

THEIR "CRIME" IS FAITH

Despite all the campaigns waged in their behalf, millions of innocent people in dozens of countries are still persecuted and sometimes killed because of their politics, skin color, ethnic background, class origin or religious beliefs. In revolutionary Iran, the regime of Ayatollah Khomeini has elevated the medieval witch hunt to a national priority. This pitiless effort aims to "cleanse" the Islamic state of the Baha'is, adherents of a peace-loving minority religion, solely because they refuse to renounce their faith.

BY FERGUS M. BORDEWICH

TWO OF MY BROTHERS and my brother-in-law were taken away in the night and killed by the Ayatollah's executioners," says an elderly doctor. "The Pasdars [revolutionary guards] stripped me of my home, my car, my property, and shut down my medical practice. When they told my nephew that every member of the family, from eight to eighty, was to be killed, I decided to flee."

The old man pauses for a moment, choosing his words. "And yet we are not against the Iranians or Khomeini," he finally says. "We will never take vengeance on anyone. All we want is to be left in peace to worship as we choose."

The doctor's experience is typical of the unremitting terror that has engulfed the followers of the Baha'i faith since Shi'ite Moslem fanatics seized power in Iran in 1979. The Khomeini regime has mounted a steady campaign of persecution against the Baha'is—killing some 200, imprisoning and torturing hundreds more, and forcing tens of thousands into exile.

"Instruments of Satan." Since their founding in the 19th century by a Persian prophet whom they call Baha'u'llah, or Glory of God, the Baha'is have been regarded by their countrymen as heretics from Islam. But today's Shi'ite radicals have added a new resentment: to

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them, the generally well-educated and progress-minded Baha'is symbolize the late Shah's modernization attempts, which Khomeini's followers are determined to reverse. In the words of one powerful religious judge, "The Iranian nation cannot tolerate the perverted Baha'is, who are instruments of Satan and followers of the devil and of the superpowers and their agents."

Such sordid accusations are part of the awful nightmare land of today's Iran, where contempt is virtue, cruelty is devotion and ignorance is wisdom. The 250,000 or so Baha'is who remain in Iran are pacifists by creed—like Mahatma Gandhi, they believe that violence begets only more violence—and they submit to their fate with the calm surrender of Christian martyrs.

The Baha'is, who number some four million in 166 countries, practice a gentle faith that emphasizes the unity of religions, nations and races, and considers "service to mankind" a form of worship. Much in their canon is common to all the great religions—including Islam. Baha'is are prohibited by their religion from participating in politics, and also believe in strict obedience to the laws of any country in which they live. Indeed, even while their families are being tormented by the authorities, Baha'i draftees—despite their faith's pacifism—are serving in Iran's war against Iraq.

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No fewer than 40,000 of the 300,000 Baha'is who lived in Iran before the revolution have been forced to flee. For those who remain—stripped of their jobs, homes and dignity—daily life is an ongoing agony of fear and death. A well-known Baha'i doctor, who for decades had treated Baha'is and Moslems alike, was beaten to death by a fanatical mob in his own Teheran clinic. A 75-year-old bazaar merchant was murdered when he refused to recant his beliefs.

Young Baha'i girls have been abducted and forced to become Moslems. Wives have been jailed when they attempted to visit their imprisoned husbands. Throughout Iran, Baha'i children have been ordered out of the schools and universities. And the holiest Baha'i shrines have been obliterated.

Many Baha'is are dragged away in the middle of the night. "When the Pasdars came for my father," a 25-year-old woman recalls, "we expected he'd be interrogated and released. After seven months they finally let us see him. He had been tortured and his legs were dragging, but he tried not to show it. He told us that he was happy because he was serving our religion. Then one day they just killed him. They never even told us what he was charged with."

Trials, when they take place at all, are a travesty. "A friend of mine was in the courtroom only ten minutes," says one Baha'i refugee from Shiraz. "The judge, a *mullah* [reli-

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gious teacher], asked her if she was a Baha'i. 'Yes,' she replied. He asked if she would become a Moslem. She answered 'No.' 'Then the Koran says you must be executed,' the *mullah* said. She was hanged instantly."

Unlike Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism (another Persian religion), the Baha'i faith was never recognized as a separate religion by the constitution of Iran, where there is a mandatory death penalty for renouncing Islam. "The fundamentalist *mullahs* and their followers feel a religious duty to eliminate the Baha'is," explains a European diplomat with long experience in Iran. "They ask the Baha'is to convert. If the Baha'is refuse, then, in the *mullahs'* eyes,

they are guilty of a religious crime and have to be executed."

Price of a Purge. Repression has been particularly vicious in the countryside. Frenzied mobs led by rabble-raising *mullahs* roam from town to town to harass Baha'is. In one desert hamlet, an elderly Baha'i farmer and his wife were burned alive. Even death is no refuge. In the city of Shiraz, Shi'ite mobs pulled Baha'i corpses out of their graves in search of jewelry.

In the major cities, the persecution is led by the Pasdars and by the revolutionary committees, which have been set up in every workplace to investigate employees' beliefs and to purge the Baha'is and others with whom they disagree. Those who don't recant are fired. Recent

reports from Teheran indicate that more than 10,000 Baha'is have been arbitrarily dismissed, had their pensions canceled or been ordered to repay the salaries they earned before being fired.

