



ONE COUNTRY

“The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens” – Bahá’u’lláh

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In Egypt, Bahá’ís face challenges over religious identity and belief

A court ruling on all-important state ID cards stirs a major controversy in Egypt and the Arab world, drawing attention to the plight of Bahá’ís and larger issues of religious freedom.

CAIRO — Normally, a driver’s license in Egypt is good for ten years. But when Basma Moussa sought recently to renew hers, officials gave her one that is valid for just a month.

The problem is her state identity card is an old-style paper document, not one of the new computer-generated plastic ID cards that are currently being phased in by the government. Officials want to see the new card before granting a long-term license.

But Dr. Moussa, an assistant professor of oral and maxillofacial surgery at Cairo University, cannot get a new computerized card without lying — which is firmly against her religious principles.

That’s because Dr. Moussa is a Bahá’í, and the new ID card system is designed to lock out any religious affiliation except Islam, Christianity, or Judaism, which are the three officially recognized religions here.

The inability to properly renew a driver’s license may seem a small thing, but it illustrates a much wider problem facing the small but active Egyptian Bahá’í community.

Because of their inability to get new identification cards, Bahá’ís are gradually losing virtually all rights of citizenship, including access to education, financial services, and government health care — not to mention freedom of movement and security of property.

“By the end of the year, the acceptance of hand-written ID cards will stop,” said Dr. Moussa. “And at that time, everything in our lives will stop. We won’t be able to go to the bank, or have any dealing with any government office, whether hospitals, schools, or even at routine police check points.”

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Labib Iskandar Hanna, an Egyptian Bahá’í facing problems over ID cards, was interviewed in a recent article in *Al-Watani Al-Youm*, a national weekly newspaper in Egypt. The article, like dozens that have appeared recently, described the problems that Bahá’ís face over identity cards and religious affiliation.

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The Blue Planet: Oceans in Crisis

The astronauts of Apollo 8, on the first mission around the moon in 1968, took a now famous photograph. Called "Earthrise," it shows the grey and lifeless horizon of the moon — and suspended above it, against the infinite blackness of space, is our bright and blue home planet.

Along with other images from space, that photograph has had a huge impact on humanity's collective consciousness. It offered an undeniable vision of our interdependence, proof that we all share a single home, with nowhere else to go should we irreparably damage this one.

The photograph also revealed another fact: the predominant color of our planet is blue. That's because, of course, more than 70 percent of its surface is covered by water. Oceans, not land, are the predominant feature of the earth, and sea creatures the predominant form of life.

Despite this fact, or perhaps because of it, land-dwelling humanity has by and large taken the world's oceans for granted. Viewed through a traditional mindset that held that their wealth was free for the taking, the oceans were long seen as a bottomless supply of fish, seafood and other natural resources — and also a nearly infinite waste dump.

It now appears that humanity's heedlessness may soon catch up with it.

A series of recent reports and studies indicates that the oceans are on the verge of a crisis. They include the 2003 Pew Oceans Commission, the 2004 Status of Coral Reefs of the World report, and the 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

Within this body of research, there is a common theme: that the activities of humanity — fishing, farming, development, industrial processes, and consumerism — are having a huge and distinctly bad impact on the world's oceans. Moreover, this impact is going largely unnoticed and undiscussed.

Humanity's collective prosperity and long term prospects for survival are intimately linked to the health of the world's oceans. To cite just a few key points: fishing provides

some 12 percent of the world's food supply, photosynthesis in the oceans provides about half of the world's oxygen replenishment, and the oceans play a crucial role in moderating the global climate.

The economic benefits derived from the oceans are huge, as well. Fishing and fish products provide direct employment to some 38 million people and an estimated \$124 billion in economic benefits. The oceans provide an essential transportation link for global trade, not to mention their recreational value. Oceans also provide a resource for petroleum and scarce minerals.

Our collective neglect of the world's oceans, however, puts much of this at risk. Among the urgent problems facing the oceans are:

- **Overfishing.** Recent studies indicated that the number of fish species has declined by 50 percent in the last 50 years — and that the populations of large fish, those species that have traditionally been sought by fishermen, have declined by 90 percent over the same time period. Specialists blame the rise of high-tech, industrial-scale fishing fleets that use sonar, satellite data, and other systems to track schools of fish to their most remote habitats for much of this problem.

- **Pollution.** While oil-spills and toxic substances like mercury and PBBs have perhaps been uppermost in the public's mind when they think of ocean pollution, a far larger problem is emerging as excess fertilizer runs off from farms and fields into the world's rivers. The nutrients in fertilizers, as well as sewage run-offs, are causing a wide variety of problems, from toxic algae blooms that overwhelm other sea life to the proliferation of harmful bacteria.

- **Acidification.** Excess carbon dioxide, a by-product of fossil fuel use that threatens to change the atmosphere's average temperature, is also finding its way into the oceans. And when water absorbs excess carbon dioxide, it turns acidic — an effect that scientists are beginning to link to further declines in fish and other sea creatures. By the end of the century, according to a recent report in the *Los Angeles Times*, ocean acidity is expected

to be two-and-a-half times what it was before the Industrial Revolution. “Such a change would devastate many species of fish and other animals that have thrived in chemically stable seawater for millions of years,” the *Times* reported.

• **Plastics.** The accumulation of cast-off garbage — and particularly plastic garbage — is killing off seabirds and ocean wildlife at increasingly higher rates. By one count, nearly 90% of floating marine litter is composed of plastic, which when ingested by sea creatures often slowly strangles or starves them. Such plastic litter does not degrade, and it can be expected to last in the ocean for hundreds of years.

There is an increasing awareness of the scope, scale and interconnectedness of these threats — and the degree to which they threaten both humanity’s near future and long-term prosperity.

