



A Litmus Test for Iran

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In recent statements, the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran has talked of humanity's entry into a "new century of humanity, understanding, and durable peace."

Emphasizing the role of Iran in building a civilization associated with such principles, President Mohammad Khatami spoke of the importance of "religiosity, liberty and justice," stating that these are "the assets and aspirations of the Islamic revolution as it enters the 21st century."

President Khatami also emphasized the importance of the rule of law, saying that "we should carefully prepare the ground for the implementation of law in our society."

The Bahá'í International Community welcomes such statements, in the hope that they will soon be followed by concrete actions leading to the full emancipation of Iran's Bahá'í community, which is composed of some 300,000 adherents and represents the largest religious minority in Iran.

At the present time, the Bahá'ís of Iran face a continuing religious persecution. Since the Islamic Republic was founded in 1979, more than 200 Bahá'ís have been killed, hundreds have been imprisoned and thousands have lost property and access to higher education. Last July, two Bahá'ís in Iran were killed under suspicious circumstances. Currently, some 15 Bahá'ís are in prison and the community as a whole is deprived of freedom of worship.

In December, the United Nations General Assembly expressed concern over these and other examples of persecution and called for the complete "emancipation" of the Bahá'ís of Iran. [See page 6] The United Nations resolution followed a report in October by a UN special rapporteur on human rights, Prof. Maurice Copithorne, which outlined the extent of continuing persecution and documented the recent killings and other examples of oppression.

Further, as Prof. Copithorne and other United Nations investigators have indicated, the Bahá'ís of Iran have been persecuted solely for their religious belief.

As many observers have long pointed out, the Bahá'ís of Iran pose no threat to the Government. Their religious principles call on them to obey the law, to refrain from involvement in partisan politics and to practice non-violence. They seek wholeheartedly to join with their countrymen in an atmosphere of religious freedom to help in the construction of a more just and prosperous Iranian nation.

Of special concern to the Bahá'ís of Iran, however, is the lack of legal protections for their right to freedom of belief - a right upheld by several international covenants to which the Government of Iran is a party. Even if specific incidents of persecution were to abate significantly, Iran's Bahá'ís would remain unprotected by the Iranian constitution from random acts of violence.

In 1993, a secret Iranian Government document surfaced. Written in 1991 by the Secretary of the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council, the memorandum outlined a government blueprint for the quiet strangulation of Iran's Bahá'í community, stating specifically that their treatment should be "such that their progress and development should be blocked" and spelling out a series of guidelines for achieving such a goal.

To this day, the Government has not retracted this document or offered any indication that it has changed its mind about its long-held and deep-seated determination to eradicate the Bahá'í community

of Iran.

As the world community searches for a way to determine whether the new words from Iran constitute real change, tangible actions to end some 19 years of oppression and securely establish freedom for Bahá'ís to worship without fear would offer a singular litmus test as to whether the Government of Iran has indeed set itself on a new course.

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