

Local Baha'is worry about safety of kin in Iran

A story of prisons and persecution

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FAIRFIELD — Victoria and Mike don't hear much from their relatives in Iran anymore. This worries them.

The Fairfield mother and son are from Iran and both are Baha'is, members of a religious sect that has been the subject of persecution, arrest and even death in Iran.

"All the mail leaving the country is censored," said Mike.

"We got one letter from my husband's cousin," Victoria said, "and all it said was 'Hello. How are you? We are fine.' That's all. I even got one letter that they even opened and didn't bother to re-close."

"They make no attempt to even hide the fact that all the mail is opened," Mike said.

But censored mail is one of the minor problems facing Victoria and Mike. Many of their friends and relatives in Iran are hidden away in prisons or even dead because they wouldn't deny their religion.

Mike and Victoria are in this country but wouldn't allow their real names to be used for fear of what would happen to their loved ones still in Iran.

Persecution of Baha'is in Iran is not new. It's been going on for years. According to Mike, it's

caused by a difference in religion between the Baha'is and Islam.

"Islam doesn't believe in the validity of other prophets," Mike said. "They believe that Mohammed was the last prophet."

Baha'is, on the other hand, believe that Mohammed was one in a line of prophets.

"We believe that this progression of truths doesn't stop. We believe that Baha'u'llah (founder of the religion) wasn't the last prophet. Another prophet will take his place one day."

Because of their religion, the Baha'is have been persecuted by the ruling Muslims in Iran.

"Before the revolution there was only so much the Shah could do because he had to answer to other countries like the United States," Mike said. "But today the clergy have absolute power. They have to answer to no one but themselves."

Of the hundreds of Baha'is who have been executed in Iran, Mike calls it "genocide."

"It's just like the early Christians or the Jews in pre-war Germany. The only difference is the Jews had no choice. They were killed just because they were Jews."

"The Baha'is have a choice. They have the chance to say 'I'm not a Baha'!' and get out from under it. But to deny Baha'is is breaking a covenant with God," he said.

"It's not a matter of convenience. You can't change it like a shirt."

According to local Baha'is spokesman Sandra Jack, word has been received recently that 17 more Baha'is were arrested by authorities in Iran, bringing to 39 the number of Baha'is imprisoned in the last three weeks of July. On July 28, two Baha'is in Tehran and 15 more in the suburb of Karaj were taken into custody.

Jack said the July arrests came in the wake of 17 hangings in Shiraz.

Fairfield Baha'is recently held a memorial service for the 17 Baha'is executed in Shiraz.

Further, said Jack, there is still no news of the fate of two prominent Baha'is who were abducted at the end of June in Tehran, or of the 130 Baha'is men, women and children who were attacked by mobs on July 1 and forced to flee their village of Ival.

These same villagers were reportedly confined for three days and denied food and drink in an effort to force them to convert to Islam, then attacked the night of their release.

"We are shocked by Iran's continuing brutal persecution of the Baha'is despite international protests and appeals," Jack said. "It is a nightmare to imagine what would happen without the voice of world opinion."

"Baha'is appeal to the Iranian



Two local Baha'is, Victoria and Mike — shrouded here to obscure their identities — tell of the persecution of fellow Baha'is in Iran.

authorities about the kidnappings of Jahaagir Hidayati and Ahman Bashiri in Tehran have so far gone unheeded," Jack said.

"The government is denying any knowledge of the abduction or the whereabouts of the two."

Since their beginning in Iran in 1844, the Baha'is have been the target of persecution, arrest and execution.

Founded in Shiraz by a merchant who was later known as the Bab, Baha'is rejected the literal interpretation of the Koran and believed that the Bab's religion was a fulfillment of prophecy and that a new messenger of God would appear on earth.

In 19th-century Iran, the idea of freedom of religion didn't exist, and the teachings of the Bab sparked violent reaction. Accused of heresy, the Bab was imprisoned for several years, and finally executed in 1850.

But his death did not end the spread of his teachings nor dim the faith of his followers, who were now forced to defend them-

selves from attacks by both the church and the government.

Thirteen years years after the death of the Bab, one of his followers, who had been exiled to Baghdad, proclaimed himself to be the new messenger. He became known as Baha'u'llah. Most of the followers of the Bab accepted his claim and became known as Baha'is.

Religious and secular authorities kept Baha'u'llah in confinement and exile until his death in 1892. During the 40 years he was in prison he wrote a number of works which today are the scriptures of the religion.

As the number of Baha'is grew, the Muslim clergy felt increasingly threatened by the spreading religion and demanded the extermination of its members, who they branded as heretics. The tolerant, non-violent nature of the Baha'is made it possible to attack them without fear of retaliation.

Baha'is were blamed for famines, revolutions, invasions and other turmoil. If you didn't want to

pay a debt, you could accuse the creditor of being a Baha'is. If an epidemic swept the country, it could be blamed on the Baha'is.

The Baha'is idea of world unity was seen as a lack of patriotism. Their acceptance of all the world's religions was seen as a betrayal of Islam.

The persecution of the 300,000-member Baha'is community in Iran has drawn a flood of protests from President Reagan, the U.S. Congress, the United Nations Human Rights Commission, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and the parliaments of Great Britain, West Germany, Canada and Australia.

Since the 1979 revolution, 142 Baha'is have been executed or assassinated. More than 200 are imprisoned without charges in cities throughout Iran, Jack said.

The Islamic regime has also imprisoned hundreds of Baha'is, destroyed most of the religion's holy places and cemeteries and deprived Baha'is of their pensions, jobs and trade licenses.

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