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PRESS RELEASE

Baha'i International Community

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Arsonists threaten reprisals if Baha'is befriend Muslims

GENEVA, 16 January 2011 (BWNS) -- A recent wave of arson attacks on Baha'i-owned businesses in Rafsanjan, Iran, appears to be part of a campaign to fracture relationships between Baha'is and Muslims in the city.

After around a dozen attacks on shops -- carried out since 25 October 2010 -- some 20 Baha'i homes and businesses have been sent a warning letter addressed to "members of the misguided Bahaist sect."

The anonymous document demands that Baha'is sign an undertaking to "refrain from forming contacts or friendships with Muslims" and from "using or hiring Muslim trainees." The Baha'is are also told not to teach their Faith, including on the Internet.

Should the conditions be accepted by the recipients, the letter states, "we will guarantee not to wage any attack on your life and properties."

"For more than two months now, innocent Baha'is have been having their businesses fire-bombed," said Diane Ala'i, the Baha'i International Community representative to the United Nations in Geneva. "Some of them have suffered more than one arson attack on their properties."

"Now, in addition to their livelihoods, their very lives are being threatened unless they promise to isolate themselves from their friends and neighbours," she said.

"What are the perpetrators of such attacks and threats hoping to achieve?" asked Ms. Ala'i. "All it demonstrates for the whole world to see is the religiously motivated hatred being fomented by certain elements in Iranian society."

Ms. Ala'i noted that Baha'is have approached local authorities asking for an investigation. "But nothing has been done," she said.

"Unbelievably, they've even been accused by some of starting the fires themselves, under instruction from foreign governments."

The attackers have particularly targeted household furniture repair businesses, home appliance and optical stores owned by Baha'is.

On 15 November, for example, fires were started in two appliance sales and repair shops, causing damage that exceeded tens of thousands of US dollars. One of the shopkeepers subsequently rented a neighboring property to continue his trade and installed a security door. One month later, despite the precautions, attackers managed to force an explosive substance into the shop through a hole they made in the roof, resulting in a blast that blew the door five meters into the air and shattered windows.

Most recently, on 2 January, another repair shop was set ablaze when a hose pumped a flammable liquid past metal sheets the owner had installed for protection.

A newsletter published by a Muslim cultural foundation in Rafsanjan stated that the attacks have been provoked by the fact that some trades have been "monopolized" by Baha'is in the city. A Muslim-owned coffee shop was also set ablaze after the newsletter mistakenly identified it as Baha'i-owned.

"Economic pressure on Iran's Baha'i community is already acute, with both jobs and business licenses being denied to Baha'is," said Diane Ala'i.

"These attacks and threats are yet another, particularly vicious form of persecution against ordinary citizens who are simply trying to earn their living and practice their faith."

On 21 December, the United Nations confirmed a resolution that expressed "deep concern at serious ongoing and recurring human rights violations" in Iran. The resolution specifically condemned Iran's discrimination against minorities, including members of the Baha'i Faith.

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