“Humankind has used and exploited the ocean’s resources extensively and sometimes destructively,” said the International Council of Academies of Engineering and Technological Sciences in a July 2005 statement. “Through the interconnectedness of the ocean’s physical, geological and ecological systems, we all ultimately bear the consequences, good or bad. There is thus an inescapable international responsibility for what happens in and to the ocean.”

This shared international responsibility is recognized in a limited way in such agreements as the Convention on the Law of the Sea, which sets out rights regarding navigation, rights, territorial sea limits, economic jurisdiction, seabed resources, and the passage of ships through narrow straits, as well as on the conservation and management of living marine resources and the protection of the marine environment.

Yet, as can easily be inferred from the list of threats to the ocean, the Convention does not go far enough in protecting one of the planet’s greatest resources, not for now, not for future generations.

Part of the problem is that there are many competing interests — from nation-states to corporations to individual fishermen, farmers and sailors. And there is much at stake — from wholesale questions about the use of fertilizers, which are currently so important to land-based food production, to issues of biodiversity related to the extinction of aquatic life. So it is hard to envision from where and how the impetus for international cooperation and coordinated action will come.

All of these issues also properly fall under the rubric of sustainable development, which is of course the generalized term for the emerging paradigm that seeks to balance such varied issues as development, environmental conservation, consumption, human rights, population, and justice.

For Bahá’ís, the answer to balancing such competing concerns, whether for the oceans or sustainable development in general, lies in achieving a better understanding of the spiritual principles and realities behind human existence. Foremost among the new spiritual principles for this age is the oneness of humanity.

“Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch,” wrote Bahá’u’lláh. “The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.”

In numerous statements, the Bahá’í International Community has long underscored the importance of this principle in any vision of sustainable development. “Only when individuals see themselves as members of one human family, sharing one common homeland, will they be able to commit themselves to the far-reaching changes, on the individual and collective levels, which an increasingly interdependent and rapidly changing world mandates,” said the Community in a statement in 1992 in the lead-up to the Earth Summit.

Moreover, the Bahá’í writings ultimately anticipate the creation of a world federal system with a representative world parliament “whose members will, as the trustees of the whole of mankind, ultimately control the entire resources of all the component nations, and will enact such laws as shall be required to regulate the life, satisfy the needs and adjust the relationships of all races and people.”

Humanity is beginning to awaken to the collective damage that is being done to the oceans of the world. Humanity is also coming to understand that our oceans are part of the global commons — something that must be held in trust for future generations. What’s needed now is a comprehensive recognition of our underlying interdependence and essential oneness. Only that can provide the insight and motivating force to bring about the kinds of changes in our laws, lifestyles, and consciousness that will be necessary both to protect the oceans and draw on their wealth in a way that benefits all humanity.

It’s worth re-considering the Earthrise photograph taken by astronauts nearly 40 years ago. The earth is one — and blue. These facts are fundamentally interlinked. ■

What’s needed now is a comprehensive recognition of our underlying interdependence and essential oneness. Only that can provide the insight and motivating force to bring about the kinds of changes in our laws, lifestyles, and consciousness that will be necessary both to protect the oceans and draw on their wealth in a way that benefits all humanity.

In Canada, a low-key approach to virtues training pays big dividends

Some of the children and parents who attend the Family Virtues Breakfast posed recently in the gym of the Turtle Island Neighborhood Center in Winnipeg's Lord Selkirk Park.



WINNIPEG, MANITOBA, Canada — When city health officials make their morning rounds to pick up used syringes, the neighborhood of Lord Selkirk Park in Winnipeg's north end is often their first stop.

It's a measure of the problems afflicting the district, which has the lowest per capita income, the lowest level of education, and the highest percentage of single parent families among all neighborhoods in this central Canadian city.

A ray of hope shines here every Sunday morning during the school year, however, when dozens of children from the area stream into the Turtle Island Neighborhood Center for breakfast, crafts, friendship, and a chance to bring out the virtues in each other.

Begun as a volunteer service by Winnipeg Bahá'ís in 2001, the Family Virtues Breakfast this year has attracted as many as 80 children and parents each week. It has become "a Sunday morning tradition," according to Nicole Richard, a mother who has been coming with her four children for about two years.

While many families were initially drawn by the prospect of free food — the menu usually features pancakes, French toast, hash browns, ham or sausage, and juice — the

program's continuing attraction has become its emphasis on helping children build positive moral capabilities.

The virtues component of the program comes without any lecturing or structured lessons. Rather, project volunteers teach virtues with an interactive approach, involving crafts, drawing, and reading, and games like skipping and tag.

During such activities, project volunteers strive to foster virtuous behavior by modeling it themselves.

They also seek to provide positive reinforcement when the children behave well. On the ready are specially marked cards that identify virtues like courtesy, joyfulness, or truthfulness. When a child displays such a virtue, they are handed a card.

"Mostly our goal is for children and adults to experience the virtues," said Stephanie Bloodworth, a Bahá'í volunteer with the program. "We want it to be interactive."

Those who have watched the program from the outside agree that the project's low-key approach has been effective.

"I know that it is hard for any organization to put together a program that attracts families as a unit," said Shon Haynes, who

Begun as a volunteer service by Winnipeg Bahá'ís in 2001, the Family Virtues Breakfast this year attracted as many as 80 children and parents each week. It has become "a Sunday morning tradition," according to one participant.

was program coordinator at the Turtle Island center until April. "I understand they get 70 to 80 families coming to the breakfast program, which kind of blows my mind. It is so hard to get families to do anything together."

Mr. Haynes added that the idea of modeling virtues, instead of lecturing about them, has been an important innovation. "One of the reasons why workshops or community meetings have failed in that area is because you have an individual coming and standing up in front of the room and saying: 'This is how things should be done.' But they don't do that and for that reason it is effective, and appreciated by the community."

Other social service groups have begun to enquire about the project's approach. The project has also started to receive outside funding and donations. In 2003, for example, the Winnipeg Foundation donated C\$3,000 for food, craft supplies, and equipment.

