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Local Baha'is fear for faithful in Iran

By ANNETTE DROLET
Sun staff writer

When Kambiz and Farah Rouhani bear news reports about the persecutions of Baha'is in their native Iran, they feel especially alarmed. Besides being Baha'is themselves, the Clearwater couple has relatives in that Middle Eastern country. Though their loved ones have escaped harm so far, the Rouhanis fear their relatives will fall victim to

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the violence that has left at least 150 Baha'is dead in Iran since the Ayatollah Khomeini's regime came to power in 1979.

"The Iranians say they want to eliminate all Baha'is," Mrs. Rouhani said. "They're killing people because of their beliefs. In that sense, I feel it's a genocide."

Mrs. Rouhani said letters from her Iranian relatives—an aunt, uncles and grandmothers—have contained no information on the persecutions, because her loved ones are afraid similar things will happen to them if they talk about the situation.

"I think all the correspondence is read" by Iranian authorities, Mrs. Rouhani said. "What my husband and I know about the situation is what we see on television and what we read in the newspapers."

In the past two months alone, according to news reports, at least 17 Baha'is have been murdered in Iran. On June 18, for instance, 10 women were hanged after hours of questioning, threats and assurances that they could save their lives if they would renounce their faith.

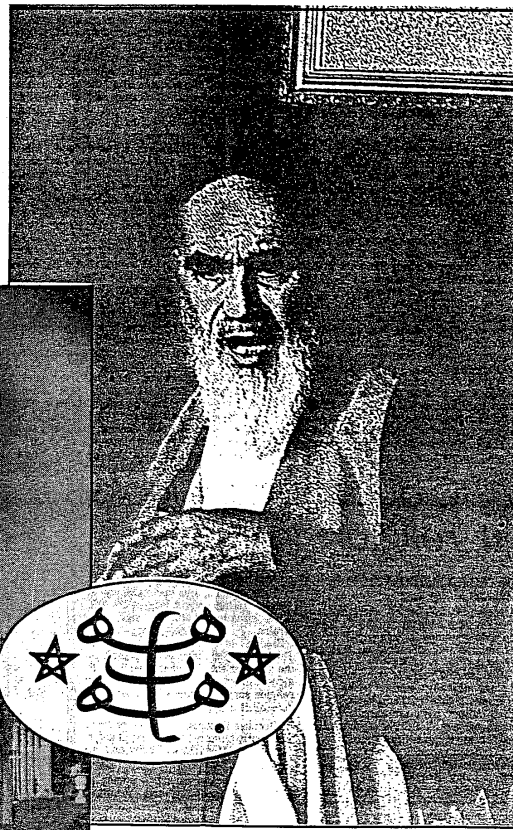
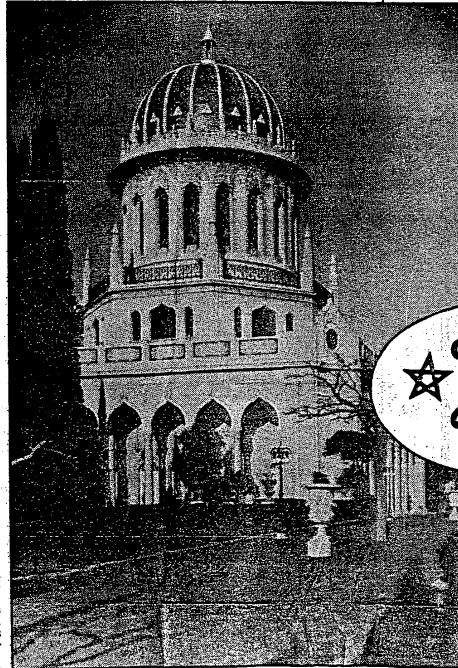
Two days before the women died, six Baha'i men, ranging in age from 23 to 60, also were hanged. On June 24, another young man was executed.

"They're beginning to kill groups of Baha'is without any trial or levying any charges," said Linda Brown of the Clearwater Baha'i community. "There's not even a pretense at a trial."

"The families don't find out about the deaths until afterward. The Baha'is aren't given the rights the rest of Islam has. In the Islamic religion, burial is very important. After they execute these Baha'is, they throw them in a mass grave. Even after death they do as much as they can to degrade."

In addition to being murdered, Baha'is in Iran (who number about 350,000) are being imprisoned, denied their pensions, ousted from schools and jobs and deprived of their homes, businesses and other properties, according to news reports.

