

**The Bahá'í International Community's
United Nations Office**

UPDATE

***Situation of the Bahá'ís
in the Islamic Republic of Iran***

January 2008

This document presents only the most recent developments in the ongoing oppression that targets Bahá'í citizens of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It covers the months from September 2007 to mid-January 2008.

To complement the latest news given in this *Update*, a background document provides further information: [Situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran – Nature of the Persecution \(http://bic.org/statements-and-reports/Iran-persecution-background.pdf\)](http://bic.org/statements-and-reports/Iran-persecution-background.pdf), a review of the human rights violations perpetrated against members of the community for decades, also highlights and re-examines how their situation has gradually but steadily worsened over the past three years.

The Bahá'í International Community is seriously concerned about an incremental rise in the number of human rights violations against Bahá'ís in the Islamic Republic of Iran during recent months. Other groups are also suffering, as the authorities have been conducting a crackdown on civil society and targeting in particular academics, women's rights activists, students and journalists.

Denial of access to employment

Most widespread and systematic have been incidents that deny Bahá'ís the right to employment, following implementation of official orders to identify and monitor all members of the community throughout the past year (for more on the information-gathering campaign, see [Situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran – Nature of the Persecution \(http://bic.org/statements-and-reports/Iran-persecution-background.pdf\)](http://bic.org/statements-and-reports/Iran-persecution-background.pdf)). During 2007, such abuses occurred in 41 different localities.

Previously unreported cases include:

- refusal to issue or renew business licences, work permits and/or trade membership cards in a wide range of sectors;
- refusal of loan applications for business purposes (in several towns);
- official intervention to force dismissals or block employment opportunities;

- Harassment of business owners, including non-Bahá'ís employing members of the community – shop closures in some cities and others threatened with closure, bans on advertising, prohibitions on leaving the country, etc.;
- Incitement of the population to shun Bahá'í-owned businesses (also in several different towns).

We recently received copies of documents proving that these violations are a result of government policy. In a letter dated 9 April 2007, the Public Places Supervision Office of the Public Intelligence and Security Force (Province of Tehran) gave orders to the commanders of police and heads of public intelligence and security throughout its region. The orders specified restrictions to prevent members of the “perverse Bahaist sect” (as well as members of anti-revolutionary political organizations and other illegal groups) from engaging in particular occupations.

According to these instructions, Bahá'ís are to be denied work permits or licences for over 25 kinds of business, including all trades involving the preparation or sale of food. In addition, Bahá'ís are to be barred from “high-earning businesses” and only granted permits for work providing “an ordinary livelihood”.

Moreover, an official form must be filled out and signed by all who apply for business licences, requiring the applicant to declare his/her religion and undertake to:

...adhere to and uphold the moral principle of the law and regulations of the Public Places Supervision Office and the laws and authority of the Islamic Revolution... [and accede that] ...in the case of the slightest wrongdoing, the [same] Office has the authority to impede my activity without adhering to any legal or administrative proceedings, and I, consequently, do not have grounds for any objections.

In this manner, the authorities are attempting to deny legal recourse to those targeted by the discriminatory regulations.

Denial of access to education

There have also been new developments in the ongoing attempt to obtain access to university for Bahá'í students. It is important to note that the government has done nothing to reverse or to counter instructions from various authorities, stipulating that students who are discovered to be Bahá'ís must be expelled from university. As previously reported, we have obtained copies of correspondence that clearly show the official and wide-reaching nature of these instructions (for details, see [Situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran – Nature of the Persecution \(http://bic.org/statements-and-reports/Iran-persecution-background.pdf\)](http://bic.org/statements-and-reports/Iran-persecution-background.pdf)).

