

# Iran's Persecution of Baha'i Unchecked

## 10 Women Reported Hanged After Refusing to Renounce Faith

By GEORGE CORNELL, *Associated Press*

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

Executed were two teen-age girls, five women in their 20s and three older women, all 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, represented 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 is a systematic, grinding process of arrests, confiscations of property and assets, dismissals from jobs, expulsion of children from school and executions designed to intimidate and spread fear, he said.

The persecution so far has not involved "mass murder," Kazemzadeh said in a telephone interview, but, he asked, in the face of executions over religious belief, "How long can human nerve endure?"

Only two days before the women were killed, six Baha'i men, ranging in age from 23 to 60, were hanged in the same city, and, later, on June 24, a young man was executed by hanging. In these cases, as in the 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, because almost all the Baha'i members under arrest believed that earthly survival is not as important as life's quality for eternity, Blum said.

### Compared to Nazi Persecution of Jews

The killings, persecution and pressure are being compared to the early Nazi persecution of the Jews. But in that case, Jews were classified racially and had no chance to recant to save themselves.

Kazemzadeh likens the situation of Iran's Baha'is to that of the early Christians in the Roman Empire who died rather than renounce their faith.

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

In the last three years under the regime of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Iran, there have been 142 known hangings, firing-squad executions or assassinations of Baha'is, mostly local or national leaders.

Among other abuses are destruction of Baha'i property, including homes, businesses and shrines, stopping of pensions to the elderly, ousters from jobs and schools, and attacks by mobs.

In the first week of July, about 130 Baha'is, including women and children, from the northern village of Ival

were confined three days and denied food and water unless they converted to Islam.

Eventually released without yielding, they 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

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

Although the Iranian courts cite such charges against the Baha'is, rather than religion, a judge in Shiraz said in

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*An Iranian judge was quoted as denouncing 'the perverted Baha'is, who are instruments of Satan and followers of the devil. . . .'*

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an interview in the newspaper Khabar-I-Junub last Feb. 22.

"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."

The persecution has been protested by the U. S. Congress, Canada, West Germany, Great Britain, Australia, Switzerland, Luxembourg and the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, plus organizations such as Amnesty International and the U.S. National Council of Churches.

Baha'i leaders see the campaign as a genocidal attempt to wipe 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 now about 3.5 million Baha'is in 165 countries, with 100,000 in the United States.

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