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Is Iran planning genocide against its Bahais?

By James D. Davis

Religion Writer

Bahais in Iran have faced systematic persecution — evictions, loss of jobs, executions — ever since the rise to power of Ayatollah Khomeini. But recently stepped-up actions, and statements by officials of that nation, carry the ominous ring of extermination.

In the last two weeks 17 Bahais, including seven women and three teen-age girls, were hanged in Shiraz, bringing the number of Bahai dead in Iran to 142. And the same court is considering 500 other Bahai cases.

On July 1, two of the nine national committee members were kidnaped. And since June 29, some 20 believers have been held in a field without food or drink to make them renounce their religion.

The actions are an apparent follow-up to remarks last February by a Shiite Moslem judge in Shiraz, the city where the Bahai faith was born in 1844. He branded all Bahais as "germs of corruption" and "offsprings of Satan," warning that Iran soon would deal with them as it has "with other hypocrites who have appeared in more dangerous garb."

Iranian leaders "are stating publicly that they plan genocide against Bahais," charged Hannah Hessler of the Bahai assemblies in Broward. "They're trying to set up God's government on earth, and that includes a plan to wipe Bahais out. Our national committee fears that the pressure is mounting."

Fearing for the other 300,000 Bahais in Iran, their co-religionists in America have mounted a publicity campaign for world agencies to stop the persecution. The 400 Broward Bahais will offer their case today at a memorial service for the 17 dead.

The service is set for noon at the Lauderdale Lakes Public Safety Auditorium, 4300 NW 36th St. Featured will be prayers, music and a talk by Karen Pritchard of the national Bahai youth committee.

The service also falls on the anniversary of the martyrdom of the Bab, who heralded the coming of the universalistic prophet known as Bahauallah. Believers revere Bahauallah — whose name is Arabic



Golden-domed Shrine of the Bab is centerpiece for Bahai headquarters in Haifa, Israel. The

site has given rise to accusations by Iran that Bahais are agents of the Jewish state.

for "Glory of God" — as the latest of nine "manifestations" of the Deity; the others include Moses, Jesus, Zoroaster, Buddha and founders of other influential religions.

Bahais also include Muhammad, founder of Islam — which includes the Shiite Moslems who dominate Iran — as one of the manifestations. But the Shiites still see Bahais as blasphemers who refuse to acknowledge Muhammad as the greatest prophet.

However, religious debates become political ones when the government itself is religious, as in Iran. Charges of Bahai disloyalty laced the February

statements of Hojjatol-Islam Qazai, Islamic religious judge of the Shiraz court.

In an English translation of the interview in the newspaper *Khabar-I-Junub*, furnished by U.S. Bahais, Qazai called the Bahais "followers of the devil and of the superpowers and their agents."

Qazai mentioned the Bahais' internal hierarchy and separate meetings. He also accused Bahais of being Israeli agents because the Universal House of Justice, the world Bahai government, is based in Haifa, Israel.

Iran's Bahais "have created, however ridiculously, a state within a state, a government and administration different from that of Islam," Qazai was quoted as saying. He added that they declined to take part in any demonstrations against the deposed shah and did not take part in post-revolutionary elections.

Accordingly, "any activities on the part of the Bahais are against the Constitution," and all Bahai elections, feasts and meetings are crimes, the judge stated. He noted with approval that some Bahais "return to the bosom of Islam every day and cruse the leaders of Bahaiism."

It is the latter remark that unmasks the Shiites' real aim, Mrs. Hessler said. "If they accuse Bahais of spying for Israel, why do they offer to let them off by recanting the faith?"

"The basic motive is religious. Bahais believe that Bahauallah is the messenger for this age, not Muhammad. Therefore, Bahais are accused of being disloyal to Islam."

Paradoxically, she added, "I never gave Islam. I thought before I became a Bahai. Now I give Muhammad credit as being a prophet."

As for the claims of political enmity, she said: "Bahais are loyal to any government in place. We do not participate in politics, such as running for office or belonging to political parties. But we obey the laws, pay taxes and vote in elections."

Mrs. Hessler added that 20,000 Bahais were massacred in its early years, and that as recently as 1954 — when the shah was in power — at least one pogrom happened. So far, the Ayatollah Khomeini has not begun that scale of killing, she said.

"At least the human race seems to have grown out of such wholesale deaths," she said. She voiced hope that world opinion, stirred by the Bahai publicity campaign, would help stem the killings.

But so far it hasn't worked out well, she conceded. On May 22, anniversary of the religion's birthdate, President Reagan asked the ayatollah to release 22 condemned Bahais. Instead, Khomeini said the appeal was proof of their guilt, and the executions resumed.