The Winnipeg Harvest food bank also gives weekly donations of food stuffs when they are available. This year, as well, the project received C\$1,684 for crafts from the North End Community Renewal Corporation.

Organizers said the project's innovative approach has evolved through a process of action and reflection — and a dose of Bahá'í consultation.

"At the end of every morning, we sit down with all the volunteers and debrief," said Sheila Pinkerton, a volunteer since 2001, who is also the liaison with the local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Winnipeg, which oversees the project.

The first year saw about 20 children in attendance each week — and a few difficulties.

"What we found was that the kids interacted with the toys," said Ms. Pinkerton. "There wasn't a way for us to interact with them, apart from sitting down with them at breakfast and cutting their pancakes and trying to talk to them. That would be our golden moment. But apart from that we were just maintaining order. And these kids treated us like a wall. It was like, 'You're not there. I'm not talking to you — I don't hear you.'"

The team also found that the toys were disappearing from week to week.

So they consulted together and retooled. Games were gradually replaced by crafts that participants could work on at the center and take home afterwards. Parents were actively invited to participate in the program with their kids. And the virtues component became less formalized and more integrated into the rest of the morning's activities.

Attendance grew year by year, peaking last year when as many as 140 children and adults showed up on a given Sunday. The team has had to limit numbers to about 80 this year to make it manageable.

Ms. Bloodworth believes the process of action and reflection, rather than any professional expertise, is what has kept the program relevant to the needs of the children and their parents.

Currently, about 12 Bahá'ís — and up to half-dozen of their neighbors — form the core group that volunteers every Sunday during the school year, when the project is active, said Ms. Pinkerton.

Dan Trottier, program coordinator of the Lord Selkirk Aboriginal Women's Group, which also runs programs in Lord Selkirk Park, agrees that the program has been a benefit for the community.

"It fills the weekend void," said Mr. Trottier. "It helps the families come together. You have activities going for different age groups. There's not enough of that. Usually the parents are not involved. It's a great program, a much needed program." ■

— Canadian Bahá'í News Service

Nicole Richard, shown here with her youngest of four children, has been coming to the Bahá'í-sponsored Family Virtues Breakfast for about two years. She said the regulars feel "like a huge extended family."



New Bahá'í representative at the UN

UNITED NATIONS — Bringing wide-ranging experience in women's issues, civil society organization, and international development, Fulya Vekiloglu has joined the United Nations Office of the Bahá'í International Community in New York as a representative to the UN.

A native of Turkey, Ms. Vekiloglu arrived in New York in June 2006. She will work alongside Bani Dugal, who is the Community's principal representative to the United Nations. Ms. Vekiloglu's focus will be on issues related to the advancement of women and social development.

"We consider ourselves very fortunate to have Ms. Vekiloglu on our team at the United Nations," said Ms. Dugal. "She brings with her a wealth of experience in some of the issues that concern the Community the most, specifically in the areas of women and children, as well as in social and international development, and civil society."

Before coming to New York, Ms. Vekiloglu worked as a project manager for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Afghanistan, where she managed an institutional capacity building program in the Ministry of Women's Affairs for three years. There she provided direct support to the Ministry and trained more than 700 civil servants

and representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from 10 provinces in Afghanistan on gender issues.

In 2001 and 2002, Ms. Vekiloglu worked as a consultant for the UNDP in Bosnia and Herzegovina on a project to survey civil society development in Eastern Bosnia. She also worked there promoting conflict resolution and peace education.

Before that, Ms. Vekiloglu worked extensively with civil society and women's organizations in Turkey. From 1999 to 2000, Ms. Vekiloglu served as the coordinator of a women's NGO networking project in Ankara, Turkey.

During the lead-up to and during the 1996 UN Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II), Ms. Vekiloglu was a member of the National NGO Host Committee of Turkey, also serving as a member of the national Habitat II report committee for Turkey. She was also the founder and facilitator of the Habitat Women's Caucus (1997-1999) in Ankara for the follow-up to the Habitat Agenda.

A lifelong Bahá'í, Ms. Vekiloglu served in the external affairs office of the Bahá'í community of Turkey from 1992 to 1995, and directed the Habitat II Bahá'í Office from 1995-1998.

Ms. Vekiloglu, 40, has a Master of Science degree in Gender and Women's Studies from the Middle East Technical University in Ankara and a Bachelor of Science in Industrial Product Design from Mimar Sinan University in Istanbul.

"Although I have had many incredible experiences working in the field, this new position is really exciting because it offers an opportunity to work on issues at the global level, directly at the United Nations," said Ms. Vekiloglu.

"I have lived in different communities with diverse religious and cultural backgrounds and have seen up close the lives, dimensions and experiences of women at the grassroots level," said Ms. Vekiloglu. "Yet I have seen that they all speak with the same voice and thirst for a common equality, endeavoring as women and mothers to create better lives for their children and their communities.

"My hope is to bring a positive outlook, based on these experiences, to our work at the UN and with other civil society organizations," said Ms. Vekiloglu. ■

A native of Turkey, Ms. Vekiloglu will focus on issues related to the advancement of women and social development.

Fulya Vekiloglu, who joined the United Nations Office of the Bahá'í International Community in New York as a representative to the United Nations in June 2006.





Dr. Rodney Clarken, a Bahá'í and one of the original signers of the Earth Keeper Covenant, at left, looks on as “e-waste” is collected in a recycling bin in Marquette, Michigan. Also shown are Jean Soderberg, in the background, center, and Dennis McCowen, at right, also Bahá'ís, participating in the Earth Keeper Clean Sweep on 22 April 2006. The man with his back to the camera is unidentified. (Photo by Greg Peterson.)

In the USA, collecting “e-waste” is an interfaith effort

MARQUETTE, MICHIGAN, USA — Just nine years old, Eve McCowen was dwarfed by the huge piles of unwanted electronic equipment that quickly accumulated in the parking lot of the Messiah Lutheran Church on Earth Day 2006.