It is also clear that the instructions are being implemented. For academic year 2006-2007, of the 480 who received documentation indicating that they had passed the exam and were eligible for admission, only 289 were originally accepted, and of these (to date) 162 either have not been allowed to register or were expelled when it became clear that they were Bahá'ís. Regarding the students who took the national entrance exam in June 2007, for academic year 2007-2008:

- The application form for technical and vocational institutes throughout the country (which had to be filled out to take the exam in these fields) included a declaration of religion that excluded Bahá'ís. The applicant was given only three choices: Christian, Jewish or Zoroastrian. The form explicitly stated that if none of the boxes were marked, the applicant would be considered Muslim. The registration

form for other institutions of higher education allowed Bahá'ís to take the exam without declaring a religious affiliation, in the same way as last year.

- Over 1,000 Bahá'í students took the exam in June 2007. Some 800 of these students were later informed that their exam papers would not be graded, and the reason given in all cases was “incomplete file”. Whatever this may mean, it was not raised beforehand, and they were all permitted to take the exam. The numbers involved strongly suggest that this is yet another means being used to bar access to university for students now known to be members of the Bahá'í community.
- Only 237 of those who took the exam were subsequently informed that their marks were satisfactory and that they could apply for admittance. Of these, only 121 were allowed to select their field of study and admitted to universities nationwide. Thus far, out of these 121, 36 students have either not been allowed to register or have been expelled from the universities concerned.

The following statistics present complete details for the past two academic years:

<i>Academic Year</i>	Registered for national entrance exam	Took national entrance exam	“Incomplete files”	Eligible to select field of study	Accepted at university	Did not enrol for personal reasons or military service	Expelled or not allowed to register	Total enrolled in universities as of January 2007
2007-08	over 1000	>1000	±800	237	121	8	36	77
2006-07	±1000	830	----	480	289	42	162	85
TOTAL							198	162

We cannot but conclude that the authorities never intended to take all the measures required to reverse long-standing policies that continue to block access to higher education for those identified as Bahá'ís. Enrolling a tiny, token number can only be seen as a tactic to counter protest from the international community.

The campaign to put pressure on Bahá'í primary and high school students has continued, as well. All high school students completed a registration form at the start of the 2007 school year, but the Ministry of Education later introduced a new form with a section on religion. Teachers have strongly urged Bahá'í students not to declare their religion on this form. Since September, at least 19 Bahá'í students have been dismissed from different schools because of their religious beliefs. In addition, there have been over 40 cases involving refusals to register Bahá'ís in schools (we cannot confirm the exact number of children concerned, as some parents may have tried several different schools, and some reported cases may involve more than one child from the same family).

Other incidents

Early in September, threatening letters were delivered to some 30 Bahá'í families in Najafabad, on the outskirts of Esfahan; and on 9 and 10 September, individuals using heavy equipment bulldozed a Bahá'í cemetery near this town, destroying over 100 Bahá'í graves.

The destruction recalled a nearly identical intervention in July in Yazd, where another Bahá'í cemetery was extensively damaged by earth-moving equipment. During the

past year, six other cemeteries were raided and partially demolished. Desecrations of Bahá'í cemeteries or graves were reported in 19 different localities.

Arrests and imprisonments

According to the most recent reports received, ten Bahá'ís were in prison in Iran as of mid-January 2008. The total number of Bahá'ís arrested since August 2004 and released on bail, awaiting trial (or recently sentenced and awaiting appeal hearing) now stands at 145. Fourteen members of the community were imprisoned in 2007, and many more were summoned for interrogation by police or Ministry of Information officials without being officially arrested or detained: 196 such cases were reported during the year. For the security of those concerned, we will not discuss any individual cases here.