Nowhere is the government's determination to wipe out the Baha'is clearer than in its systematic suppression of the Baha'is' National Spiritual Assembly, the body responsible for managing the community's religious affairs in Iran. From the start, Baha'i community workers had been frequent victims of Shi'ite zealots; then, in 1980, the nine members of the Baha'i Assembly were arrested, and disappeared without a trace. In 1981 eight of the nine new assembly members were summarily executed (one

was "lucky" to be out sick). Undaunted, the Baha'is elected yet another new assembly. In August 1983 the Iranian government declared participation in any Baha'i administrative activity a crime. Honoring their obedience to local laws, the Baha'is disbanded all their remaining institutions in Iran. But the killings and persecutions have continued.

Life on the Run. Every tale told by Baha'is I interviewed in Austria, Switzerland, Canada and the United States is a study in tragedy. The story of Mariam and Daryoush,* both active in Baha'i community affairs, is typical. Mariam is an articulate university graduate in

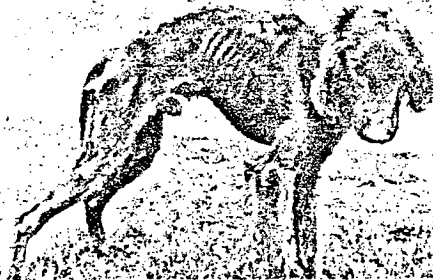
*Names have been changed to protect relatives in Iran.

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her late 20s. Expelled from her job for her beliefs, she began tending Baha'i children barred from government schools. Meanwhile, the Pasdars were hunting Daryoush, her husband, who owned a small factory. The Pasdars were looking for Daryoush because they knew him to be a counselor to Baha'i youth, an "official" in government eyes. The "subversive" texts he taught were documents of various world religions, including the Bible—and the Koran.

Finally, Daryoush was forced to go underground, and Mariam lived for the next several months at her mother's home. "One night, eight Pasdars burst in the door and demanded my husband," Mariam says. "Not finding him, they dragged me off to prison and interrogated me eight hours a day. They told me that if I renounced my religion everything would be all right. But how can you deny something you believe in?"

Released after 14 days, Mariam discovered that her home, car and bank accounts had been confiscated along with those of her parents. Daryoush remained on the run for nearly eight months. In the end, the couple escaped to Canada.

The largest group of Baha'i refugees, about 7500, has settled in the United States. Many have also been accepted by Canada, Australia, the Scandinavian countries and a few Latin American states. But since the early 1980s, the outflow has been reduced to a mere trickle. If a

Baha'i tries to leave legally, his passport is lifted and he is jailed. For those who wish to escape, there is almost no alternative to the harrowing trek across the desert to Pakistan or through the rugged mountains to Turkey.

Power of Faith. Many Baha'is arrive at the border without money, friends or protection. The 1000 or so Baha'i refugees in Pakistan have been receiving about \$50 a month per person from the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, but a number of them have been waiting a year to be accepted by a third country. Several hundred more are waiting in Turkey for permission to emigrate.

Because the Baha'is won't strike back at the regime, states Gerald Knight, a British Baha'i who serves as the faith's U.N. representative for human rights in New York, the only hope for these gentle people is in diplomacy and international protest. Since the persecutions began, quiet representations have been made to the Iranian government by the U.N. Secretary General. Moreover, resolutions condemning persecution of the Baha'is have been adopted by the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, the European Parliament, the U.S. Congress, and the parliaments of Australia, Canada, West Germany and other countries. International efforts have so far, at best, only slowed the pace of the persecution.

For the moment the Baha'is are hopefully watching the result of

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the May 25, 1984, decision of the U.N.'s Economic and Social Council to appoint a special representative "to make a thorough study of the human-rights situation" in Iran, and to report to the Human Rights Commission. Much, of course, depends on the investigator, yet to be named, and on the Iranian response.

In Iran, meanwhile, the stage remains set for genocide. The threat of total extermination will hang over the Baha'is as long as fanatic religious leaders, with their totalitarianism of hate and bigotry, remain in power. If Iran were to lose its war with Iraq, or if its economy were finally to collapse, it could scarcely be surprising if the radical *mullahs* looked to the Baha'is as scapegoats and put in-

to effect the "final solution" that they seem to have had in mind all along.

The Baha'is pray that the world will come to their aid, by continuing to accept Baha'i refugees and by putting economic and diplomatic pressure on Iran. To endure the nearly unendurable daily life inside Iran, however, they will look ultimately to their own faith.

"We are not bitter," Gerald Knight says, with the sense of self-assurance and conviction that rises through the words of nearly all Baha'is. "We don't hate the people who are killing our fellow Baha'is. Rather, we take our example from the people who are being killed—they are filled with love for their tormentors. In them we see the power of God."

Letter Perfect

A WELL-MEANING CUSTOMER of the famed Neiman-Marcus department store was prompted to send Stanley Marcus this letter:

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By return mail came Marcus's reply:

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—Bennett Cerf in *Saturday Review*