But she was nevertheless one of the first to run up to an arriving car that needed to be unloaded as residents brought old stereos, defunct computers, and broken television sets for recycling.

“Recycling is good for the environment because when you throw stuff away it can get in the earth’s soil and water and that isn’t good for the earth,” said Eve, the daughter of Dennis and Lisa McCowen of Marquette.

Eve is a Bahá'í, as are her parents, and they were among the nine Bahá'ís from Marquette who participated in the second annual Earth Keeper Clean Sweep on 22 April 2006, which is designated as Earth Day in the United States and many other countries.

The effort collected more than 300 tons of “e-waste” — electronic equipment like television sets, computers, VCRs, and the like that are not otherwise easily recycled — from various sites across Michigan’s Upper

Peninsula, a sparsely populated region north of Lake Michigan.

The Earth Keeper event also showed how faith communities can collaborate on local and regional projects for the common good.

In this case, more than 350 volunteers from some 120 churches, temples, and faith communities across the Upper Peninsula participated. Represented were Bahá'ís, Buddhists, and Jews, along with Catholics, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists and Unitarian Universalists. All together, the faith groups represented have some 130,000 members in the region.

“This is historic and I hope it is a model that can be duplicated throughout the country and the world,” said Rodney Clarken, a Bahá'í and one of the original signers of the Earth Keeper Covenant. “We often see faith communities arguing and even killing one another — we have here an example of spiritual leaders and their communities uniting.”

“I believe the overwhelming response to the local initiatives to collect hazardous wastes last year and electronic wastes this year has largely been the result of all the faith communities uniting to support this en-

“This is historic and I hope it is a model that can be duplicated throughout the country and the world.”

— Rodney Clarken, a Bahá'í and Earth Keeper participant.



Eve McCowen, 9 years old, places an old computer onto a recycling pile under the watchful eye of her mother, Lisa, on 22 April 2006 during the Earth Keeper Clean Sweep in Marquette, Michigan, USA. (Photo by Greg Peterson.)

deavor,” said Dr. Clarcken, who is a professor of education and director of field experiences at Northern Michigan University (NMU) in Marquette.

“Without the force of religion to sustain and inspire moral action, little can be accomplished,” Dr. Clarcken said.

Carl Lindquist, director of the Central Lake Superior Community Partnership and the event’s organizer, said Bahá’ís were a “key partner” in the event.

“They were very enthusiastic, and very well informed about the issues,” said Mr. Lindquist, adding that faith groups in general were critical players in raising public awareness about the event, and then motivating people to take action.

“As the director of a non-profit environmental organization, who has also worked at the state and federal levels, we have been trying to do public education and efforts like this over the years — and I’ve never seen anything more effective than this, ever,” he said.

With faith groups, Mr. Lindquist said, “when you send the word out, they listen and

they respond.”

The annual Clean Sweep is sponsored by the Central Lake Superior Watershed Partnership, the non-profit Cedar Tree Institute, the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community, and the various faith communities that participated.

Last year’s Clean Sweep collected about 46 tons of household poisons like pesticides, herbicides, mercury, car batteries and lead-based paints. More such household hazardous waste was collected in three hours than the Upper Peninsula’s landfills normally see in two years.

Bahá’ís who participated expressed the hope that similar projects will be started by Bahá’ís around the world.

Such projects can help “break down the artificial barriers we have constructed between religions, nations, cultures, and the world in which we live,” said Dr. Clarcken.

“May these efforts reinforce a hundred-fold our work toward creating a world in which all people can live in peace and prosperity,” he said.

Rehema Clarcken, a 27-year-old NMU graduate student and the daughter of Dr. Clarcken, said the project offers an important lesson because “so many people from so many different faiths pulled together to complete a project that really benefits our community.”

“Whatever differences we might have in our religious beliefs, we have become united in service,” said Ms. Clarcken.

Vicki Lockwood of Marquette said the Earth Keeper event helped her to understand better various Bahá’í principles, such as the importance of service and the concept of unity in diversity.

“This instills the concept of unity, and unless you center on your commonalities you won’t accomplish much,” said Ms. Lockwood. “We were all working with the concept of keeping these products out of the landfills and keeping pollution off the ground and out of the air.”

Jean Soderberg, a nurse and a member of the Bahá’í community, agreed that the chance to work with other faith groups offered an important model.

“Protecting the environment is the responsibility of everyone on the planet if we are to continue to enjoy the bounties God gives us,” said Ms. Soderberg. “Doing this through a faith-based organization is an even more rewarding opportunity.”■

— Reported by Greg Peterson

In Singapore, youth fold paper flowers to promote religious harmony



About 40 youth gathered at the Singapore Bahá'í Center on 15 April 2006 to fold paper lotuses as part of the Project Million Lotus 2006. Shown here are six secondary school students from Chung Cheng High School with Bahá'í Sabrina Han (center) in the floral shirt.

SINGAPORE — Young members of the Bahá'í community here recently gave support to a national interfaith project aimed at bringing Singaporeans of all races and religions together.

About 40 youth gathered at the Singapore Bahá'í Center on 15 April 2006 to fold paper lotuses as part of the Project Million Lotus 2006, which is sponsored by the Singapore Buddhist Federation.

The effort aimed to have young people of all races and religions make a million paper lotuses as symbols of purity and harmony.

"The idea of folding a paper lotus is taken from the symbolic meaning of a lotus that grows in muddy water and yet emerges into a pure and beautiful flower," said Lynette Thomas, Secretary of The Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Singapore.

"Every lotus folded is like a wish for harmony that unites all people in Singapore," said Ms. Thomas. "Each of the nine major religions has been invited to open up their centers for one Saturday to host youth from other communities to come and fold paper lotuses."

Ms. Thomas said in addition to the 15 April event, Bahá'í study circles have also folded lo-

tuses for the project. She said more than 4,000 lotuses were contributed by Bahá'ís.

