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Reagan to Iran: Stop persecuting Bahais

*President will urge Khomeini to
stay the executions of 22 members*

By Bernard Weinraub
New York Times News Service

WASHINGTON — President Reagan will issue a statement tonight saying the United States is "alarmed and dismayed" at the persecution of Bahais in Iran and urging the Iranian government to halt the planned execution of a group of prominent Bahais, White House officials said yesterday.

"I strongly urge other world leaders to join me in an appeal to the Ayatollah Khomeini and the rest of Iran's leadership not to implement the sentences that have been pronounced on these innocent people," said the presidential statement, which was made available yesterday.

White House officials said the apparently increased persecution of the Bahai minority in Iran was "a serious issue with us, an important issue now." At least 150 Bahai men and women have been hanged or shot by Khomeini's government since it came to power in 1979.

Although the Bahai population in Iran is relatively small — there are 300,000 to 400,000 Bahais in the country — the Khomeini government has singled

them out as adherents of a heretic Islamic sect. Bahais have generally served as businessmen, teachers, middle-level government officials, and army officers in Iran.

The Bahais have no clergy and uphold the divine origin of all major religions, including Islam. The religion shuns violence, abstains from partisan politics, and espouses the "eradication of prejudices of race, creed, class, nationality, and sex."

The Bahais have been the scapegoats of Persian and then Iranian society for generations; an estimated 20,000 Bahais have been killed in Iran in the last 100 years, according to Bahai officials. The faith claims adherents in 173 countries.

Bahai officials in the United States said Reagan's statement would be the first White House expression of concern about the persecution of the Bahais since the Iranian revolution, although Carter administration officials also criticized Iran's treatment of the Bahais.

The statement was prompted, according to administration officials, by several congressional resolutions about the Bahais, growing State Department concern about the treatment of the minority, and the highly vocal and organized Bahais in the United States, who number 100,000.

Although Reagan, in his planned statement, said the Iranian government had sentenced 22 members

of the Bahai faith to death, Firuz Kazemzadeh, a Bahai of Iranian descent who is chairman of the Committee on Middle Eastern Studies at Yale, said in a telephone interview that two men and a woman had already been executed and that 19 now face death in Iranian prisons.

Kazemzadeh said the presidential statement was being made to coincide with the founding of the Bahai faith, on May 23, 1844. On that date a merchant in the Persian city of Shiraz, Ali Muhammad, told a Moslem clergyman that he was divinely inspired to create the new faith. The merchant was later known as the Bab, or gate, signifying the gate between man and God.

Reagan, in his statement, said, "America and the world are increasingly alarmed and dismayed at the persecution and severe repression of the Bahais in Iran."

He said the Bahais sentenced to death "are not guilty of any political offense or crime." He added: "They have not plotted to overthrow the regime, and they are not responsible for the deaths of anyone. They only wish to live according to the dictates of their own conscience."

Bahai officials said that 15,000 to 20,000 Bahais fled Iran in the last few years and that about 8,000 of them had settled in the United States.

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