

PRESS RELEASE

Baha'i International Community

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Persecution intensifies as former Baha'i leaders mark anniversary behind bars

GENEVA – Iran's former Baha'i leaders begin their fifth year in prison today amid an intensification of the persecution of their co-religionists.

The seven prisoners each face the bleak prospect of 16 more years in jail for crimes they did not commit. Next week also marks the first anniversary of raids on homes of Baha'is associated with an informal initiative offering higher education to community members barred from university. Nine educators later received harsh prison sentences.

The detention and conviction of these and other Baha'is is a reflection of the oppression facing all Iranians who desire freedom and the progress of their country, said the Universal House of Justice in a letter dated 11 May 2012 sent to the Baha'is of Iran.

In its message, the Universal House of Justice noted how the intensifying cruelty towards the Iranian Baha'i community is now also engulfing children. Among recent attacks, the letter highlighted the confinement in prison for a few days of a two-year old boy with his mother, the beating and burning of the hand of a school pupil by her teacher after the girl did not take part in congregational prayers, and the violent abduction by officials of a mother before the eyes of her two young children.

"From schoolchildren to the elderly, from the seven former leaders to ordinary villagers, no Baha'i in Iran is spared the cruel and calculated persecution which the Iranian government and its agents are constantly devising," said Diane Ala'i, the Baha'i International Community's representative to the United Nations in Geneva.

The seven former leaders have been given the longest sentences – 20 years each – of any of the prisoners of conscience currently held in Iranian jails, Ms. Ala'i added. "Conditions are harsh with poor food and bad sanitation and most of them have experienced significant health problems. Yet during these four years, not one of them has been granted any type of furlough – something to which a prisoner is entitled under Iranian law."

The Universal House of Justice observed in its letter that, over the past year, governments and organizations have continued to defend the rights of Baha'is and other oppressed Iranians. Among such supporters, statesmen and officials – including some Muslim politicians in both the East and the West – civil agencies, universities and prominent personalities have declared the persecution of Baha'is to be unjust and have called for it to cease.

Recent action has included the unanimous passing of a resolution in the United States Senate – on 29 March – calling for the release of the seven former leaders. Three days later, the plight of the prisoners captured the public's attention in 12 of the world's major cities, when widespread publicity marked the combined total of 10,000 days that the seven had spent behind bars.

Fair-minded Iranians, including artists, are also defending the rights of their oppressed Baha'i compatriots and demanding their freedom, noted the Universal House of Justice.

"Blind prejudice and superstition pervades Iran today and irreparable damage has been done to the name and reputation of Islam," said Diane Ala'i. "We welcome and join with every effort made by people of good will – both in Iran and around the world – to condemn the extent and violence of the oppressions faced by the people of Iran."

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