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Plight of Iranian Baha'is

October 1984

Background: Since the 1979 revolution led by the Ayatollah Khomeini, the Government of the "Islamic Republic of Iran" has held itself to be the embodiment of one specific religion--Shi'ite Islam--with the authority to persecute adherents of other religions. The regime has recognized officially three religious minorities--Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians--and allows them to practice their religion, to hold token representation in the legislature, and to instruct their own children. Although members of all minority religious groups face some degree of discrimination, conditions have worsened particularly for members of non-recognized groups such as the Baha'is, Iran's largest non-Muslim minority group. Allowed to rise to positions of prominence under the Shah's rule, these groups are now suspect on religious, social, and political grounds and have lost favor disproportionately under the current government. The Khomeini regime has virtually outlawed the Baha'i faith, creating one of the gravest human rights situations in the world today.

The Baha'i faith: The Baha'i faith--originally an offshoot of Shi'ite Islam--arose in Iran during the 19th century. The central figure in the founding of Baha'ism, Baha'ullah, severed formal ties with Islam and developed the new faith into a separate religion. Baha'is believe in equality of the sexes, racial harmony, and universal education, and practice abstinence from alcohol. There are more than 1.5 million Baha'is worldwide, about 350,000 of them in Iran. Persecution of Baha'is is based mainly upon theological differences: Muslims believe that there can be no revelation after Mohammed, and many consider the Baha'i faith not as a separate religion but as a heretical departure from Islam.

Treatment of Baha'is: Viewing Baha'is as heretics and claiming they are a "fifth column" for the US and Israel, the Khomeini regime consistently has violated the basic human rights of Iranian Baha'is. Because Baha'i marriages never were recognized officially in Iran, for example, the revolutionary regime has branded Baha'i married women as "prostitutes." Baha'i shrines have been desecrated and destroyed; the House of Bab, the site of the founding of the Baha'i faith and its most holy shrine, was demolished and converted into a parking lot. Baha'is have been fired from their jobs and their businesses confiscated. They have been expelled from schools at all levels and denied social services and pensions to which they were entitled under Iranian law. Some of these actions involved mob violence against Baha'is, but most persecution has been directed by Iranian Government authorities. A number of government officials belong to the Hojjatiyah, a society dedicated to exterminating all Baha'is.

Iranian Government action: The President of the Revolutionary Court of the city of Shiraz stated early in 1983: "It is absolutely certain that in the Islamic Republic of Iran there is no place for Baha'is and

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Baha'ism." The Iranian Government has executed Baha'is and, through torture and imprisonment, has forced "conversions" of Baha'is to Islam. Since the revolution, more than 170 Baha'is have been executed by the regime or have died under torture in prison; others have simply disappeared and are presumed dead. Prominent Baha'is have been arrested and charged with such vague offenses as "crimes against God," "corruption on earth," and "Zionism." The Islamic Republic's official position toward Baha'is hardened in August 1983, when Iran's Prosecutor General declared that "activities of Baha'is are banned in Iran."

In response to the Prosecutor General's pronouncement and in keeping with a Baha'i tradition of submitting to governmental authority, the National Spiritual Assembly of Baha'is in Iran dissolved all Baha'i administrative institutions. At the same time, these elected representatives of the Iranian Baha'i community appealed to the Iranian Government, which was responsible for the execution or disappearance of all members of the two preceding Baha'i National Assemblies, to restore all rights denied to individual Baha'is because of their religion.

Following its ban on all Baha'i religious and institutional activities, the Iranian Government has intensified its persecution. Today, more than 750 Baha'is, many of them women, are imprisoned in Iran. Some 32 of them are now awaiting execution. Accounts of their treatment indicate that some prisoners, including women, have been chained to benches while being whipped with canes. Others report teenage girls being executed by firing squads or by hanging and men and women having boiling water poured on their heads and having their legs and backs branded with hot irons. Despite promises of freedom and restoration of their property if they recant and despite brutal treatment, few Baha'is have renounced their faith and "converted" to Islam.

US Government action on behalf of Iranian Baha'is: Public pressure is one of the few tools available to the US Government when serious human rights violations take place in a country, such as Iran, where the US has little influence. In key statements by the President and major Administration officials, in the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices submitted annually to Congress, in comments on the Voice of America, in two concurrent congressional resolutions, and in a number of statements to the press, the US Government has condemned Iranian persecution of the Baha'is. In addition, the US has given refuge to more than 10,000 Iranian Baha'is during the last 4 years. Finally, the US has supported international efforts on behalf of the Baha'is, including those undertaken by the UN Secretary General, the UN Economic and Social Council, and the UN Human Rights Commission.

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