

3 Bahai Sect Members Executed, Iran Reports

BEIRUT (AP)—Three Iranians, members of the Bahai religious sect, have been executed on charges of preaching their faith and spying for Israel, the official Iranian news agency Pars said Wednesday.

The three were executed Monday after a trial before the Islamic Revolutionary Court in Shiraz, a southern Iranian city, the agency said. The sect said a firing squad carried out the executions.

In Wilmette, Ill., the Bahai National Center issued a statement saying the executed Iranians were "innocent victims of a campaign to eradicate the Bahai community in Iran."

Pars said that defendant Mehdi Anvari Nafti was charged with having close contacts with an organization in Haifa, Israel, that Pars described as "a Zionist venture of espionage."

Another defendant, identified as "Colonel Vahdat," was accused of being "one of the foremost Zionist spies who cooperated with the Savak (the secret police under the Shah of Iran) and with recent insurgencies."

Pars said the third defendant, known as Hedayatollah Dehkani, was accused of "misleading undiscerning people, especially in rural regions, and receiving correspondence encouraging his activity from the national circle (leadership) of the Bahais."

The Bahai religious sect is an offshoot of Babism, a Persian religion founded in Iran in 1844. It espouses universal brotherhood and social equality and commands a considerable following in the United States, with 7,000 churches. The faith will not disclose the number of its followers.

The faith is considered heretical to Islam and is banned in most Arab countries as well as Iran, which is Persian but Muslim.

Iran's Islamic constitution does not recognize the Bahai faith. Its world headquarters is in Haifa, at the site of the tomb of its founder, who was buried there in the 19th Century, before the birth of the Zionist state of Israel.

Bahai leaders say that although their headquarters is in Haifa, they have no connection with Zionism.

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