The 40 young people who gathered at the Singapore Bahá'í Center included many from Chung Cheng High School who are not Bahá'ís.

"Regarding the million Lotus project, I think it is a very meaningful one," said Sabrina Han, one of the Bahá'í youth who participated on 15 April, saying it brings "many youth from different religions together."

Anita Kuppusamy, another Bahá'í who participated on 15 April, said she found that the effort led to meeting many new friends. "Though I had a hard time folding the lotuses at first, I got better at it after folding a few," she said. "The center was filled with energetic youth and I was glad to be one of them."

The project has received support from Singaporean President S.R. Nathan, as well as from the Central Singapore Community Development Council, Trust Central, the Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore, and several Singapore corporations.

"It has provided a great opportunity to learn more about the peace-loving religion of Buddhism and to interact with Buddhist youth," said Ms. Thomas. ■

"Every lotus folded is like a wish for harmony that unites all people in Singapore."

— Lynette Thomas, Bahá'í community of Singapore

In Iran, pattern of arbitrary arrests of Bahá'ís continues; 129 await trial

NEW YORK — Iranian authorities have continued to arrest and detain Bahá'ís throughout Iran in recent months, subjecting them to a “revolving door” sequence of imprisonment and release that is apparently designed to harass and oppress the Bahá'í community.

As of this writing, some 129 Bahá'ís have been arrested, released on bail, and are now awaiting trial.

The bail demands have been high, in most cases requiring the Bahá'ís to hand over considerable sums of money, deeds to property, business or work licenses. In nearly every case, government officials retain these assets, despite the fact those who have been arrested have not been charged with any crime and no trial dates have been set.

“We are concerned that this revolving door pattern of arrest and release is being used increasingly as another form of harassment of the Bahá'ís,” said Bani Dugal, the Bahá'í International Community's principal representative to the United Nations. “Holding on to the assets of people who have not been charged with any crime and whose trial date is unknown is part of the larger strategy of intimidation to deny the community its rights and opportunities.”

On 29 June, the UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, issued a report stating that at least 640 Bahá'í properties have been seized since 1980. Miloon Kothari noted that such “expropriations are considered a form of land confiscation by the affected population, particularly since prices paid in return for land are considerably lower than market values.”

Largest number since the 1980s

The largest incident of recent arrests came on 19 May 2006, when officials detained 54 Bahá'ís in the city of Shiraz. Most were youth who were engaged in humanitarian service when they were apprehended. It was the largest number of Bahá'ís taken at once since the 1980s.

The detentions came as the Bahá'ís, along with several other volunteers who were not Bahá'ís, were teaching classes to underprivileged children in a school as part of a community service activity conducted by a local non-governmental organization. They had a

letter of permission to do such work from the Islamic Council of Shiraz.

At the same time, the authorities raided six Bahá'í homes in Shiraz and confiscated notebooks, computers, books and documents.

Within a week, nearly all of the 19 May detainees were released. Fourteen of those were required to post bail in the form of property deeds valued at US\$11,000 each; another 36 were released on the strength of either personal guarantees or the deposit of work licenses with the court as surety that they will appear when summoned to court. Three Bahá'ís remained in jail until 14 June.

It should be noted that those who were arrested along with the Bahá'ís on 19 May were released that day without having to post bail.

On 13 June, a Bahá'í resident of Sanandaj was arrested in that city and then released on 29 June.

On 18 June, in Hamadan, three other Bahá'ís were arrested, jailed for three days and released. This occurred after government officials searched their homes and confiscated computers, books and Bahá'í documents.

And on 28 June, a Bahá'í in Karaj was taken into custody and, as of this writing, was reportedly being held in a Ministry of Information detention center. The man had first been arrested on 5 August 2005 and released on bail ten days later. In a trial last September, he was sentenced to ten months in prison on the spurious charge of opposition to the Islamic Republic of Iran. It may be that he was rearrested in June to serve out this sentence, but no further details are known at this time.

“Taken all together, this pattern of arbitrary arrests and detentions amount to the purest form of religious persecution and reflect nothing less than a calculated effort by the Iranian government to keep the Bahá'í community utterly off balance and in a state of terror,” Ms. Dugal said.

The arrests come against a backdrop of increasing concern by international human rights monitors that the Iranian Government is escalating its 27-year-long campaign of persecution against the 300,000-member Bahá'í

“Holding on to the assets of people who have not been charged with any crime and whose trial date is unknown is part of the larger strategy of intimidation to deny the community's rights and opportunities.”

— Bani Dugal, Bahá'í International Community

community of Iran, the largest religious minority in that country.

Text of secret letter released

In March 2006, Asma Jahangir, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, issued a statement regarding a secret letter from the Iranian military headquarters to various Revolutionary Guard and police forces instructing them to “identify” and “monitor” Bahá’ís around the country.

News of the letter, dated 29 October 2005, stirred alarm among international human rights groups. Ms. Jahangir expressed concern that “the information gained as a result of such monitoring will be used as a basis for the increased persecution of, and discrimination against, members of the Bahá’í Faith.” Ms. Jahangir did not release the full text of the letter.

On 24 July 2006, the London-based human rights group Amnesty International indicated in a press release it had obtained the letter and was making it public.

