

World Learning Of Bahai Plight

Persecution in Iran Puts Focus On Religion's Doctrine of Unity

By KEN KUSMER
Associated Press

HAIFA, Israel — The solemnity of the Bahai World Center dominates picturesque Mount Carmel here. The golden-domed Shrine of the Bab glistens in the hot summer sun and two white marble edifices stand amid rows of manicured gardens.

The tranquillity here differs dramatically from the mood 750 miles away in Iran, where another ugly chapter in the faith's brief history is unfolding.

Bahais there are imprisoned, sent to the gallows or forced from their jobs by a government that considers them heretics, subversives, prostitutes and Zionist spies. Bahai shrines have been bulldozed.

In June, the situation in Iran deteriorated drastically. The fundamentalist Islamic regime of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini scoffed at an appeal by President Reagan for the lives of 22 Bahais and executed 17 of them in the space of two weeks.

The Bahai center claims two other prominent Bahais were kidnapped on the streets of Tehran, while 130 Bahai men, women and children were held captive by neighboring villagers and pressured to recant their faith. Meanwhile, the official Iranian news agency IRNA reported that 50 Bahai families had converted to Islam.

"We are alarmed and very concerned that the extent and the intensity (of the persecution) may be increasing," said Donald Barrett, secretary-general of the Bahai international organization.

Jewish author Elie Wiesel, the chairman of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial, recently suggested that the U.N. Human Rights Commission probe the plight of the Bahais in Iran.

"We all vowed after the Nazi outrages — never again. Now is the time to act on that vow," Wiesel said.

The Bahai leadership claims that since the Khomeini regime gained power in 1979, 142 Bahais have been killed and 14 are missing and presumed dead. About 275 are imprisoned.

Bahais, often erroneously referred to as an Islamic sect, embraces the unity of all religions, and besides Mohammed, it considers among its prophets

Moses, Jesus, Buddha, Krishna and Zoroaster.

"We are not a sect. We are not a section or part of anything," Barrett said in a recent interview. "Because our roots are in Islam, people tend to think we are an Eastern religion, to lump us as an offshoot of Islam."

"Until recently, there has been very little knowledge about the Bahais," Barrett said, "But because of the persecutions in Iran we have become the focus of world attention."

Already, the United Nations, the European Common Market, the U.S. House of Representatives and the national parliaments of Canada, Australia, Fiji and West Germany have passed resolutions condemning the persecution.

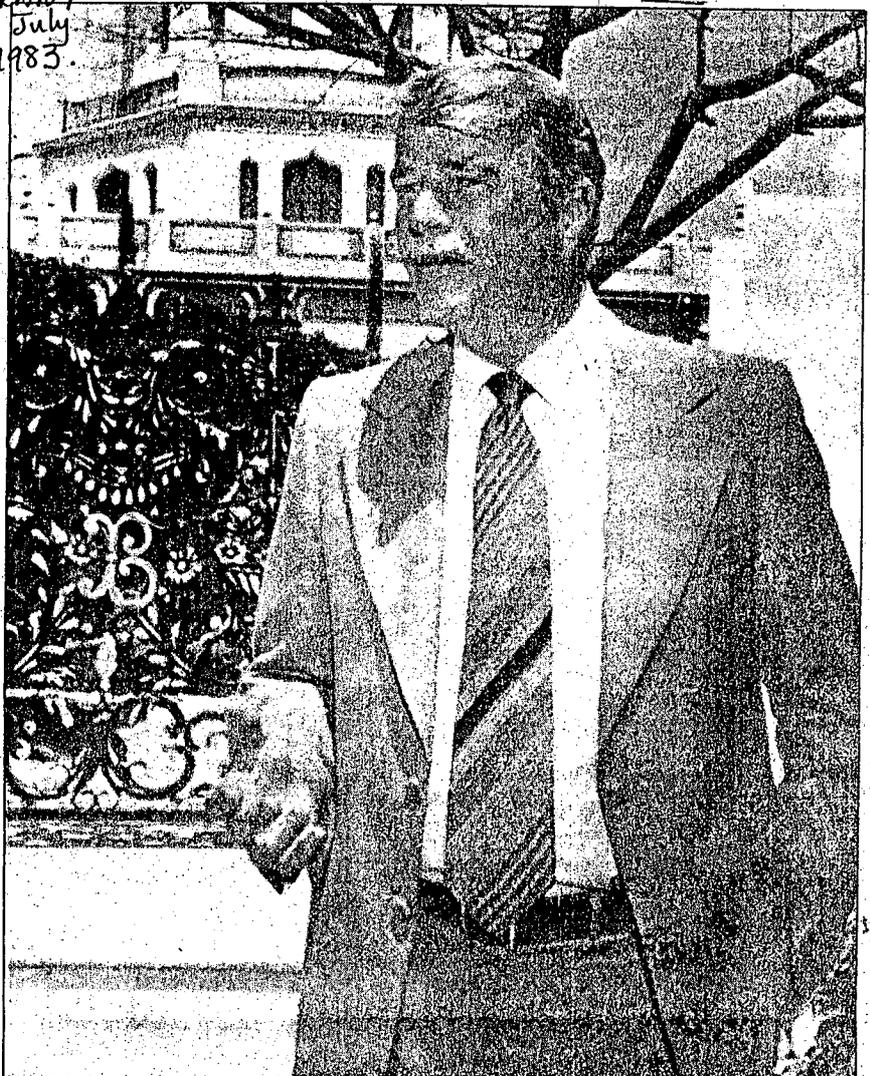
As secretary-general, Barrett represents Bahai concerns on behalf of the top Bahai administrative body, the International House of Justice. A silver-haired, affable American and former senior legal counsel for the Gulf Oil Corp., Barrett, 55, is the chief Bahai spokesman, explaining the faith's little-known history and beliefs and answering the charges Iran has leveled against Bahais.

