

Storm builds up over religious slaughter in Iran

by Rosemary Righter

INTERNATIONAL pressure for a United Nations special inquiry into the persecution in Iran of the 300,000 people of the minority Baha'i religion will be strengthened by last Friday's execution of a Briton visiting Iran, whose death is directly linked to his membership of the faith.

Habibollah Azizi, aged 65, was executed last week having been under arrest in Teheran since late last year. Azizi moved to Bournemouth 12 years ago and became a British resident in 1979. He returned to visit his mother in Iran but was arrested two days after arrival.

Evidence now before the human rights sub-commission on the prevention of discrimination, meeting in Geneva, gives harrowing details of executions, murders, torture and economic harassment of the Baha'i religious community since the 1979 revolution in Iran.

Forcible mass conversions are a daily occurrence, and murders and executions are increasing. Ben Whitaker, director of the London-based Minority Rights Group, says that they are threatened by a systematic official policy of extermination.

Immediately after the 1979 revolution, their administrative offices were raided by revolutionary guards and mobs incited by mullahs. Their cemeteries were desecrated. The authorities then claimed that this violence was random, and responded by confiscating "for their protection" the religion's holy places, hospitals, clinics and other community property.

The holy places have since been vandalised or demolished and the most sacred of them, the House of the Bab in Shiraz, has been razed to the ground. Last June orders were given to build roads and a public square on the site.

Members have also been dismissed from their jobs in the civil service and the schools and deprived of their pension rights. Businessmen have had their premises and assets confiscated.

Whole rural communities have been driven from their homes.

The religion was born in Iran a century ago, but is now worldwide, with several million adherents, including 4,000 in Britain.

As convenient scapegoats at times of national upheaval, members have been variously accused of being agents for Tsarist Russia, for British imperialism, for international Zionism and for the Central Intelligence Agency.

They are vulnerable to these accusations because they believe in world government and do not take part in national elections or accept political posts, though they are required by their religion to obey whatever national government is in power.

But, unlike Christianity, Judaism and other minority religions in Iran, this faith is not recognised by Iran's new Islamic constitution and is effectively put outside the protection of the law.

The United Nations sub-commission is expected to issue a formal condemnation next week, accusing the Iranian government of "systematic persecution . . . motivated by religious intolerance and a desire to eliminate the faith in the land of its birth."

The Iranian government denies the charge, claiming that adherents have been executed for "crimes"—such as espionage, corruption or warring against God. Almost all of those executed have been offered their lives if they would convert to Islam.

Their case is expected to come up before the United Nations General Assembly later this month. Iran has turned a deaf ear to appeals by the European Parliament and the Council of Europe as well as diplomatic efforts by a growing number of governments. The leadership continues to consider them as heretics and — despite the fact that their religion specifically forbids them to engage in political activity — as a "political sect."