

FREEDOM OF FAITH

A CHRISTIAN COMMITTEE FOR RELIGIOUS RIGHTS

170 East 64th Street
New York, New York 10021
(212) 838-4120

IRAN: Persecution of the Baha'i Community

The Baha'i community in Iran, that nation's largest religious minority with 450,000 members, has been experiencing growing hardship since the overthrow of the Shah in February of 1979. Baha'i centers have been seized, cemeteries desecrated, businesses confiscated, homes burned, and individual Baha'is attacked throughout the country. Over twenty Baha'is are now being held in prison. Most recently, the most holy place in Iran for the Baha'is, the house of their prophet the Bab, was torn down in Shiraz. Attempts have also been made to force Baha'is to renounce their faith.

Under the new Iranian constitution, the Baha'is continue to be denied the legal status as a "religious minority" that has been extended to Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. The fear is that the Baha'i community in Iran will slowly be denied all personal, social, administrative, and financial rights, and be forced into an underground existence.

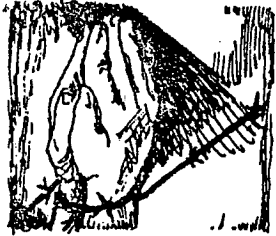
BACKGROUND

The Baha'i faith is an independent world religion with adherents in nearly every country. Emerging from the Islamic tradition in the mid-nineteenth century, the Baha'is rejected a literal interpretation of the Koran. The central teachings of the Baha'i faith are the oneness of God, the oneness of religion, and the oneness of mankind; Baha'is see Divine Revelation as a continuous and progressive process. Baha'is have experienced great hardship in Islamic countries since their inception, where they have continually been accused of apostasy. Their prophet the Bab was executed in Persia (Iran) in 1850, and 20,000 of his followers massacred. Baha'u'llah, the founder of the faith, died in an Ottoman (Turkish) prison in 1892. The Baha'is experienced great suffering under the former Shah of Iran, particularly in 1955-56, when great violence against them broke out.

The Baha'i faith has never been granted legal status as a "religious minority" in Iran, the land of their origin. Without such a provision, Baha'is have no personal status - to marry, divorce, adopt, or distribute inheritance - since these acts must be done according to the rules of one of the four recognized religions of the country: Islam, Christianity, Judaism, or Zoroastrianism. The lack of such status means that the administrative and financial institutions of the Baha'i community are without legal protection. The whole of the Baha'i community is therefore placed in a dangerous "legal limbo" which has been used to legitimize their suppression. Such legal status has been granted the Baha'is in other Islamic countries, notably Pakistan.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

It is believed that the continued denial of status as a religious minority in Iran means the total suppression of the Baha'i community in that country. Such status would be a minimum first step towards guaranteeing the safety of the Baha'is in Iran. We therefore urge you to send letters and postcards of concern to the government of Iran and other officials, stressing



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- 1). the physical safety of members of the Baha'i faith must be guaranteed;
- 2). confiscation or destruction of property belonging to the Baha'i community or individual Baha'is must cease;

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ECUMENICAL COMMITTEE URGES INTERCESSION FOR VICTIMS OF RELIGIOUS RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Freedom of Faith, a coalition of Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christians, today called on the American church community to intercede by prayer and action for those suffering persecution for witnessing to and practicing their faith from around the globe.

The committee echoed the words of Bishop Angel Hobayan of the Philippines, a leading proponent of religious liberty and human rights in that country: "Let us not forget the teaching that the Church is like a human body. When part of it is sick, the whole body suffers the groaning pain. My dear people of God, let us not think of ourselves as isolated people. We must be one in mind, one at heart, and one in spirit. If we will not act, who will do it for us? If not now, when else?"