The letter, originally in Persian, was signed by the Chairman of the Command Headquarters of the Armed Forces, Basij Major General Dr. Seyyed Hossein Firuzabad. It was stamped “highly confidential.” It read:

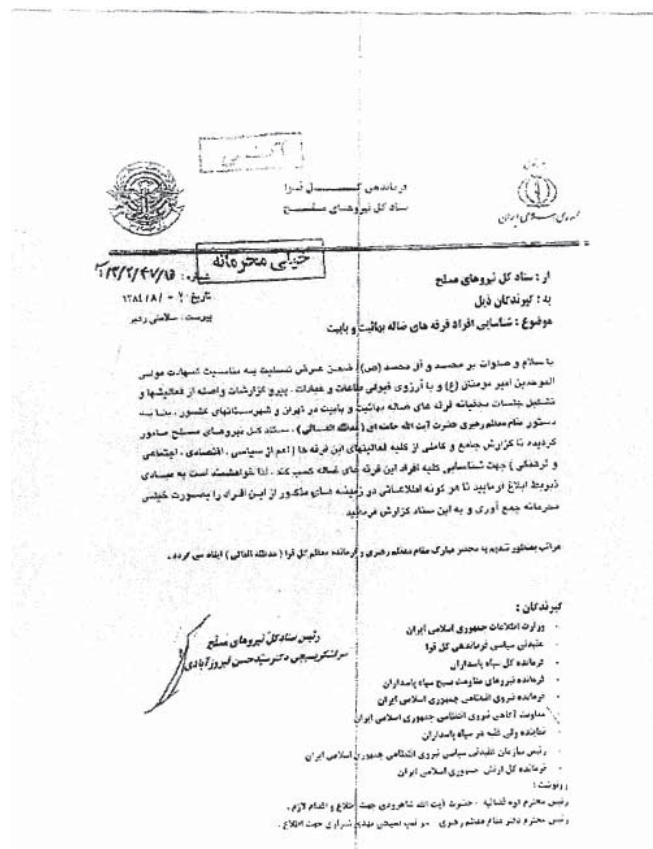
With salutations and praise to Muhammad and his descendants (S) [May the Blessing of God be Upon Him and His Descendants], while we express our deepest sympathy on the occasion of the martyrdom of the Lord of believers in divine unity [Amir-al-Momenin] and the Commander of the faithful (MPUH) [May Peace be Upon Him], and wishing for the acceptance of [our] obligations and worships, further to the reports received concerning the secret activities and meetings of the misguided sects of Baháism and Babism, in Tehran and other cities in the country, and according to the instructions of the Exalted Rank of the Supreme Leader, His Holiness Ayatollah Khamenei (may his exalted shadow be extended), the Command Headquarters of the Armed Forces has been given the mission to acquire a comprehensive and complete report of all the activities of these sects (including political, economic, social and cultural) for the purpose of identifying all the individuals of these misguided sects. Therefore, we request that you convey to relevant authorities to, in a highly confidential manner, collect any and all information about the above-mentioned activities of these individuals and report it to this Command Headquarters.

This [either this information, or the reports to be received] will be submitted for the blessed consideration of the Exalted Rank of the Supreme Leader, the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces (may his exalted shadow be extended).

The letter listed the following recipients:

- The Ministry of Information of the Islamic Republic of Iran
- The Belief-Political [organization] of [the office of] the Commander in Chief
- The Commander of the [Revolutionary] Guard
- The Commander of the Basij Resistance Forces of the [Revolutionary] Guard
- The Commander of the Police Force of the Islamic Republic of Iran
- The Deputy of the Intelligence Branch of the Police Force of the Islamic Republic of Iran
- The Representative of the Jurist Cleric [Ayatollah Khamenei] in the [Revolutionary] Guard
- The Chairman of the Belief-Political Organization of the Police Force of the Islamic Republic of Iran
- The Chief Commander of the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Below: A facsimile of the original 29 October 2005 letter from the Iranian military command that orders government police and intelligence agencies to “identify” and “monitor” Bahá’ís.



In Egypt, Bahá'ís face challenges over religious identity and belief

Egypt, continued from page one

The whole issue of identity cards and religious affiliation has become something of a *cause célèbre* in Egypt since a lower court upheld the rights of Bahá'ís to be properly identified on government documents.

That ruling, handed down by a three-judge administrative court on 4 April 2006, held that government efforts to deprive Bahá'ís of ID cards were illegal — and that Bahá'ís, even if their faith is not recognized as a religion, have every right as citizens to be identified as Bahá'ís on official documents.

While Egyptian human rights groups immediately hailed the decision, influential Islamic organizations vehemently objected — including scholars at Al Azhar University and representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood.

“Public shock has given way to heated debate over an administrative court ruling sanctioning an Alexandrian family to designate itself as Bahá'ís in their identity cards and passports,” said *Al Ahram*, one of Egypt's major newspapers, in its weekly English online version on 11 May.

Apparently in response to the outcry, the government filed an appeal and — after a somewhat raucous and unruly hearing in which lawyers representing the Bahá'í plaintiffs were verbally and physically harassed — the Supreme Administrative Court temporarily suspended the lower court's order and called for a full hearing on the issue, now set for 16 September 2006.

Widespread coverage

The issue has received widespread publicity, not only in Egypt but throughout the Arab world. Since April, in Egypt alone there have been more than 100 newspaper and magazine articles, as well as numerous radio and television broadcasts, on the ruling, the reaction, and its implications.

“There is a huge interest in this case,” said Hossam Bahgat, director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), an independent human rights organization. “The human rights community, the legal community and the media are closely following it.

“This case is important not only for Bahá'ís but for all Egyptians as it will set an important precedent in terms of citizenship, equality, and freedom of religion.

“People on both sides of the case are mobilized,” said Mr. Bahgat. “There are people who are in support of the Bahá'ís, and people who see this as a threat to society or Islam.”

A cursory examination of some of those articles reveals a wide divergence of opinion over the larger question of freedom of religion and belief that many observers say has been raised by the case.

On 4 May, the Arabic print version of *Al Ahram*, which has a circulation of more than a million, carried a headline that said “Crisis in Parliament Over a Judicial Ruling About ‘Al-Bahá'íyyah’ [Bahá'ism].”

The article said the “majority, the opposition, the independent and the government deputies of the parliament all demanded an appeal of the ruling” that upheld the right of Bahá'ís to state their religion in official documents.

“The deputies stated that the issued ruling is in contradiction with the constitution and the tenets of the Islamic Shariah, which considers that ‘Baha'ism’ is not a Divine religion,” stated the 4 May *Al Ahram* article.

