



BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

Kenneth E. Bowers,
Secretary, National Spiritual Assembly of the
Bahá'ís of the United States

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Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
Hearing on The Worsening Plight of Religious Minorities in Iran

Mr. Co-Chairmen McGovern and Wolf, and other distinguished members of the Commission, thank you for holding this hearing on a pressing human rights issue of significant global concern – religious freedom in Iran – and thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I am the Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, the elected governing body of the Bahá'ís of this country. I am here today to speak about the Bahá'í community of Iran, a group that Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, recently labeled the most persecuted religious minority in that country.

The Bahá'í Faith is a world religion with some 5 million followers in over 200 countries and territories, representing virtually every racial, ethnic, and national group on the planet. Some 300,000 Bahá'ís live throughout Iran, making them the country's largest non-Muslim religious minority. The persecution of Bahá'ís has been particularly severe since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Between 1978 and 1998, the government killed over 200 Bahá'ís. Thousands more were imprisoned, many of them brutally tortured.

A 1991 confidential government memorandum signed by the Supreme Leader, which describes itself as addressing “the Bahá'í question,” calls for the government to treat the Bahá'ís in such a way that “their progress and development are blocked,” and generally outlines a strategy for the economic and cultural strangulation of the Bahá'í community

Economic and social pressure on Iran's Bahá'í community is acute. Bahá'ís are barred from public employment. The government pressures Muslim employers to refuse employment to Bahá'ís and to dismiss Bahá'ís from their employment in the private sector. Bahá'ís are also often denied business licenses as a way of destroying their means of livelihood.

Bahá'ís are excluded from public universities. At times, the government permits the enrollment of a few students known to be Bahá'ís so that it may publicly state that Bahá'ís are enrolled in university – only to expel them later. Bahá'í school children are frequently harassed by teachers and administrators.

Bahá'í homes are routinely raided by government agents, and Bahá'í homes and shops are often the target of vandalism and arson attacks. The property of Bahá'ís is often confiscated without compensation, and Bahá'í holy places have been destroyed. Bahá'í marriages are not recognized and Bahá'í children are considered illegitimate. Bahá'ís are not permitted to bury their dead according to Bahá'í law, and Bahá'í cemeteries have been desecrated. Iran's state-sponsored news media systematically disseminates virulent propaganda intended to incite hatred against the Bahá'í community. Bahá'ís also cannot obtain redress for the acts of aggression and abuse they suffer.

Since 2005, the government has been steadily increasing the pressure on the Bahá'í community. Over 600 Bahá'ís have been arrested since then. In the spring of 2008, the government of Iran arrested the seven members of the ad hoc leadership group of the Bahá'ís, detained them and falsely charged them with, among other things, espionage, propaganda against the Islamic order, and corruption on earth. In 2010, these seven individuals – Mrs. Fariba Kamalabadi, Mr. Jamaloddin Khanjani, Mr. Afif Naeimi, Mr. Saeid Rezaie, Mrs. Mahvash Sabet, Mr. Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Mr. Vahid Tizfahm – were sentenced to 20 year prison terms. They are now nearing the fifth anniversary of their imprisonment.

Beginning in May of 2011, the government conducted sweeping raids on the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education, the Iranian Bahá'í community's informal system of higher education. Agents searched dozens of homes, seizing educational materials, and arresting 17 individuals. In October 2011, seven faculty and staff were convicted of “membership in the deviant sect of Bahá'ísm, with the goal of taking

action against the security of the country, in order to further the aims of the deviant sect and those of organizations outside the country” and given four or five year sentences. Six of these individuals are currently in prison: Mr. Kamran Mortezaie, Mr. Mahmoud Badavam, Ms. Noushin Khadem, Mr. Farhad Sedghi, Mr. Riaz Sobhani, and Mr. Ramin Zibaie. Since then, four more educators have been imprisoned: Ms. Faran Hessami, Mr. Kamran Rahimian, Mr. Kayvan Rahimian, and Mr. Shahin Negari.

The situation has worsened considerably in the last two years. On January 1, 2011, there were 56 Bahá'ís in prison; this number is now 110. On January 1, 2011, there were 230 Bahá'ís who, although not then in prison, were awaiting trial, appeal, sentencing, or commencement of their sentences; this number is now 436.

The Bahá'ís in the small town of Semnan have been particularly hard hit. Several Bahá'ís have been imprisoned, several homes have been attacked, and numerous businesses have been closed. Recently, three young mothers in Semnan were imprisoned along with their nursing infants.

On March 12, 2013, Senator Mark Kirk and Senator Richard Durbin introduced Senate Resolution 75, and Congressman Michael Grimm and Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky introduced House Resolution 109, which condemn the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran. It is our hope that these resolutions, hearings like this one, and actions taken by nations around the world will shine a bright light on the dire religious freedom situation in Iran and help to hasten the day when Bahá'ís and all citizens of Iran are accorded their full human rights.