

# Baha'i members fear group's extinction in Iran

By Bethany Korwin  
Tribune Staff Writer

The recent hangings of 16 members of the Baha'i religion — 10 of them women — in Iran brought a small group of Eastbay believers together last week to talk about their faith.

Baha'i is in danger of being wiped out in Iran, the country of the religion's origin 139 years ago, the representatives said.

Baha'i, with about 4 million members worldwide and about 150 in the Eastbay, emphasizes universal spirituality and world peace, in the belief that those things lead to social stability and human equality.

The family home of Charles and Betty Garcia serves as the spiritual center of the Baha'i group in Oakland, where there are 65 members.

Iran's efforts to exterminate Baha'i was expected to be the subject of an ABC 20/20 segment Thursday night, but it apparently was pre-empted by a report on Poland and the lifting of martial law.

The Garcias and their guests said Baha'is in Iran today are attacked as spies, American agents, prostitutes and Zionists by the Moslem fundamentalist government.

Most of the 140 Baha'i members executed since the 1978 revolution in Iran have been, like the Garcias, elected officials of local spiritual assemblies, according to Richard McLaughlin, who belongs to the Baha'i chapter in San Leandro.

The 16 executed on June 18 and 19



Eastbay members of Baha'i religious faith discuss their faith; from left, Richard McLaughlin, Betty Garcia, Charles Garcia III, William Twitty, Charles Garcia Jr., Anthony Chicca.

were the first exceptions to the rule. Most of the 10 women who were hanged on the 18th in Shiraz, the birthplace and a stronghold of the faith, were Baha'i teachers, McLaughlin said.

"They were executed for teaching the faith," said McLaughlin, 33, a police officer for Peralta Colleges.

"The schools, along with jobs, and even the right to shop for food" are being

taken away from Baha'is in Iran, said Bill Twitty, chairman of the Oakland center.

"It is clearly a religious persecution," Twitty said. Baha'is follow the laws of the country in which they live, he said, and they don't involve themselves in politics.

The Baha'i ethic, Twitty said, is pragmatic almost to the point of being puritanical. "We have a big work ethic," said Twitty, 47, a mortgage loan counselor.

"Work is a form of worship," said Betty Garcia, the group secretary. "We all do useful work for humanity."

She said Baha'i members aren't allowed to proselytize. They believe that all religions are one anyway and that there is an inexorable progression in human faith. Therefore the Baha'i prophet, Bahauallah, is a spiritual descendant of Moses, Jesus and Mohammed.

Twitty said it was an "ironic" advantage of the persecution in Iran that the faith is thereby becoming known by more people.

"But that is the history of faith," he said. "Blood spilled leads to crisis and then to triumph."

## Envoy denies Baha'i singled out

By Wanda MacClarín  
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The Iranian ambassador to the United Nations last week said many Iranians are extremely antagonistic to members of the Baha'i religion, and that his government considers Baha'i not a religion but a hostile political movement — but he denied that the Baha'i members in Iran are persecuted for their faith alone.

Dr. Said Rajate Khorassani, who heads the U.N. mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran, responded in a telephone interview from New York to the statements of the Eastbay Baha'i group members, who believe their co-religionists in Iran are harassed, imprisoned and executed in an effort to stamp out their faith.

"We believe Baha'i is not a faith. It is not a religion," Khorassani said. "It is a political movement strongly sup-

ported by the superpowers and the Zionists."

Khorassani said that if there is enough evidence that the Baha'i members in Iran are "Zionist agents, prostitutes, or American agents," they are punished accordingly in Islamic courts.

He went on to say that a good number of Moslems have also been found guilty of those "crimes," and they were imprisoned or executed just as Baha'i group members have been.

"The principles of Islam do not require that Baha'i members be persecuted merely for being Baha'i members," Khorassani said, but added:

"If the principles of Islam required persecuting individuals because of the group they belong to, we would do that too, without apology. It is not of great concern. We are concerned with divine satisfaction, not public satisfaction."

He went on to say that the princi-

ples of Islam would not change on this matter, but his understanding of those principles might change.

As for Baha'i members in Iran losing their jobs, right to attend school or right to shop for food, Khorassani said, "I think this is nonsense," but he then qualified his statement.

He said Baha'i members can attend public schools but teachers must be "meticulously clean and decent" in their Islamic faith, so Baha'i teachers are expelled from Iranian schools along with communist teachers. He said he did not know about restrictions on other jobs for Baha'i members.

As for Baha'i members being unable to shop for food, Khorassani said it is possible that Iranian people might occasionally prevent them, because "People have a very strong negative attitude and negative emotions against the Baha'is."

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