights Committee and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1992-1993. The government is not cooperating with these treaty bodies and is thus not meeting its obligations under the International Covenants to which the State is Party.

We are gravely concerned about the gradual but steady increase, since 2005, in the arbitrary and cruel use of power against the Iranian Bahá'ís. The nature, number and range of incidents give ample evidence of underlying official policy, intended to put members of the community under severe pressure – as well as to disengage them from their friends and fellow citizens, by harassing and intimidating people they know and by inciting the population to detest and distrust them.

The Iranian Bahá'ís deeply love their homeland, despite all the suffering they have endured under successive regimes. They ask only to benefit from the rights accorded to all Iranian citizens and look forward to a time when they may finally be accepted and respected. Bahá'ís throughout the world have a deep and abiding reverence for Iran, the birthplace of their Faith, and hope that they may be able to make valuable contributions to its advancement some day.