

Bahais are desperately trying to stop persecution in Iran

By Michael Precker
Dallas Morning News

HAIFA, Israel — Through secret channels to the West, word of the Iranian government's campaign against the Bahai faith reaches its international headquarters on the wooded, picturesque hillside of Mount Carmel.

As the news of killings, disappearances and economic persecution comes in, Bahai leaders work desperately to publicize their cause and to mobilize world opinion with a steady stream of booklets and news releases, hoping to change the policies of the Islamic revolutionary government of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

"It is a systematic campaign, and it is intensifying," said Donald Barrett, a Californian who serves as secretary-general of the Bahai international community, which numbers 2 million people in more than 100 countries. "The sole purpose is to exterminate the Bahai faith in Iran."

Latest episodes

Some of the latest episodes of violence cited by the Bahais include:

✓ In June, 12 men and 10 women were hanged in the Iranian city of Shiraz after refusing to save themselves by recanting their Bahai faith. Khomeini refused an appeal from President Reagan to spare their lives, declaring that Reagan's intervention proved the 22 were American and Zionist agents.

By Bahai count, the hangings brought the number of Bahais executed by the government since the 1979 Iranian revolution to 132. Another 14 have disappeared, at least 200 remain in prison, and the number murdered by Islamic zealots in the countryside is difficult to determine.

✓ In June, 130 Bahai men, women and children were rounded up in the village of Ival and held for three days in an open field without food, water or shelter from the sun. After constant harangues, they were released, but Barrett said the incident illustrated the growing campaign of intimidation against

“We are not an enemy of Islam. We accept Mohammed as a prophet, but they cannot accept any other prophet after Mohammed.”

— Bahai official Donald Barrett

the 300,000 Iranian Bahais, most of whom live in villages.

✓ In early July two prominent Iranian Bahais, Jahangir Hidayati and Ahmad Bashiri, were kidnapped on the streets of Tehran. Authorities refuse to provide information or even acknowledge they were detained, raising fears the two may never be seen again.

The Bahais have urged Iran to permit an independent investigation by the United Nations or any other independent organization, but Iran has refused the request.

Regarded as heretics by Moslems, Bahais have suffered persecution in Iran since a Persian merchant declared himself the founder of a new religion 133 years ago. Known as the "Bab" (gate in Arabic), he began preaching — despite warnings from Moslem authorities — that his religion would usher in an era of peace and brotherhood. He was executed by a 750-man firing squad in 1850.

"Messenger"

Thirteen years later a Tehran nobleman proclaimed he was the messenger of God predicted by the Bab as the successor to Abraham, Moses, Zoro-

aster, Buddha, Krishna, Christ and Mohammed. He called himself the Baha'u'llah — "Glory of God" in Arabic and his followers "Bahai."

Baha'u'llah was exiled and imprisoned in Palestine but later was freed to spend the rest of his life in Acre, 10 miles north of Haifa. His tomb, in a landscaped garden near Acre, and the golden-domed shrine of the Bab in Haifa, are the two holiest spots for Bahais.

The religious differences between Islam and the Bahais now are compounded by a geographic twist of fate: In Khomeini's eyes, the Bahais are synonymous with the "Great Satan" of Zionism.

"Bahais naturally turn here," Barrett said. "Their holy places are here, their world center is here. They contribute to the building and the upkeep. Their passports are stamped with Israeli visas."

"The Iranians say, 'Here's the proof that Bahais are spies for Israel and Zionism,'" he said. "It's so easy to prove that is a false charge."

No clergy

The Bahai faith espouses a mixture of puritanism, racial and sexual equality and a Utopian view that all mankind will eventually unite in harmony and world government; there is no clergy and almost no liturgy, but Bahais are urged to study Bahai teachings and pray daily. Alcohol, drugs and extramarital sex are banned, and a strong family life is stressed.

Theologically, Bahais accept all the prophets of major world religions, but regard their own teachings as the latest in a series of "progressive revelations" throughout history.

"The beauty of Bahai teachings is that it doesn't deny the truth of other great religions," Barrett said. "It provides the key to understanding them all."

But the universalist doctrine poses a challenge to Islam, which regards Mohammed as the final and most important prophet. "We are not an enemy of Islam," Barrett said. "We accept Mohammed as a prophet, but they cannot accept any other prophet after Mohammed, and to them that makes us her-

etics."

From the start, Bahais have paid the price for their dissent. An estimated 20,000 early followers of the Bab and Baha'u'llah were put to death, and in the Moslem world only Iran has a sizeable Bahai community.

Barrett acknowledged that Iranian Bahais were urged to flee Iran before Khomeini took power, and about 10,000 did. Because Islamic fundamentalists view Bahais as Moslem dissidents, not a separate religion, their religious freedom is not protected under the Iranian Constitution.

Three stages of persecution

Barrett, a former senior legal counsel for Gulf Oil, said the persecution under the Khomeini regime developed in three stages. Shortly after the revolution, the nine members of the National Spiritual Assembly, the highest Bahai authority in Iran, disappeared and are presumed to have been murdered.

When nine men were elected in their place, all were arrested and executed when they refused to renounce their faith. Other prominent Bahais met the same fate.

The second stage, Barrett said, was economic strangulation. Bahai property and financial holdings were seized, and holy places desecrated. Bahais were fired from their jobs and denied pensions, their children expelled from school.

The final stage, the Bahais believe, is mass intimidation of believers. Stories abound of mobs attacking Bahais throughout Iran, destroying property, seizing teen-age girls to be married to Moslems against their will and murdering men and women who refuse to recant.

Through it all Bahais around the world have remained quiet, partly because their faith proscribes noisy political action and partly because diplomacy seemed the best way to deal with Khomeini.

Soviet construction boss reportedly has been ousted

The New York Times

The head of the Soviet Union's construction industry has left his post as deputy premier, in what appears to be one of the highest-level demotions since Yuri V. Andropov took charge last year.

According to recent Soviet press reports, the official, Ignati T. Novikov, 76, asked to be relieved of his duties so he could go into retirement.

The reports were not accompanied by the usual expression of gratitude for services rendered, which has become common under Andropov when leading officials leave the government on reaching retirement age.

In addition to being one of a dozen or so deputy premiers, Novikov was chairman of the State Committee for Construction Affairs, a powerful government agency that supervises the specialized construction ministries.

His retirement follows criticism by the ruling Politburo of delays in the construction of the Atomash nuclear-reactor fabricating plant and the associated town of Volgodosk on the Don River. Atomash is considered the key to the program of nuclear power development, and the delays have put the manufacture of reactors and their installation behind schedule.

SPECIAL BULLETIN

J.M. McDonald's

BP000537