Freedom of Faith's ALERT highlighted five cases of the violation of religious freedom in particular: the arrest of a leading Orthodox figure in the Soviet Union; government interference with the mission of the Church in Brazil; the arrest of a priest and a layperson for "illegally" building a church in Poland; the detention of a Catholic priest in the Philippines; and the arrest of the leader of the Christian Seminars in the Soviet Union.

security police; they had been instrumentable in communicating the offer of the diocese to use the church as a meeting place to the striking workers, whose labor hall had been ransacked and closed by the police. Finally, on November 6, a hundred military police assaulted the church of Nuestra Senora del Socorro (Our Lady of Sanctuary) and drove out 250 workers and their families who had peacefully been meeting there. Tear gas was used on the people, and a number were beaten and arrested. The workers had been invited by the church to use the building as a meeting place.

These government actions were immediately and strongly protested. Archbishop Paul Arns of Sao Paulo, who telephoned from Rome to communicate his support for the church's work and the blessing of Pope John Paul II. Similar support came from Bishop Ivo Lorscheiter, president of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops, who accused the government of targeting the church for repression as a result of its "clear and consistent preference for the poor."

Freedom of Faith protests this interference in the life-sustaining ministry of the church in Sao Paulo, and asks that American Christians express their support and prayerful concern for the Brazilian church.

POLAND:

Freedom of Faith's third cases focuses on the trial of Fr. Adam Michalski, a priest in the diocese of Przemyśl, and Tadeusz Radochowski for "illegal building" in connection with the construction of a church on property belonging to Radochowski.

Fr. Michalski was given a one-year suspended sentence and fined 230,000 zlotys (\$8,000), and Radochowski was fined 80,000 zlotys (\$2,500)

In the fall of 1978, the diocesan office for the new district of Przemyśl requested permission to build a church for the 7,000 inhabitants who had no place to worship. When no reply was forthcoming, a temporary chapel was built, which was later enlarged. Government harassment of those

Fr. Cardenas was given a "temporary release" on January 10 in the custody of his bishop. It is not clear, however, if charges will be filed at a later date.

Freedom of Faith urges Christians to remember the work of Fr. Cardenas and the Church in Samar for the poor and dispossessed, and to express their prayerful concern for their continued safety and well-being.

SOVIET
UNION-

In its fifth case, Freedom of Faith protests the arrest of Lev Regelson, leader of the Christian Seminars on the Problems of Religious Renaissance, on December 24 in Tallin, Estonian S.S.R.

Regelson had been in hiding since the arrest of his close associate Fr. Gleb Yakunin on November 1, 1979. His arrest appeared imminent when militiamen were seen near the entrance to his apartment after he failed to respond to a summons to police headquarters. Reports indicate that he will be charged under Article 70 of the Russian Criminal Code, "anti-Soviet agitation and propanda," which could bring from three to ten years imprisonment.

Regelson had assumed the leadership of the Christian Seminars on the arrest of its founder, Alexander Ogorodnikov, in the fall of 1978. The seminar, which was organized by young Orthodox Christians in order to seriously study their faith, has been a particular target of the government crackdown on religious activism. Six members of the group have now been arrested: Regelson, Ogorodnikov, Vladimir Poresh, Igor Polyakov, Sergei Ermolaev, and Tatyana Schipkova.

Regelson is perhaps best known as co-author, with Fr. Yakunin, of the 1975 appeal to the World Council of Churches meeting in Nairobi, Kenya, urging that greater attention be given to the plight of believers in the Soviet Union.

Freedom of Faith calls on the Christian community to express their

U P D A T E

(This new section will contain additional information and news on cases Freedom of Faith has adopted in past ALERTs. For further information, please contact the FOF offices).

IRAN - The persecution of the Baha'i community in Iran continues with the recent abduction of three prominent leaders of that religion. Reports indicate that they are being held in prison without charges. The Baha'i community is Iran's largest religious minority, yet they have not been accorded legal status as a recognized religious minority under that country's new constitution. Such recognition would provide a minimum guarantee that the Baha'i faith will be permitted to exist openly in Iran (October ALERT).

BULGARIA - Five Pentecostals and one other person were sentenced on October 25, 1979 to terms ranging from three to five years imprisonment on charges of illegally importing foreign and Bulgarian currency. Reports indicate that these individuals did not receive the currency directly, but in the form of religious literature and printing equipment from the West. The Bulgarian government has long sought to restrict the activities of the Church, and is particularly concerned about the rapid growth of the Pentecostals (October ALERT).

