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PRESS RELEASE

Baha'i International Community

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Grave concern for safety of Iran's imprisoned Baha'i leaders

NEW YORK, 15 February 2011 - Iran's seven imprisoned Baha'i leaders have been transferred to more brutal sections of their prison complex.

In the case of the two Baha'i women, the circumstances of the move have raised concerns that it may have been orchestrated as a means of creating an insecure environment that threatens their lives.

The Baha'i International Community has learned that one of them - Fariba Kamalabadi - has already been physically threatened by inmates since being sent to the notorious Section 200 of Gohardasht Prison.

"Apparently, the atmosphere is highly charged in this section, and there is a great deal of tension and animosity among the inmates," said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Baha'i International Community to the United Nations.

Mrs. Kamalabadi was transferred to Section 200 on Saturday, along with Mahvash Sabet.

"It is difficult to be certain about the reason for the move," said Ms. Dugal. "However we believe that, since their arrival at Gohardasht, the Baha'i women – despite their own extremely challenging situation – have nonetheless been a constant source of comfort and hope to other inmates. The prison authorities apparently became alarmed that the two women began to receive signs of respect from a growing number of prisoners. As a justification for the increased harsh treatment, the authorities accused the two of teaching the Baha'i Faith."

Throughout their entire imprisonment, added Ms. Dugal, the two women have conducted themselves in a spirit of service to others. In early 2009, for example, they shared a cell at Evin prison with Iranian-Japanese-American journalist Roxana Saberi, who later wrote that they had helped her through her ordeal.

Last week, a general announcement was made to all prisoners that they were not to have any contact with the two Baha'i women. Undeterred, however, fellow inmates continued to seek them out.

"After the women were transferred, a number of prisoners made their way downstairs to visit them in their new quarters, despite efforts by the guards to restrain them," said Ms. Dugal.

Mrs. Kamalabadi and Mrs. Sabet were told that - prior to the move - the inmates in Section 200 had been "warned" about them, she said.

Harsh and unsanitary conditions

The seven Baha'i leaders were sent to Gohardasht prison, 20 kilometers west of Tehran, in August last year. Having previously been incarcerated in Tehran's Evin prison without charge for 20 months, they were accused of espionage and the establishment of an illegal administration among other allegations. All the charges were denied. After a brief trial, they were sentenced to 10 years in prison.

While Gohardasht is infamous for its harsh and unsanitary conditions, the Baha'i prisoners were at first kept segregated from some of the more violent elements at the complex. They also had relatively frequent access to outdoor exercise areas.

But over the past few weeks, all seven of them have been moved from the quarters they originally occupied into sections where conditions are much worse.

The five men were transferred three weeks ago to a wing set aside for political prisoners, known as Section 4, which is more crowded and reportedly under close surveillance. They are now suffering severe physical deprivations.

"Three of them are together in one cell, with the other two sharing another cell," said Ms. Dugal. "There are two beds in each cell, so one of them has to sleep on the floor."

"The inmates in this part of the prison are able to go outside for fresh air only at designated times, whereas previously they could do so whenever they wished," said Ms. Dugal.

Appeal to governments

"In our open letter of 7 December 2010 to the head of Iran's judiciary, we stressed that such an odious and degrading environment is unworthy of even the most dangerous criminals," said Ms. Dugal.

"We say to the Iranian government once again – does it believe the principles of Islamic compassion and justice to be consistent with the imposition of such conditions on innocent citizens?"

"We continue to call upon governments and people of good-will throughout the world to take whatever action they can to impress upon the Iranian government that its actions are being watched, and that it will be held responsible for the safety of these and the more than 50 other Baha'is who are imprisoned throughout Iran," said Ms. Dugal.

More details >>

Before their arrest in 2008, the seven - Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Saeid Rezaie, Mahvash Sabet, Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Vahid Tizfahm - were members of a national-level group that helped see to the minimum needs of Iran's 300,000-strong Baha'i community.

Reports of the trial and sentencing of the Baha'i leaders provoked a worldwide chorus of condemnation from governments - including Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the U.K. and the U.S.A. The European Union, and the President of the European Parliament also joined the global protest, along with numerous human rights organizations, other groups and countless individuals.

On 21 December last year, 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.