Bahaism was founded in 1844 and has spread to 134 nations with more than 2 million adherents. Its largest community — 1 million — is in India, and it has 100,000 followers in the United States, where it is headquartered in the Chicago suburb of Wilmette, Ill.

Bahaism has consistently been persecuted in the land of its birth, then called Persia and now Iran, and has been banned at least partially in several other, predominantly Moslem countries, including Iraq, Egypt, Morocco, Syria and Indonesia.

Bahaism is the largest minority religion in Iran today, with an estimated 400,000 members, but is not protected under the constitution of the Islamic republic as are other minority faiths like Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism.

"Now it is virtually impossible (for a Bahai) to leave Iran," Barrett said. "Why? We're the scapegoats. If the war with Iraq goes bad, blame the Bahais. If



Donald Barrett, secretary-general of the Bahai International Community, stands before the Shrine of Bab on Mount Carmel in Haifa, Israel. The shrine is a Bahai prophet's burial place.

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Bahai leaders claim that Iranian Bahais are guilty only of membership in the faith, and that conversion to Islam offers immediate freedom for incarcerated Bahais.

Bahaism has been regarded as a heresy to Islam since the founding of the faith in 1844.

Mirza ali-Muhammed, now worshipped by Bahais as the Bab — the Gate in Arabic — announced in the southern Persian city of Shiraz then that a new prophet was coming. The Bab and 20,000 other Bahais were executed within the next six years.

The new prophet, Mirza Husayn Ali, known as Bahauallah — The Glory of God — proclaimed himself in 1863 in

Baghdad, where he had been exiled from Persia 10 years earlier in the aftermath of the Bab's execution.

According to Bahai literature, the popularity of Bahauallah's teachings was his undoing, as local rulers viewed him as a threat and successively banished him to the Ottoman centers of Constantinople and Adrianople and finally to Acre, eight miles north of Haifa.

Bahauallah eventually won relative freedom in Acre, and died there in 1892, and Acre and Haifa together serve as the spiritual and administrative center of the faith. About 250 Bahais — all officially connected to the center — live in Israel.

The influx of Bahai money and pilgrims to Haifa has triggered the Iranian accusations

of Zionist espionage, a charge that for many years caused the world center here to avoid comment on the Iranian situation.

Because Bahaism's roots are in Islam, Iran regards it as a heretical sect and a threat to Islam.

But Barrett argues: "We are the only other major religion to recognize Mohammed as a prophet and the Koran as a holy book."

Bahaism is as distinct from Islam as Christianity is from Judaism, he added. "We seek unity in diversity. We are not seeking unity in sameness."

Iran also charges the Bahais cooperated with the previous Iranian monarchy, but a basic Bahai tenet demands obedience to government and forbids participation in partisan politics.