

Iran's Newest Victims

Iran is no longer in the spotlight; its war with Iraq drags on indecisively and a now-indifferent world shrugs off its unending internal wrangles. This apathy perfectly suits Iran's clerical zealots as they silence newspapers, jail their opponents and bloodily settle old scores. Especially ominous has been their systematic execution of adherents of Baha'i.

Though it has followers around the world, Baha'i is an unoffending creed with no friends in power in Iran. In nine months, Baha'is have been killed in Teheran, Tabriz, Yazd and Shiraz. Baha'i shrines have been demolished, property has been confiscated and Baha'is have been fired from their jobs.

Last August, nine members of the Baha'i governing board were seized by revolutionary guardsmen and have since vanished. And now Iran's High Court of Justice has ruled that just belonging to Baha'i institutions justified the execution of two Baha'is in Shiraz; that created "discord and disunity amongst Moslems."

The Baha'i faith originated in Iran in 1844 and has evolved into an independent world religion. Its adherents believe that a single God has been revealed in progressive revelations. Because it has roots in Islam, it has been viewed as heretical by the Islamic clergy. What has made Baha'is more vulnerable is their relative prosperity and professional success — tempting scapegoats in a revolutionary country with a floundering economy and an aimless war.

Of Iran's religious minorities, the Baha'is are the largest, with about 500,000 adherents in more than 500 localities. But disturbingly, the faith is not listed among the religions acknowledged by name in Iran's Islamic constitution. With the High Court's recent ruling, a match has been thrown on a bonfire.

Iran's critics have little influence with the mullahs in Teheran, meaning that Iran's third-world friends have an obligation to speak out, before another religious blood-letting shames a supposedly modern world.