On the other hand, the government's own Ministry of Culture, in its highly respected weekly newspaper *Al-Kahera News* [Cairo News], featured an article on 20 June that stressed the need for religious tolerance with respect to the Bahá'í case.

Written by Muhammad Shebl, the article discusses the Bahá'í case as “another round on Islam and freedom of belief.” Bolstered with quotations from the Qu'ran, Mr. Shebl wrote that “God created man and wanted him to be free... and gave him a mind to discern for himself.

“If God had wished to force all humans to worship Him in a certain way, He would have done so, but He allowed them the freedom to choose so that He can hold them accountable,” wrote Mr. Shebl. Therefore, he said, Muslims should respect the followers of all other religions, including Bahá'ís, Buddhists, and Hin-

Egypt, continued on page 14

“This case is important not only for Bahá'ís but for all Egyptians as it will set an important precedent in terms of citizenship, equality, and freedom of religion.”

— Hossam Bahgat,
director of the
Egyptian Initiative
for Personal Rights

Once among the most active communities in the Middle East, Bahá'ís of Egypt have long faced persecution

The Bahá'í community of Egypt was once among the most vibrant and active in the Middle East, with Spiritual Assemblies and local groups established throughout the country, and an impressive array of administrative, educational, and social institutions.

The community was among the first to be established outside of Iran, birthplace of the Faith's Founder, Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'í merchants settled in Alexandria and Cairo in the 1860s.

By 1900, a number of Arabic language Bahá'í books were being published in Cairo, and Egypt had become a transit point for Western Bahá'ís coming to and from Acre in what was then Ottoman Palestine, where the son of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, was imprisoned.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, himself, visited Egypt in September 1910, shortly after his release from prison, and there made the acquaintance of a number of intellectuals and other influential figures. Significantly, 'Abdu'l-Bahá spent a total of almost two years in Egypt, visiting on two other occasions. He became a well known public figure — as evidenced by extensive press coverage in Egypt of his funeral in 1921.

The Bahá'í community of Egypt grew steadily during the

period from the turn of the century to the mid-1920s, and included individuals from minority groups such as those of Kurdish, Coptic, and Armenian origin.

In 1924, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Egypt was formed. This represents the highest administrative body on a national level in the Bahá'í Faith, a sign of a community's maturity.

At one point in the 1930s, a member of the Egyptian Parliament made a public tribute to the Faith. And in 1934, the National Spiritual Assembly achieved legal incorporation. Authorities allocated four plots to serve as Bahá'í cemeteries in Cairo, Alexandria, Port Said, and Isma'iliyyih, having decided it would not be lawful for Bahá'ís to be buried in Muslim cemeteries.

In May 1944, the community celebrated the Centenary of the Faith's founding in an impressive and newly completed national headquarters building in Cairo. More than 500 Bahá'ís from around the country attended, along with some 50 guests who were Christians, Muslims, and Jews.

During the 1940s and 1950s, Bahá'í festivals and public meetings were commonly publicized in the media and regular Bahá'í meetings were open to the public. Official statistical publications listed the Bahá'í Faith among the religious movements active in Egypt. In April 1955, the community purchased some 17,000 square meters of land on the banks of the Nile for use as the future site of a Bahá'í House of Worship. By the late 1950s, local Assemblies had been established in 13 cities and towns, and Bahá'í groups existed in another 11 localities.

At the same time, such progress disturbed fanatic elements in Egyptian society. In the early 1940s, to cite one incident, the custodian of the national headquarters building was at one point beaten, suffering a broken arm.

In 1960, without warning or explanation, President Gamal Abdul Nasser signed a short, six paragraph Decree stating that “all Bahá'í Assemblies and Centres” are “hereby dissolved, and their activities suspended. Individuals, bodies and institutions are warned to refrain from any activity.” All Bahá'í properties — including the national headquarters building, the libraries and cemeteries — as well as all Bahá'í funds and assets were confiscated. The properties and assets have not been returned to this day.

The government promised that individuals would remain free to practice their religion. In keeping with the Bahá'í principle of obedience to government, the Bahá'ís of Egypt duly disbanded their institutions immediately. The Faith's members shifted to a footing that emphasized quiet worship by individuals and families, with limited social and educational activities focused on internal development. Unfortunately, they have nevertheless faced episodes of harsh persecution, along with continuous restrictions on their personal, religious and social activities. ■



A group of Bahá'í women in Alexandria, Egypt, in 1947.

dus, and honor their choice.

Beyond Egypt, as well, the case has received extensive attention in newspapers, magazines, broadcasts, and various online media — including blogs. And, again, there has been a wide divergence of opinion.

Al Watan, a daily newspaper in Kuwait, carried a headline noting that Al Azhar scholars in Cairo called the April ruling in favor of Bahá'ís “the Greatest Setback.” The article then printed some of the points of misinformation that are often repeated by fanatical Muslims, such as that Bahá'ís are “agents of Zionism and colonialism and are enemies of the country” and that they reject Muhammad and aim only to “strike Islam.”

In contrast, Nabil Sharafi'd-Dín, writing on 4 May in *Elaf*, which characterizes itself as the first electronic Arabic daily newspaper, said statements in the Parliament by *Al Azhar* and others could be seen as an effort to “victimize the followers of the Bahá'í Faith and launch what could be described as a campaign of hatred against the Bahá'ís.”

The court's ruling

The lower court's ruling on 4 April concerned the case of an Egyptian Bahá'í couple from Alexandria, Husam Izzat Musa and Ranya Enayat Rushdy, who sued the Ministry of Interior after they had their ID cards confiscated when they requested that their daughters' names be added to their passports.

Judges Faruq 'Ali 'Abdu'l-Qadir, Salah-uddin Algruani, and Hamed Al-Halfawi found that existing precedents in Islamic law indicate that Muslim countries have traditionally

housed non-Muslims with different beliefs “without any of them being forced to change what they believe in.”

