

Baha'is: Peaceful people in a deadly land

By George W. Cornell
The Associated Press

After being questioned and threatened for hours, assured they could save their lives and gain national respect if they would renounce their "misguided" faith, the 10 unyielding women were hanged.

They included two teenage girls, five others in their 20s and three older women — wives, mothers, daughters, sisters — members of one of the world's most tolerant, peace-loving religions, the Baha'i faith.

Their executions in the city of Shiraz in southern Iran on June 18, as recounted by American Baha'i leaders, was only one episode in a grisly, three-year succession of deaths and abuse against Iran's largest religious minority.

"The objective is the elimination of the Baha'i community," says Firuz Kazemzadeh, a Yale University expert on the Middle East and chief executive of the Baha'i national assembly in the United States.

It's a systematic, grinding process, he says, of arrests, confiscations of property and assets, dismissals from jobs, expulsion of children from school and recurrent executions designed to intimidate and spread fear.

The technique so far has not involved "mass murder," he said in a telephone interview, but when family members and friends keep being killed rather than forsake their faith, "how long can human nerve endure?"

Only two days before the women died, six Baha'i men, ranging in age from 23 to 60, were hanged in the same city, and on June 24, another young man was hanged. In these cases, as in the steady toll of others, Baha'i officials said, the victims were offered release if they would recant their faith.

"They're told they can be freed, have their homes back and their jobs," said Robert Blum of the Baha'i temple and headquarters in Wilmette, Ill. "That's the offer — your life versus your faith. Many are offered more than they had before."

But few have given in, believing that earthly survival is not as important as the quality of eternity, he said.

The accumulating deaths, persecution and pressure are being compared with the Nazi persecution of the Jews. But in that case, Jews were given no chance to recant to save themselves.

Kazemzadeh likens the situation of Iran's Baha'is to that of the early Christians under the Roman Empire when many of them died rather than renounce their faith in order to live.

"It's a matter of transcendence, of values greater than life itself," he said.



Firuz Kazemzadeh, a U.S. Baha'i leader

In the last three years under the Khomeini regime in Iran, there have been 142 hangings, firing-squad executions or assassinations of Baha'is recorded, most of whom were local or national leaders.

Other persecutions have been widespread and continuous, officials say, involving imprisonments, destruction of Baha'i property, including homes, businesses and shrines, stopping of pensions to the elderly, ousters from jobs and schools, mob raids.

In the first week of July, about 130 Baha'is from the northern village of Ival, including women and children, were confined for three days and denied food and water unless they converted to Islam.

Without yielding, they were eventually released, but were attacked by mobs, driven from their homes and forced to hide in a forest outside the village.

In the execution of Baha'is, the Iranian courts variously label them American spies, agents of Zionism, collaborators with imperialism, enemies of Iran, moral degenerates and in the case of women, prostitutes.

That charge, Kazemzadeh says, is "because Baha'is teach the equality of the sexes" — which Islam rejects and which the Khomeini regime sees as depraved.

While the Iranian courts cite such charges against the Baha'is themselves, the judge in Shiraz condemns the Baha'i religion. In an interview in the Feb. 22 issue of the newspaper Khabar-Junub, he said:

"The Iranian nation has . . . determined to establish the government of God on Earth. Therefore, it cannot tolerate the perverted Baha'is who are instruments of Satan and followers of the devil . . . There is no place for Baha'is and Baha'ism."

Several governments have protested the persecutions, including the United States, Canada, West Germany, Great Britain, Australia, Switzerland, Luxembourg and the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. So have numerous other organizations, such as Amnesty International and the U.S. National Council of Churches.

The world "is increasingly alarmed and dismayed at the persecution and severe repression of the Baha'is in Iran," President Reagan said recently, adding that they "are not guilty of any political offense or crime."

Onslaughts against them are seen by Baha'i leaders as intending gradual extermination, or genocide, wiping out Iran's 350,000 Baha'is, the largest religious minority in a land where the faith originated in 1844.

Around the world, there are about 3.5 million Baha'is in 165 countries, 100,000 in the United States.

Members of this gentle faith believe in the oneness of God, the divine origin of all the world's major religions, including Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the unity and equality of humanity and working for world peace and order.

But in Iran, the faith is considered heresy by the ruling Shiite Moslems and is not recognized as are Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism. /H



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