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Iran fails to address calls for greater religious freedom

GENEVA – Iran's response during a major review of its human rights record today failed to adequately address repeated calls by other governments here for greater respect for religious freedom and an end to discrimination against religious minorities, including Baha'is.

"Sadly, what we saw at today's Human Rights Council session was an attempt to gloss over the issue of religious discrimination, repeatedly cited as a concern by other governments," said Diane Ala'i, the Baha'i International Community's representative to the United Nations in Geneva.

"And in response to questions posed by member states about Bahá'ís, Iran's representative once again completely distorted the facts and hypocritically stated that Baha'is enjoy all citizenship rights.

"If there were the least thread of truth in what he said, why then on Saturday were at least 79 Bahá'í-owned shops in Kerman, Rafsanjan, and Jiroft, summarily closed by officials because proprietors had stopped doing business to observe a recent Baha'i holy day. Those closures obviously violate the freedom of these Iranian citizens to practice their religion," said Ms. Ala'i.

"Moreover, why has it been over 30 years since Baha'is have been officially allowed to attend university or work in the public sector or even be gainfully employed in their own businesses?" said Ms. Ala'i.

Ms. Ala'i noted that governments from every region raised the issue of religious tolerance in Iran, and that concern over the treatment of Baha'is – along with Christians, Sunni Muslims, and Sufis – were frequently and specifically raised.

She further noted that governments also repeatedly raised concern over evidence of widespread discrimination against women, the imprisonment of journalists and human rights defenders, and the excessive use of the death penalty, especially in the absence of legal due process.

"Sadly, the comments made by Iran's representatives once again were clearly nothing less than prevarication, whether it be on the issue of religious freedom, freedom of the press or

assembly, or due process in legal proceedings,” said Ms. Ala’i.

Ms. Ala’i noted that Iran’s representatives also tried to introduce the concept of the “multicultural universality of human rights.”

“Such a concept would give the government a license to interpret international human rights law as it pleases, something it is already doing in the case of the Baha’is and women, among others” said Ms. Ala’i.

Today’s session represented a once-in-four-years review before the Human Rights Council, a process known as Universal Periodic Review (UPR). More than 100 governments made statements, submitted questions or offered recommendations to Iran.

There are currently more than 100 Baha’is in prison in Iran. Baha’is are also denied access to higher education and officially discriminated against in many categories of employment. The government has also waged a well-documented hate campaign against Baha’is in the news media and severely restricted their right to practice their religion freely.

Iran last faced a UPR in February 2010. At that session, members of the Council made 188 recommendations on how Iran could improve its adherence to international human rights law. Iran “accepted” or promised to fulfill some 123 of those recommendations – at least 34 of which specifically affect Baha’is and their situation.

Yet Iran has utterly failed to implement any of those previous 34 recommendations, a fact documented in a recent report of the BIC titled “Unfulfilled Promises.” The Baha’i Faith is the largest non-Muslim religious minority in Iran.

“How Iran treats their Baha’i citizens is really a litmus test on how the government respects the rights of all its citizens,” said Ms. Ala’i. “Baha’is are entirely non-violent and pose no threat to the government, and so there is no reason it cannot simply and reasonably uphold their rights.”

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