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Two months in the morgue: One facet of campaign to make Iranian Baha'is invisible

GENEVA – The body of a Baha'i has been held in the morgue for nearly two months in the large, southern Iranian city of Ahvaz because local officials have refused to allow the man's burial.

Shamel Bina passed away on 28 October but remains unburied, despite numerous appeals from his family and others, who have appealed to numerous officials, from the governor general to the city's Friday prayer leader, to no avail.

The family's agony is compounded by the fact that, earlier this year, the Baha'i cemetery here was closed by authorities in a cruel fashion: its entry door to the walled compound was welded shut and bricked up.

The episode is the latest in a series of incidents in recent months where Iranian officials have blocked or interfered with the burial of Baha'is – or sanctioned the destruction of their cemeteries – apparently as part of a campaign to force Baha'is to deny their own religious identity.

In another city, Semnan, the Baha'is were told that in order to be issued a permit to bury their deceased relatives, they must sign an undertaking. In this form, they are asked to have no marking on the graves except the names and dates of birth and death and not to create green space in the cemetery since that is considered a promotion of their faith. Similar orders were issued earlier this year for the Baha'i cemetery of Sangsar.

"In recent years, more than 40 Baha'i cemeteries have been attacked, vandalized or closed, and in numerous cases the burial of Baha'is has been blocked or interfered with by authorities," said Diane Ala'i, the representative of the Baha'i International Community to the United Nations in Geneva.

"The overall pattern that emerges is of a government-coordinated effort to make Baha'is invisible in Iran by eliminating one of the few remaining public signs of their existence – their own distinctive cemeteries – and to force them to abide by Muslim rites as yet another means to force Baha'is to deny their faith," said Ms. Ala'i.

The most well-known of these incidents has been the effort since April by the Revolutionary Guards in Shiraz to [destroy the historic Baha'i cemetery](#) there to make way for a new sports

and cultural complex.

That effort is continuing, despite a call for a halt to that work in September by [three UN human rights experts](#). Recent reports say the construction work is ongoing, and some 5,000-6,000 square meters of land have now been excavated or built upon.

“It goes beyond common justice that Iranian Baha’is not only face widespread persecution across the entire span of their lives – deprived of education, jobs, and freedom of worship – but that they also are repeatedly being denied the dignity of a decent burial,” said Ms. Ala’i.

Other incidents in this campaign include:

-- The case of Ziba Rouhani, who died in October in Tabriz. For at least eight days, she was refused burial in the Tabriz Baha’i cemetery by local officials unless she were to be buried without a casket, which would be contrary to Baha’i burial laws.

-- The case of Miss Mahna Samandari, a talented young girl who became disabled, who passed away recently in Tabriz at the age of 11. Reports received in November said she was also denied burial in the cemetery in Tabriz.

-- In November, government authorities closed the Baha’i cemetery in Mahmoudiyeh in Isfahan province, saying Baha’is would no longer be allowed to be buried there.

-- In June in Tabriz, reports emerged that officials had refused to allow the burial of Tuba Yeganehpour and two other Baha’is in the public cemetery there.

-- In April, the grave of a prominent Baha’i buried in the Baha’i cemetery in Sabzevar was destroyed by a bulldozer by an unknown individual. As with other such incidents in recent years, it is clear that no one could use this type of heavy equipment without the sanction of the authorities.

-- In an eight month period in the city of Tabriz, the remains of at least 15 Baha’is have been refused burial in the public cemetery there, and their families have been forced to send them to another city.

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