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PRESS RELEASE

Baha'i International Community

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Four Iranian Baha'is released while eight remain in prison

NEW YORK — Four Baha'is involved with the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), who had been unjustly imprisoned in Iran four years ago, have been released after completing their sentences, while concern remains for eight others who are still languishing in jail.

Mr. Ramin Zibaie, Mr. Farhad Sedghi, Ms. Noushin Khadem and Mr. Mahmoud Badavam were arrested on 21 May 2011 in a coordinated raid during which some 17 Baha'is from several cities across Iran were arrested because of their involvement in the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education -- an informal initiative for providing university-level studies to Baha'i youth deprived of the right to higher education in the country.

“The Baha'i International Community is pleased with the release of these prisoners who were forced to spend four years of their lives confined to their prison cells only for assisting young people to study,” said Ms. Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Baha'i International Community to the United Nations. “However, we are still very concerned about the eight others who remain in prison for charges related to the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education. It is also equally worrying that over 100 Baha'is continue to languish in Iranian jails.”

Immediately after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Baha'i students were expelled from the nation's universities and Baha'i professors and lecturers dismissed from their positions. After years of efforts to get the government to reverse its decision, in order to meet the needs of the youth to gain education, the Baha'i community made some informal arrangements to use the voluntary services of dismissed Baha'i professors to provide an education to the deprived Baha'i youth. The participants did not expect to receive an official degree, nor was anyone promised any other benefit such as prospects of employment. However, even this initiative is considered illegal by the government of Iran.

“It is as though one were to deny certain citizens access to available food supplies and when they undertake with untold hardship to cultivate their backyards in order to survive, declare their efforts illegal and destroy their crop,” said Ms. Dugal. “Persistence in these dehumanizing acts serves only to expose the irrational determination of the authorities to

block the social and economic progress of the Baha'is.”

The Baha'is who were arrested in May 2011 were tried between September-October 2011. Mr. Badavam, Mr. Zibaie, Ms. Khadem and Mr. Sedghi were, on two separate days, taken to court and informed of their verdicts, whilst in handcuffs and with their ankles chained.

No written copy of the verdicts was provided to the prisoners or their lawyers. However, transcripts made by those present at the hearing as well as the accusations leveled against some later indicate that the Baha'is were found guilty of such charges as “ membership of the deviant Bahaist sect with the goal of taking actions against the security of the country” and “ collaboration with the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education.”

“The assertions made against these individuals were vague and completely without foundation, and designated their actions as illegal,” said Ms. Dugal. “The question is, what is illegal? To study? To learn? To accompany others in their quest to gain knowledge? Why debar Baha'i youth from studying or gathering together to learn, or disallow a dismissed professor from sharing his or her learning with young people who are deprived of higher education? And why imprison those who teach science and other subjects at home to these youth?”

“Ultimately, what is illegal, a government policy that excludes its citizens from higher education on the basis of their religious affiliates or the efforts of a community to educate its own youth? The four Baha'is who have been released, and those still imprisoned, are ordinary individuals who were exercising their basic human rights,” she said.

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