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**PRESS RELEASE**

Baha'i International Community

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**Harsh sentences are a judgment against an entire religious community**

NEW YORK – The harsh prison sentences handed down to seven Iranian Baha'i leaders who are absolutely innocent of any wrongdoing is a judgment against an entire religious community, the Baha'i International Community said today.

Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi, whose Defenders of Human Rights Center represented the Baha'i defendants, said she was "stunned" by the reported 20-year jail terms.

"I have read their case file page by page and did not find anything proving the accusations, nor did I find any document that could prove the claims of the prosecutor," said Mrs. Ebadi in a television interview, broadcast on 8 August by the Persian-language service of the BBC.

The flagrantly unjust sentence has provoked vehement protest from governments throughout the world – including Australia, Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, the U.K. and the U.S.A. The European Union and the President of the European Parliament have also joined the chorus of condemnation, along with numerous human rights organizations – including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and FIDH – as well as other groups, and countless individuals.

"The trumped-up charges, and the total lack of any credible evidence against these seven prisoners, reflects the false accusations and misinformation that Iran's regime has used to vilify and defame a peaceful, religious community for an entire generation," said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Baha'i International Community to the United Nations.

Ms. Dugal noted that the seven have reportedly been transferred to Gohardasht Prison in Karaj, a facility about 20 kilometers west of Tehran. "The reason for the move is not yet known and it is too early to assess the implications for the prisoners," she said. "It does, however, clearly impose an added burden to their families, who now have to travel outside Tehran to visit their loved ones."

The seven - Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Saeid Rezaie, Mahvash Sabet, Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Vahid Tizfahm - were all members of a national-level group that, with the government's knowledge, helped see to the minimum spiritual needs of Iran's Baha'i community.

"That these manifestly innocent people should each be jailed for 20 years after a sham trial is utterly reprehensible," said Ms. Dugal. "We ask the Iranian government: Does such a callous disregard for justice contribute to the advancement of Iranian society? Or does it, rather, further diminish your credibility among your own people and among the nations of the world?"

Ms. Dugal said the Baha'i International Community condemns the widespread injustice perpetrated by the Iranian authorities against others throughout Iran, whether religious minorities, journalists, academics, civil society activists, women's rights defenders, or others.

#### A catalogue of abuses

Even before the sentences were pronounced, the arrest, detention and trial of the seven leaders was a two-year long catalogue of abuses and illegal actions, both under international law and Iranian statutes.

"Iranian law requires that detainees be quickly and formally charged with crimes. The seven Baha'is were held at least nine months before any word of the charges against them were uttered by officials, and even then it was at a press conference, not in a court setting," said Ms. Dugal.

"For a long time, the seven were also denied access to lawyers. When they were allowed contact, it lasted barely an hour before their so-called trial began," she said.

"Detainees who have been charged also have the right to seek bail and to be released pending trial. The seven have continually been denied bail, despite numerous requests."

"These are black and white concerns, not subject to interpretation," she said.

"The government knows that the Baha'i teachings advocate non-violence and non-involvement in politics. Yet this campaign is rigorously pursued with one aim in sight – the eradication of the Baha'i community as a viable entity in Iran," she said.

"In this light, the imprisonment of the seven must be seen as an attempt to decapitate a community's leadership, and strike a devastating blow to Iran's largest non-Muslim religious minority," said Ms. Dugal.

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For a special report including articles and background information about the seven Iranian Baha'i leaders, go to:

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