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Followers of Bahai faith executed in Iran

Nacogdoches man's parents, sister put to death

BY MICHAEL STEPHENS
Associated Press

NACOGDOCHES — It was 5 a.m. on a Saturday when the young Nacogdoches man was shocked out of his sleep by a telephone call from his brother in Australia. The message was brief: "Dad has become a martyr." Their father had been executed by the fanatical Islamic government of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

At 5 a.m. the next day the phone rang again. This time the news was even worse. Saeid Eshraghi learned that his mother and sister had been executed, too, for their refusal to recant their belief in the Bahai faith.

Nearly a week after learning of his loss, the 34-year-old native of Iran reflected on life in his former country and on the death of his parents and sister.

The executions were carried out despite the pleadings of governments and organizations throughout the world. Khomeini allegedly pointed to the personal plea of Ronald Reagan as an indication of the Bahais' guilt.

Eshraghi hopes his story will help ignite a global outcry loud enough to stop the executions and religious persecution of some 300,000 Bahais in a country boiling with Islamic fervor.

Eshraghi is now co-owner of an Italian restaurant in Nacogdoches. When he left Iran for Boston in 1978, he had no inkling of the events that would soon rock his homeland. He planned to train as an architect and go home.

In a subdued voice, Eshraghi recalled arriving in Boston for language studies five years ago, about a year before Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was forced to flee Iran and Khomeini set up his Islamic republic.

After studying language, Eshraghi went to Kilgore Junior College to begin architectural studies. But after the revolution, when he could no longer get money out of his homeland, he took a job in a local restaurant to support himself and his wife. Two months later he was manager.

He then took a job as manager in the restaurant that he now partly owns.

Eshraghi still has a sister in Iran, another sister in Nigeria and a brother in Australia.

Although he didn't expect the revolution, when it did occur, Eshraghi knew the Bahais would suffer. Indeed, Bahais were the target of persecution from the beginning. Members of the faith had their homes burned and religious gathering places destroyed.

The persecution didn't touch Eshraghi personally until 1980, when his family in Shiraz was arrested and held for three days on suspicion of counterrevolutionary activity.

Eshraghi explained that almost all members of the Bahai faith in Iran are of the middle or upper-middle class. His father, for example, had been an executive for Iran's national oil company before the revolution.

"My family had lived in Shiraz for a long time, and

my dad was a very nice man. He never had an enemy in his life. He loved people, and they had a lot of people come to the house," Eshraghi said.

In a letter to his son, Eshraghi's father said he had been arrested because of the number of people seen coming and going from the family home.

Middle Eastern experts say it was the middle class that was most responsible for ousting the shah, Eshraghi said.

So when Khomeini took power, he began undermining the economic clout and civil liberties of those who had brought down the shah, Eshraghi said.

The Bahais took the brunt of the persecution, Eshraghi said. They were fired from their jobs, and benefits for retirees, like his father, were terminated. Bahai members were executed or imprisoned on charges ranging from spying to being devils.

When Eshraghi's family was arrested for the second time in Shiraz nine months ago, they weren't released. Secret trials were held, and 22 people were condemned to death unless they agreed to renounce their faith.

His sister who remained free was allowed to visit her father, mother and sibling for three minutes once a

week. In June she asked her father for permission to marry her boyfriend.

Her father consented, and she was engaged on the afternoon of June 16.

Earlier that same day, her father and five other Bahais were executed by hanging.

The next week her mother and sister were dead.

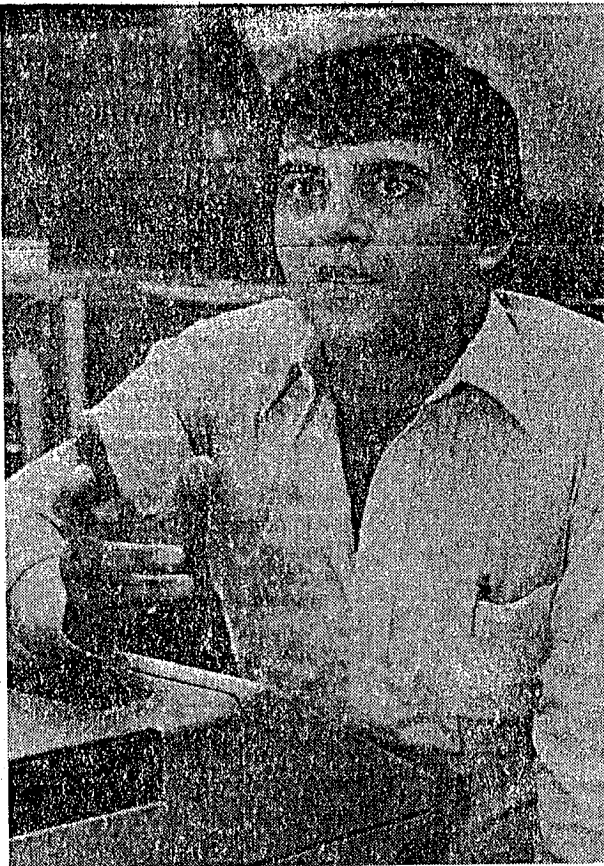
"It's such a waste for society," Eshraghi said.

Pointing to a name on the list of those executed with his father, Eshraghi added, "This man, Dr. Afnan, was 48 years old. He went to school for almost 30 years to become a doctor and just executing someone like him is such a waste."

The Bahai faith originated in Iran. Followers believe in the oneness of mankind, elimination of prejudice, equality of men and women and the application of spiritual solutions to economic problems.

Eshraghi retains a strong belief in the faith his family died for. But he is also grateful for his life in Nacogdoches.

"I'm living in a society where people are human beings. Where they fight for humanity. And where they are sincere."



AP Wirephoto

Saeid Eshraghi of Nacogdoches tells of the persecution of the Bahai faith in his native country of Iran. His father, mother and a sister were executed by the Islamic government of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini for their refusal to recant their beliefs.