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# Baha'is gain support for bid to worship in peace

By Ken Kusmer

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HAIFA, Israel

**T**he solemnity of the Baha'i World Center dominates picturesque Mt. Carmel. The golden-domed Shrine of the Bab glistens in the hot summer sun and two white marble edifices stand amid rows of manicured gardens.

The tranquility here differs dramatically from the mood 750 miles away in Iran, where another ugly chapter in the faith's brief history is unfolding. Baha'is there are imprisoned, sent to the gallows or forced from their jobs by a government that considers them heretics, subversives, prostitutes and Zionist spies. Baha'i shrines have been bulldozed.

In June, the situation in Iran deteriorated drastically. The fundamentalist Islamic regime of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini scoffed at an appeal by President Reagan for the lives of 22 Baha'is and executed 17 of them in the space of two weeks. The World Center said two other prominent Baha'is were kidnaped on the streets of Tehran, while 130 Baha'i men, women and children were held captive by neighboring villagers and pressured to recant their faith.

"We are alarmed and very concerned that the extent and the intensity (of the persecution) may be increasing," said Donald Barrett, secretary-general of the Baha'i international organization.

Jewish author Elie Wiesel, the chairman of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial, recently suggested that the U.N. Human Rights Commission probe the plight of the Baha'is in Iran.

"We all vowed after the Nazi outrages —

never again. Now is the time to act on that vow," Wiesel said.

The Baha'i leadership says that since the Khomeini regime gained power in 1979, 142 Baha'is have been killed and 14 are missing and presumed dead. About 275 are imprisoned.

Baha'ism, often erroneously referred to as an Islamic sect, embraces the unity of all religions, and besides Mohammed, it considers among its prophets Moses, Jesus, Buddha, Krishna and Zoroaster, as well as its own prophets.

"We are not a sect. We are not a section or part of anything," Barrett said.

The United Nations, the European Common Market, the U.S. Congress and the national parliaments of Canada, Australia, Fiji and West Germany have passed resolutions condemning the persecution.

As secretary-general, Barrett represents Baha'i concerns on behalf of the top Baha'i administrative body, the International House of Justice. A silver-haired, affable American and former senior legal counsel for the Gulf Oil Corp., Barrett, 55, is the chief Baha'i spokesman.

Baha'ism was founded in 1844 and has spread to 134 nations with more than 2 million adherents. Its largest community — 1 million — is in India, and it has 100,000 followers in the United States, where it is headquartered in Wilmette, Ill.

Baha'ism has consistently been persecuted in the land of its birth, then called Persia and now Iran, and has been banned at least partially in several other, predominantly Muslim countries.

Baha'ism is the largest minority religion in Iran today, with about 400,000 members, but is not

protected under the constitution of the Islamic republic as are other minority faiths like Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism.

"Now it is virtually impossible (for a Baha'i) to leave Iran," Barrett said. "Why? We're the scapegoats. If the war with Iraq goes bad, blame the Baha'is. If the crop goes bad, blame the Baha'is."

Bahai leaders say Iranian Baha'is are guilty only of membership in the faith, and that conversion to Islam offers immediate freedom for incarcerated Baha'is.

The influx of Baha'i money and pilgrims to Haifa has triggered the Iranian accusations of Zionist espionage, a charge that for many years caused the world center here to avoid comment on the Iranian situation.

Because Baha'ism's roots are in Islam, Iran regards it as heretical and a threat to Islam. But Barrett argued: "We are the only other major religion to recognize Mohammed as a prophet and the Koran as a holy book."

Iran charges that the Baha'is cooperated with the previous Iranian monarchy, but a basic Baha'i tenet demands obedience to government and forbids participation in partisan politics. Baha'i literature describes the systematic violation of Baha'i human rights under the Iranian shahs.

Another frequent Iranian charge is that Baha'is are immoral and prostitutes. This comes from the fact that Baha'i marriage is not recognized in Iran, and that women are treated equally with men.

Barrett said Baha'i women are teachers of the faith, a role that takes on special significance as Baha'ism has no priests.



Donald Barrett

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