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HUMAN RIGHTS

?Five Years Too Many? campaign shows global support for imprisoned Bahá'ís

In Brief:

- For 10 days in May, thousands around the globe participated in a campaign to call attention to the wrongful imprisonment of seven Iranian Bahá'í leaders.
- Government officials, religious leaders, human rights activists, and ordinary citizens urged the Iranian government to immediately release the seven, who have been imprisoned since 2008.
- One theme that emerged was the degree to which religious leaders?including Muslims?find Iran?s persecution of Bahá'ís unconscionable.

A global campaign to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the imprisonment of seven Iranian Bahá'í leaders led to an outpouring of support and concern for them and other prisoners of conscience in Iran.

Statements calling for the immediate release of the seven came from every continent, issued by government officials, religious leaders, human rights activists, and ordinary citizens during 10 days in May as part of the campaign, which was titled "Five Years Too Many." Local and national media also gave the campaign "extensive coverage."

"Our hope is that the government of Iran will understand clearly that the seven Bahá'í prisoners, who have been unjustly and wrongfully held for five long years simply for their religious beliefs, have not been forgotten," said Diane Ala'i, the Bahá'í International Community's representative to the United Nations in Geneva.

Six of the seven Bahá'í leaders were arrested on 14 May 2008 in a series of early morning raids in Tehran. The seventh had been arrested two months earlier on 5 March 2008.

After their arrests, the seven leaders—Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Saeid Rezaie, Mahvash Sabet, Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Vahid Tizfahm—were subjected to an entirely flawed judicial process, and ultimately sentenced to 20 years imprisonment, the longest of any current prisoners of conscience in Iran.



Among the most notable expressions of concern was a joint statement by four UN human rights experts which said that the seven are held solely because of their religious beliefs and that Iran's treatment of religious minorities violates international law.

Prominent figures in national governments also spoke out during the campaign, which was organized by the BIC. In Australia, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator Bob Carr, issued a statement on 7 May calling for their immediate release. In Germany, Markus Löning, the Government's Commissioner for Human Rights Policy, called on Iran to repeal the judgment against the seven and to release them immediately.

In Canada, the national Ambassador for Religious Freedom, Andrew Bennet, called for their release. And

Lloyd Axworthy, former Minister of Foreign Affairs in Canada, published an article in *The Globe and Mail* that said Iran's treatment of its Bahá'í minority offered a 'litmus test' to judge Iran's record on human rights.

In the United States, Thomas O. Melia, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, said the wrongful imprisonment of the seven was 'emblematic' of the persecution faced by Bahá'ís throughout Iran and a 'reminder' of the situation facing other minority religious communities in Iran. 'This is a government that also prevents Sunnis from worshipping, flogs Sufis, and detains Zoroastrians without charge simply for who they are,' said Mr. Melia.

In India, a letter calling for the 'immediate release of the seven' was signed by L. K. Advani, chairman of Bharatiya Janata Party; Soli Sorabjee, former Attorney General of India; Imam Umer Ahmed Ilyasi, Chief Imam of the All India Organization of Imams of Mosques; and Miloon Kothari, former UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, among others. 'We call for the immediate release of the seven, along with countless other prisoners of conscience in Iran,' their statement said. 'We plead people of good conscience everywhere in India to raise their voices in support and urge the Iranian Government to live up to its international human rights obligations.'

In Austria, a broad range of officials and prominent individuals issued statements calling for the release of the seven. The officials included Efgani Donmez, the first Muslim elected to the Austrian Parliament, who said: 'The Bahá'ís in Iran are part of the society, part of the Iranian culture. They should also have the (same) rights as all the other citizens in Iran.'

In the Netherlands, Nico Schrijver, a senator and vice-chair of the Geneva-based UN Committee for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, said: 'The leaders of the Bahá'í community have been detained for the sole reason that they are Bahá'ís. This is of course a complete violation of human rights law.'

Religious leaders speak out

One theme that emerged was the degree to which religious leaders find Iran's persecution of Bahá'ís unconscionable.



In South Africa,

Shaykh Achmat Sedick, vice president of the national Muslim Judicial Council, used a Five Years Too Many campaign event on 15 May to talk about freedom of religion from an Islamic perspective. He described how the teachings of the Qur'an support religious freedom and added that Iran's persecution of the Bahá'í community is entirely unjust.

On 14 May, some 50 religious leaders representing virtually every religious community in the United Kingdom sent a letter to UK Foreign Secretary William Hague, calling on him to demand that Iran immediately release the seven. Signatories included Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury; Jonathan Sacks, then Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth; and Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra, an Assistant Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain.

"Iran has abandoned every legal, moral, spiritual and humanitarian standard, routinely violating the human rights of its citizens," they wrote. "The government's shocking treatment of its religious minorities is of particular concern to us as people of faith."

In Uganda, the Inter-Religious Council issued a joint statement calling on Iran to respect the fundamental human rights of Iranian Bahá'ís.

"These sheer violations of basic human rights of Iran's religious minorities by the regime of that country gave rise to international outrage from governments and civil society organizations and all freedom-loving people worldwide," said Joshua Kitakule, Secretary General of the Council.

For more, visit: <http://www.bic.org/fiveyears>
