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PRESS RELEASE

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Bahá'í International Community sends open letter to Iran's chief prosecutor

NEW YORK, 6 March 2009 – The Bahá'í International Community has issued an open letter to Iran's prosecutor general outlining the tragic history of the persecution of Bahá'ís in that country, explaining their innocence in the face of accusations made by the government, and asking for fairness in any upcoming trial of seven Bahá'í prisoners.

Sent late yesterday by email to Ayatollah Qorban-Ali Dorri-Najafabadi, the letter also suggests that the government's continued oppression of Bahá'ís will ultimately have a wide impact on Iranian society as a whole.

"Your Honor, the decisions to be taken by the judiciary in Iran in the coming days will have implications that extend well beyond the Bahá'í community in that land -- what is at stake is the very cause of the freedom of conscience for all the peoples of your nation," said the six-page letter, dated 4 March 2009.

"It is our hope that, for the sanctity of Islam and the honor of Iran, the judiciary will be fair in its judgment."

The letter comes after a series of statements from Ayatollah Najafabadi quoted in the Iranian news media leveling charges at the Bahá'ís and stating that the ad hoc arrangements that tend to the spiritual and social affairs of the Bahá'í community of Iran are illegal.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran will not allow any movement to harm the national security through illegal and unauthorized organizational activities," he said, referring specifically to Bahá'ís, according to an account published by the Islamic Republic News Agency.

The seven members of the group that had been coordinating the affairs of the Bahá'ís at the national level and who have been in prison for some 10 months, responded to the declaration from their prison cell. They stated that if the current arrangements for administering the affairs of the Bahá'í community are no longer acceptable to the

government, to bring them to a close would not present a major obstacle. They said this is now being done, to further demonstrate the goodwill that the Bahá'ís have consistently shown to the government for the past thirty years.

The letter, which was also sent to the Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations and published late yesterday on the Web site of the United Nations office of the Bahá'í International Community, carefully outlines the facts of the oppression of the Iranian Bahá'í community since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979.

“While the harassment and ill-treatment of Bahá'ís continued uninterrupted during this period, they have been taken to new levels of intensity in recent years as certain elements that have historically been bent on the destruction of the Bahá'í community have assumed growing influence in the affairs of the country,” says the Bahá'í International Community in the communication.

It notes that it was only in response to that persecution that small ad hoc groups were set up to “tend to the spiritual and social needs” of Iran’s 300,000 Bahá'ís – and that for more than 20 years the government has worked with those structures.

At the national level, the group was known as the “Yaran,” which means “Friends” in Persian. The “Khademin,” or “Those Who Serve,” performed a similar function at the local level.

“Then last year the seven members of the Yaran were imprisoned, one of them in March and the remaining six in May. ... The conditions of their incarceration have varied in degree of severity over the course of the past several months, with the five male members confined at one time to a cell no more than ten square meters in size, with no bed,” the Bahá'í International Community points out.

The seven are Mrs. Fariba Kamalabadi, Mr. Jamaloddin Khanjani, Mr. Afif Naeimi, Mr. Saeid Rezaie, Mrs. Mahvash Sabet, Mr. Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Mr. Vahid Tizfahm. All but one of the group were arrested on 14 May 2008 at their homes in Tehran. Mrs. Sabet was arrested on 5 March 2008 while in Mashhad.

“Finally,” the letter continues, “after some nine months of imprisonment, during which time not a shred of evidence could be found linking the members of the Yaran to any wrongdoing, they were accused of ‘espionage for Israel, insulting religious sanctities and propaganda against the Islamic Republic,’ and it has been announced that their case will soon be submitted to court with a request for indictment.

“This announcement was followed almost immediately by news reports which indicated that you had written to the Minister of Intelligence stating that the existence of the Yaran and the Khademin in Iran is illegal, while at the same time raising the question of the constitutional right of Iranian citizens to freedom of belief. You then made an official announcement to this effect.

“Your Honor, the events of recent years and the nature of the accusations made raise questions in the mind of every unbiased observer as to the intent behind the systematic perpetration of injustice against the Bahá’ís of Iran. Even if there might have been some misunderstandings about the motives of the Bahá’í community during the early turbulent days of the revolution, how can such suspicions persist today? Can it be that any member of the esteemed government of Iran truly believes the false accusations which have been perpetuated about the Bahá’ís in that country?”

The letter also notes that many prominent Iranians have recently arisen to defend Bahá’ís, linking the overall struggle for human rights in Iran and the situation of the Bahá’ís.

“And we hear in the voices raised by so many Iranians in defense of their Bahá’í compatriots echoes from their country’s glorious past. What we cannot help noting, with much gratitude towards them in our hearts, is that a majority of those coming out in support of the beleaguered Bahá’í community are themselves suffering similar oppression as students and academics, as journalists and social activists, as artists and poets, as progressive thinkers and proponents of women’s rights, and even as ordinary citizens.”

To read the full letter, go to:

<http://bic.org/areas-of-work/persecution/prosecutor-general-iran-en.pdf>

To read the letter in Persian, go to:

<http://bic.org/areas-of-work/persecution/prosecutor-general-iran-fa.pdf>

For more information, go to <http://news.bahai.org>