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Three top UN human rights experts call on Iran to halt destruction of Shiraz cemetery

GENEVA — Three high-level United Nations human rights experts today called on Iran to halt the ongoing destruction of a historic Baha'i cemetery in Shiraz, Iran, saying the action is an "unacceptable" violation of freedom of religion.

In a joint news release, Heiner Bielefeldt, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, and Rita Izsák, the UN Independent Expert on minority issues, said they were "dismayed" at reports that demolition work had resumed in August.

"Cemeteries, like places of worship, are an essential part of how people exercise and manifest their right to freedom of religion or belief. Their significance goes beyond their physical presence," said Dr. Bielefeldt.

"Attacks on cemeteries are unacceptable and are a deliberate violation of freedom of religion or belief," he added. "The Government of Iran must take urgent action."

Dr. Shaheed said "Baha'is have religious rites and practices for the disposal of the deceased in their own cemeteries and the Government has the obligation not only to respect them but to protect them from destruction."

Ms. Izsák urged the Iranian Government to take concrete steps to protect religious minorities.

"The Baha'is have been subjected to persecution and acts of violence," said Ms. Izsák. "The authorities must protect them from further discrimination and stigmatization."

"Measures should be put in place to protect and maintain the cultural heritage of religious minorities, including burial grounds and other sites of religious significance," she added.

The cemetery is the resting place of some 950 Baha'is, many of whom were historic or prominent figures in the Baha'i community of Iran. Interred at the site, for example, are ten Baha'i women whose cruel hanging in 1983 came to symbolize the government's deadly persecution of Baha'is.

Demolition at the site first began in April, undertaken by Iran's Revolutionary Guards, apparently to make way for the construction of a new sports and cultural center.

After the excavation of a large but shallow hole, demolition was halted for several months in the face of international pressure and the expression of outrage on the part of Iranians from all walks of life.

But in August, reports emerged from Iran saying that the Revolutionary Guards had resumed construction on the site, removing human remains from some 30 to 50 graves and pouring a concrete foundation for the complex, which will reportedly include a library, mosque, restaurant, theatre, child care facility, and sports hall.

Members of the Shiraz Baha'i community have pleaded with local authorities to enforce a permanent halt in the construction, offering also a compromise in which the sports complex could be built on the site away from areas where Baha'is are buried, while the graveyard itself is turned into a green space.

The Baha'is have been told, however, that local authorities have no control over the Revolutionary Guards, who acquired the land about three years ago.

Diane Ala'i, the Baha'i International Community's representative to the United Nations in Geneva, welcomed the statement of the three UN officials.

"We are grateful for the strong stand that these three independent human rights experts have taken on the situation in Shiraz," said Ms. Ala'i.

"The statement by Dr. Bielefeld, Dr. Shaheed, and Ms. Izsák is a clear signal to Iran that these acts are completely unacceptable, and that it is the responsibility of the government to uphold and enforce its commitments to human rights law, regardless of who the perpetrators are."

"The current government has made numerous promises to improve its human rights record but failed to take action. Words must now be followed by deeds," said Ms. Ala'i.

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