

... And barbarity in Iran

AS OFFENSIVE AS Iran's behavior at the United Nations may be, and as dangerous to peace and innocent lives as its sponsorship of international terrorism is, perhaps the ultimate measure of the Khomeini regime in Teheran is the way it is treating its own citizen minorities. According to Amnesty International, whose credentials are as good as any, at least 144 members of the Bahai faith in Iran have been executed or assassinated by the government or its agents. Their principal "crime"? Adherence to their faith, and their refusal to convert to Islam.

Last June, 16 Bahai women were hanged after they refused to recant and convert. Another 130 were dispossessed of their property, confined for three days without food or water, then released to the fury of a mob. They escaped death by hiding in a forest outside their village. Bahai leaders have been executed on trumped-up spying charges. Even children have been among those executed for what is officially condemned as heresy in Iran.

AND WHY ARE the Bahai — in contrast with other religions and sects, which may be discriminated against but are officially tolerated — so detestable in the sight of the fanatical mullahs who rule in Teheran? Presumably because their faith, an eclectic one founded in Iran some 140 years ago, preaches the kind of tolerance that is so at odds with the Khomeini brand of Islam: equality of all races and religions, the equality of men and women, intellectual freedom, universal education and — heresy of heresies — world peace. Obviously such a doctrine, if widely followed in Iran, would undercut the regime's efforts to keep the populace in a constant state of fury and hate for all that is alien to the official line.

Pleas for an end to persecution of the 300,000 Iranian Bahai have been made to Khomeini by world leaders, including President

Reagan, and by a number of international organizations, including the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva — but not, notably, the U.N. General Assembly in New York. Efforts to bring the issue to the Assembly floor for debate have failed even to turn up a single government willing to offend Iran by sponsoring such a move.

The Bahai are not the only ones to suffer in Iran, of course. Amnesty International has received reports of more than 5,000 executions, which it regards as an "absolute minimum." But the barbarous treatment the Bahai have received is so monstrous that it demands a special response from civilized nations, whose only recourse is to focus greater attention on what amounts to no less than genocide.



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