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Sun art by JACK FUREY

Since the Ayatollah Khomeini (above) has been in power in Iran, at least 150 Baha'is there have died because of their beliefs. Yet, Baha'is (whose symbol is shown in inset) throughout the world remain faithful to the teachings of a prophet who coming was foretold by the Bab. The Shrine of the Bab (left) is part of the Bahá'í World Center in Haifa, Israel.

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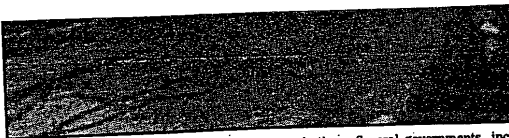
Several weeks ago, about 150 Baha'is, including women and children, from the northern village of Ival were confined three days and denied food and water unless they converted to Islam.

Unyielding, they eventually were released, attacked by mobs, driven from their homes and forced to hide in a forest bordering their village.

"All these victims are innocent people who have committed no crime," said Mary Allen, public information representative for the Clearwater Baha'i community. "We just can't sit back and let this happen."

Baha'is don't know what action to take that will stop the persecutions, Mrs. Brown said. But she and others of the faithful think letter-writing campaigns to elected representatives will help.

"It's making the masses aware of what's happen-



ing," Mrs. Allen said. "People have to know what's going on. When that was happening to the Jews, we didn't know about it until it was over. This cannot happen again."

This afternoon, Baha'is and other concerned persons who want to "stand up and be counted" may attend a memorial service for the murdered Iranian Baha'is, Mrs. Brown said. Services, sponsored by the Baha'is of Largo, will be held at 3 p.m. at the Largo Community Center, 65 Fourth St. N.W.

Local Baha'is believe that if enough people voice their outrage against the situation in Iran, the Khomeini regime could be swayed by the criticism.

"Although Iran says it doesn't care about the views of the American people, it still has an effect," Mrs. Rouhani said.

Several governments, including the United States, Canada, West Germany, Great Britain, Australia, Switzerland and Luxembourg, and the United Nations Commission on Human Rights have protested the persecutions.

Mrs. Brown recalled an outbreak of mob violence against the Baha'is in the 1950s that was quelled by the Shah of Iran after telegrams were sent by Baha'is from throughout the world.

"The shah realized the Baha'i faith had spread way beyond Iran and wasn't just a local problem anymore," she said. "Public pressure led him to stop the physical danger."

Baha'is living in the birthplace of their faith have been under threat of peril since 1844, when a young Persian merchant who became known as the Bab

promised that God would send a prophet made in the image of Buddha, Mohammed and Christ. Baha'is say that prophet is Baha-ullah, an early disciple of the Bab and founder of their faith. The Bab's teachings, which spread throughout Persia, provoked opposition by Moslem clergy and the government. Consequently, the Bab and more than 20,000 of his followers were killed. Among those who died was Mrs. Rouhani's great-aunt, who was burned at the stake. Mrs. Rouhani, who moved to America 18 years ago after a decade in Iran, has firsthand knowledge of discrimination of Baha'is in her native land. "In school, the teachers and students picked on you," she said. Mrs. Rouhani remembers having the

The Shrine of the Bab (left) is part of the Baha'i World Center in Haifa, Israel.

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grade on one of her assignments reduced from a "98" to a "50" because she began the essay with a quote from Baha'i writings.

"We couldn't publicly talk about the faith because we were afraid for people to know we were Baha'i," she said. "The Baha'is were not looked on kindly."

The reason, according to a Baha'i publication, is that fundamentalist Moslems in Iran regard the Baha'i faith as a threat to Islam, which they hold to be the final religion for all people.

"The Baha'is are denounced as 'heretics' and as 'renegades' from Islam because the founders of their religion in the last century were, for the most part, Persian Muslims (or Moslems), and because their prophet... had the misfortune to be born after Mohammed, who is considered (by Moslems) to be the last messenger of God." That statement was reprinted from the French daily, *Le Monde*, in a Baha'i pamphlet.

In present-day executions, the Iranian courts have labeled the Baha'is as American spies, agents of Zionism, collaborators with imperialism, enemies of Iran, moral degenerates and, in the case of women, prostitutes.

The last accusation, American Baha'i officials say, stems from the Baha'i belief in the equality of the sexes, which Islam rejects and which the Khomeini regime considers to be depraved.

All of the Iranians' charges against the Baha'is—peace-loving people who advocate obedience to government and non-involvement in politics—can be refuted, Mrs. Brown said.

Though saddened by the plight of her Baha'i brethren in Iran, Mrs. Brown predicts that a positive future will emerge from today's darkness.

"As painful as it is for Baha'is to live through this period, it can only help the faith in the long run because that's what it's done in the past," she said. "It's the persecutions that have actually pushed through the faith."