

Iran savages Baha'is and denounces UN charter

IRAN, whose systematic use of torture and executions without fair trial is under investigation by the United Nations, has become the first country in the world to denounce the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Its ambassador to the UN, Said Rajaie-Khorassani, has told the UN in New York that since the declaration, for which Iran voted and which has the force of international customary law, derives from "the Judaeo-Christian tradition", Iran "would not therefore hesitate to violate its provisions".

Iran justifies its defiance of international law by claiming that it abides instead by "the divine law" of its 1979 Islamic constitution. It is refusing to cooperate with the UN's special investigator, who is due to make a preliminary report next month but has not been able to visit the country.

Torture to obtain information or confessions is prohibited under Iran's constitution, but Iran claims that "corporal punishment and the death penalty" are not torture "if carried out on the basis of Islam, in accordance with a sentence by an Islamic court". However, there is extensive documentary evidence that torture is being used to extract confessions, and without judicial sanction, and that it is becoming more brutal and more widespread. One group, the 300,000 Iranian members of the Baha'i faith, has been denied recognition under the constitution and is being persecuted as an entire community.

The Baha'i religion, which originated in Iran in the 19th century, is considered heretical by Muslims because it holds that all religions come from God and must be respected as part of a process of progressive revelation. In revering Baha'ullah, their own prophet, they challenge the Islamic belief that Muhammad is the last of the prophets. Baha'is have been consistently

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discriminated against in Iran, but Khomeini's regime is the first to have embarked on their wholesale destruction.

The top Baha'i leadership, the nine-member elected national assembly, had to be reconstituted three times following kidnappings or arrests before being forced to disband last year. Of the 27 who have served since 1979, 25 are dead.

Like the Jews in Hitler's Germany, Baha'is have been dismissed from their jobs, denied pensions and in some cases been forced to repay all salary received. They have had their property and business assets confiscated, and have been denied education and the right to worship. Since 1983, they have been liable to the death penalty if they "give information to others" of the attacks against them, they have been prohibited to hold the assemblies that govern their affairs, and been executed for teaching their children the faith. Their cemeteries have been desecrated. Now the campaign to break the Baha'i leadership, over 700 of whom are in prison and 193 of whom have been killed, is entering a new phase.

All prisoners are to be forced to sign a statement conceding that the Baha'is are "a Zionist espionage group" and that possession of any Baha'i literature or religious symbol warrants the death penalty for "warring against God". The Iranian government, which has repeatedly asserted that no Baha'is have been persecuted for their faith, is resorting to this approach after six months of effort to obtain by torture "admissions" of Baha'i involvement with Israeli intelligence. Once it obtains such statements, foreign human-

rights experts believe, it will feel free to begin a "final solution" eliminating the Baha'is.

Iran justifies its denial of recognition for the Baha'is by arguing that they are "a political sect". In fact, Baha'is are expressly forbidden by their religion to take part in politics and enjoined to obey the ruling civil power.

The allegation that Baha'is are "Zionist agents" derives from the historical accident that their founder, Baha'ullah, was exiled to Acre in the 19th century, and the world headquarters of the 3m-strong worldwide religion is there on Mount Carmel, in what is now Israel.

A temporary lull in the number of executions of Baha'is came in 1983, following an international outcry over the hanging of 10 women and teenage girls for teaching Baha'i children who had been expelled from school. But since last June, the scale and ferocity of tortures of Baha'is has increased. Last month six senior leaders were executed, and the death of another 19 is thought to be imminent. Others have died under torture aimed at extracting videotaped confessions for use on Iranian television.

Outside the jails Baha'is are subjected to exceptional measures. One man was taken last June from a Tehran hospital while he was recovering from surgery; on the way to prison, the guards tore open his sutures. Others have been surrounded by mobs and burned to death, or incinerated in their homes. Families of those executed have been driven from their homes.

Some 40,000 Baha'is have managed to flee Iran. Those who remain live under a suspended sentence of death. Khomeini has not rescinded his edict that "if somebody is a heretic and will not recant, the shedding of his blood is not a crime".