Furthermore, a large number of Bahá'í cases were taken up by the Iranian courts. The judgements handed down in 2007 totalled:

- Suspended sentences: 62 cases
- Sentences to be determined by the judge: 8 cases
- Acquittals: 7 cases
- Imprisonments: 19 cases
- Pecuniary punishment: 5 cases

Three members of the community are imprisoned in Shiraz. It should be recalled that in May 2006 the authorities arrested 54 Bahá'ís who had been engaged (together with several non-Bahá'ís) in an educational programme for underprivileged children there. At that time, one Bahá'í was released the same day, 14 were imprisoned for five days, another 36 for six days, and three were detained for a month. In August 2007, the entire group was summoned to appear in court in Shiraz to receive the court's judgement. They asked to receive the ruling in writing but were told that it would be given only orally. As a result of persistent efforts, they were able to obtain permission to make a handwritten copy of the judgment.

All the Bahá'ís were accused of having engaged in indirect teaching of the Bahá'í Faith, on the grounds that their programme was based on a Bahá'í-inspired publication characterized by the court as having been produced by the Bahá'ís "to teach the Bahá'í children how to teach their Faith". This accusation is false, and indeed the court acknowledged that the material used in the programme in Shiraz included no explicit mention of the Faith. Nevertheless, it was argued that the permit for the educational programme had been obtained "by deceiving the city's cultural and executive organizations, such as the Cultural Council and its auxiliary [branches], in the name of activities related to education and culture..." and that the intention had in fact been to "teach [the Faith] indirectly".

Three of the Bahá'ís were each sentenced to four years' imprisonment (three years for organizing illegal groups and an additional one year for teaching on behalf of groups that are against the Islamic regime). On 19 November 2007, these three Bahá'ís were told by telephone to go to the Ministry of Information office in Shiraz to retrieve the items that had been confiscated from them when they were arrested in May 2006. They did so, were taken into custody and are being held at the detention centre of the Ministry of Information in Shiraz, where family members have since been able to visit them. The reason for their detainment at this facility is not known, as it seems that the Information Ministry does not have the right under Iranian law to imprison citizens but only to detain individuals for the purpose of interrogation.

The remaining 50 Bahá'ís were each sentenced to one year in prison: four months for forming illegal groups and an additional eight months for spreading propaganda on behalf of groups that oppose the regime. Their sentences were suspended for three years on the grounds that all of them are young people with no record of any previous criminal conviction. Suspension of the sentence is, however, dependent upon their attending classes organized by the Islamic Propaganda Organization. The Bahá'ís have declined to participate in the classes of the Propaganda Organization, as they would be required to sign documents indicating that they have become Muslims.

All 53 Bahá'ís have appealed the verdicts against them, but at this time the status of their appeals is not known.

Two prisoners previously incarcerated have been released, including a 70-year-old Bahá'í tried in April 2007 and sentenced to one year in prison and 74 lashes. The flogging was not carried out, because of his advanced age. Subsequently we heard that he had been fined instead, and his sentence had been reduced to five months. It seems he was released on 30 September, having served out this reduced sentence.

The Bahá'ís have been persecuted throughout their history in Iran, but the oppression greatly increased after the Islamic Revolution. The civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights of Iranian Bahá'ís are violated throughout the country, still today.

Over the past three years, there has been an official, nationwide effort to identify and monitor all members of the community, combined with a campaign of propaganda against the Bahá'í Faith in government-controlled media. In parallel, we have deplored a gradual increase in the cruel and arbitrary use of power against Bahá'ís, including revolving-door arrests and imprisonments, widespread and systematic measures to deprive them of employment, pensions, loans and other means of livelihood, as well as attacks, harassment and discrimination against Bahá'í students of all ages.

The nature, number and range of incidents give ample evidence of the underlying official policy. It is clearly intended not only to put Bahá'ís under severe pressure but also to disengage them from their friends and fellow citizens – by intimidating people they know and inciting the population to religious hatred, suspicion and mistrust.

Further information can be found in the document entitled [Situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran – Nature of the Persecution \(http://bic.org/statements-and-reports/iran-persecution-background.pdf\)](http://bic.org/statements-and-reports/iran-persecution-background.pdf).

Background can also be accessed at: <http://bahai.org/iranthreat>.