

FAITH

Iran urged to end persecution of the Baha'is

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Baha'is protest in Rio de Janeiro over the arrest of religious leaders in Iran
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International lawyers and human rights activists have appealed in an open letter to the head of Iran's High Council for Human Rights for an end to the regime's persecution of the Baha'is.

The signatories, who include Baroness Kennedy of the Shaws, QC, a member of the International Commission of Jurists, and Richard Goldstone, a former chief prosecutor for the International Criminal Tribunals for Yugoslavia and Rwanda, told Javad Larijani, the council's secretary, that innocent followers of the faith, which was founded in Iran in 1863, were arbitrarily arrested, tortured and imprisoned for many years solely on the basis of their faith. Thousands of Baha'is were refused access to university and not allowed to participate in Iran's economic life.

"Such persecution and discriminatory treatment represents violations of international law, including a number of treaties to which Iran is a party," the 23 signatories said. The persecution of Baha'is was a "breach of Iran's obligations both domestically and internationally".

They said countless documents, including those brought to the attention of the United Nations, had revealed human rights abuses against the Baha'is, including imprisonment and execution, destruction of Baha'i cemeteries and exhumation of bodies, expulsion of Baha'i artists from their professions, the burning of homes and the closure of Baha'i shops.

The signatories, including many professors of international law, reminded Mr Larijani that Iran's constitution required the government "to treat non-Muslim individuals with good conduct, in fairness and Islamic justice, and must respect their human rights".

The open letter comes 200 years after the birth of Baha'ulláh, the founder of the Baha'i faith, who was born in Persia in 1817. He is considered by many Iranians as a Muslim apostate, and his followers, numbering about 300,000 in Iran, have long suffered discrimination. This increased significantly after the 1979 revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic.

The Baha'l faith believes that all religions have true and valid origins. The religion has 6 million adherents worldwide and an estimated 5,000 in the UK.

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