TAIWAN - The government has shelved its draft of restrictive new regulations governing "Shrines, Temples, and Churches" in the face of massive opposition from Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian groups. Among other items, these regulations would have prohibited the use of local languages or dialects in worship. However, reports of recent arrests in Taiwan indicate a fresh wave of religious persecution (September ALERT).

PHILIPPINES - The ten members of the Student Christian Movement detained on June 14, 1979 during a seminar on Christian renewal were given "temporary releases" in early August. Under the conditions of the release, all may be

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embargoed for 20.00
Thursday, October 25, 1979

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NEWS RELEASE

CHRISTIAN CALL TO ACTION FOR VICTIMS OF RELIGIOUS RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Freedom of Faith, the ecumenical Christian organization working for the religious rights of all believers and all faiths, today called on the Christian community to intercede by prayers and action regarding five cases of violations of religious rights from around the world.

The call came in the organization's regular 25th-of-the-month "Alert," which is timed to recall Christmas and God's commitment to humankind in Christ's birth.

The cases noted this month include the suppression of the Baha'i community in Iran, the arrest of another member of the Religious Youth Seminar in the USSR, the arrest and interrogation of at least fifteen members of the Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia, the harassment of the Catholic Farmer's Association in South Korea, and the trial of members of the Pentecostalist Church in Bulgaria.

(Article 70), which can carry a penalty of ten years imprisonment followed by five years in internal exile.

Poresh is the fifth member of the Seminar arrested since last November. Two other members, Sergei Yermolaev, 20, and Igor Polyakov, 24, were sentenced on September 24 to four and three and a half years in a labor camp respectively, on the strength of their involvement in the Seminar. Soviet authorities appear determined to forcibly break up the Seminar by arresting all those associated with it.

Freedom of Faith calls on Christians to keep Vladimir Poresh and the other members of the Seminar in their thoughts and prayers, and to express their concern for and support of the work of the Moscow Religious Youth Seminar.

Freedom of Faith's third case focuses on the arrest and interrogation of four priests and at least eleven laymen since Monday, September 10.

The arrests appear to be in connection with the unauthorized publication of theological literature and the "Teologicky Sbornik" (Theological Review). Nine of the fifteen arrested have apparently been released from detention, but indications are that all will be charged in the case.

Those arrested include some of the most prominent Catholics in Czechoslovakia today, including four signers of "Charter 77," the Czech human rights document. Still in detention is Fr. Frantisek Lizna, S.J., a young Jesuit priest imprisoned twice during the sixties and allowed to say mass officially only once, in 1974. Dr. Josef Zverina, S.J., probably the most prominent theologian in Czechoslovakia who has been allowed to publish only once, was arrested and released, but will be charged.

Since the election of John-Paul II and his historic journey to Poland, members of the Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia have begun to speak more openly against the three-decade-long repression of religious liberty and human rights in their country. These recent arrests, coming on the heels of the the trial of ten members of the Committee for the

CZECHO-
SLOVAKIA:

Association, and urges Christians to express their support for the invaluable work of the CFA in building peace and justice in South Korea.

BULGARIA:

Freedom of Faith's fifth case focuses on the arrest and trial of five Pentecostals and one member of the Open Brethren in Sofia.

The six were placed on trial on September 11, formally charged with "currency violation." They are: George Todorov, Peter Janev, Bancho Banchev, Nathaniel Tsachev, Mitko Zhekov, and Peter Shupov.

Arrested in March during a government crackdown on religious groups, it appears that they have been singled out for especially harsh treatment because of the rapid growth in membership of the Pentecostal church, particularly among young people. Bulgarian officials are also reported to be anxious about the amount of religious literature from the West coming into Bulgaria.

Seized with them was literature production equipment, including typewriters, duplicators, cassettes, and manuscripts.

Freedom of Faith calls on Christians to express their concern for these people who are attempting to live out their faith in witness, and to keep them in their prayers and thoughts.

For further information, please contact the FOF offices at 170 East 64th Street, New York, NY 10021.

(for further details, please call John Hays-Greene at 212-831-7002).