And since Egyptian law requires that every citizen carry an identity card that states his name and religion, it “is not inconsistent with Islamic tenets to mention the religion on this card even though it may be a religion whose rites are not recognized for open practice, such as Bahá'ism and the like.

“On the contrary, these [religions] must be indicated so that the status of its bearer is known and thus he does not enjoy a legal status to which his belief does not entitle him in a Muslim society,” wrote the court.

The court ended its ruling by ordering the government to give identity cards and birth certificates to the plaintiffs on which the Bahá'í Faith is stated as their religion.

As noted, the ruling triggered an intense controversy in Egyptian society. The emotions stirred by the case were evident at the initial hearing on the government's appeal of the case by the Supreme Administrative Court, held 15 May.

At that hearing, lawyers representing the government and other individuals seated in the courthouse “interrupted and heckled defense counsel each time they tried to address the court,” according to an account of the hearing that was posted that same day on the EIPR website. The lawyers for the Bahá'ís were called “infidels” and were threatened with “physical violence during the hearing.”

The Bahá'í viewpoint

For their part, the Bahá'ís of Egypt wish only to be accorded the rights afforded any other Egyptian citizens — without being asked to lie about their religion.

“All that the Bahá'ís of Egypt are asking for is to be given citizenship rights and not to be noted falsely and fraudulently in our identification documents,” wrote five Egyptian Bahá'ís in a 13 May letter to the Ministry of Interior.

Labib Iskandar Hanna, who is among those who signed the letter, said that Bahá'ís would be satisfied even if the identification cards and other official papers that require one to list their religion simply offered “other” or “blank” as a choice.

“Previously, we used to put a dash or leave it blank,” said Dr. Hanna, who is a professor of mathematics at Cairo University, explaining how Bahá'ís were able to survive under the paper-based ID card system. “If you hit an official who was fanatic, we could go to

“All that the Bahá'ís of Egypt are asking for is to be given citizenship rights and not to be noted falsely and fraudulently in our identification documents.”

In addition to identity cards, Bahá'ís have had trouble with birth certificates. Below is a recent photograph of a sign posted on the wall in the maternity ward of an Egyptian hospital. Under the heading “Important Guidelines, point 2 says: “It is not permissible to register a religion that is not of the Book, such as Bahá'í and the like, for that goes against the heavenly laws.”



another office and find someone who would accept it blank or with a dash.”

Under the new computerized ID card system, Dr. Hanna said, that option is locked out. Only the three recognized religions can be listed.

“Not having a new ID prevents us from getting almost anything,” said Dr. Hanna. “For example, if you have to renew your passport, they will ask for it. Or to enroll your children in school. Or even to do banking, the banks are now asking for the new ID cards.”

Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá’í International Community to the United Nations, said the issue has risen to the level of a major human rights concern relating to the freedom of religion or belief, as outlined in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

“It is important to keep in mind that the debate is not and should not be about Bahá’í theology or belief — it is about the right for Bahá’ís to hold their beliefs and still be al-

lowed all of the rights that other Egyptian citizens are given,” said Ms. Dugal.

Ms. Dugal said the administrative court’s judgment is essentially correct: since Egyptian law requires identity cards for all citizens, and also requires religious identification on those cards, it is unfair — and legally contradictory — to force Bahá’ís to identify themselves as Muslims, Christians, or Jews — which is the current government policy.

“The declaration on the application form makes the providing of false information an offense punishable by law,” added Ms. Dugal “Yet, Bahá’ís are being told by officials of the Egyptian government that they must declare themselves to be either Muslim, Christian or Jew.

“Most important for a Bahá’í, the declaration of his or her religion as being another is unconscionable as a matter of principle; such a false statement is tantamount to the denial of one’s faith,” said Ms. Dugal. “The Bahá’í writings forbid lying and dissimulation of any sort.” ■

“The debate is not about Bahá’í theology or belief — it is about the right for Bahá’ís to hold their beliefs and still be allowed all of the rights that other Egyptian citizens are given.”

**– Bani Dugal,
Bahá’í International
Community**

Annual Bahá’í World examines the science of morality, concept of progress, and global activities

Review, continued from page 16 presented by progress, written by Dr. Boyles herself, offers not only a survey of current literature on the subject, but also a distinctive viewpoint of how Bahá’ís approach the idea.

“As one writer has observed, ‘progress in the Western sense has become a virtually universal aspiration,’” writes Dr. Boyles, “even though its achievement may still be a distant dream for the vast majority of the world’s peoples. But is it, in fact, an entirely desirable or sustainable aspiration, or do we perhaps need to reconsider our view of progress and the criteria we use to measure it?”

Dr. Boyles concludes that the “experience of the Bahá’í community offers compelling evidence ‘that humanity can live as one global society, equal to whatever challenges its coming of age may entail.’” Further, she writes, “the Bahá’í community is working with some urgency to promote an understanding of ‘progress’ that encompasses both the spiritual and the material aspects of life.”

Other articles in the volume include:

- An omnibus report with numerous color photographs on the celebrations by Bahá’í communities on the 50th anniversary of a ten-year global effort, 1953-1963, to ini-

tiate the growth of the community in scores of countries.

- An update on the human rights situation of the Bahá’ís in Iran and Arab countries.

- The publication of several recent major statements by the Bahá’í International Community, including the Community’s response to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s “In Larger Freedom” report, as well as a statement entitled “Freedom of Religion,” which is the Community’s response to the United Nations Development Programme 2004 Human Development Report.

The volume also includes a selection of Bahá’í Sacred Writings on the theme of science and progress, highlights from messages of the Universal House of Justice written during 2004-2005, and the “Year in Review,” which chronicles the worldwide activities of the Bahá’í community from 21 April 2004 to 20 April 2005.

The volume also contains obituaries, statistics, an index, a directory of Bahá’í agencies, and list of selected new publications in English. At 333 pages, in hardcover format with a cloth cover, *The Bahá’í World 2004-2005* is available at a retail cost of US\$19. It can be ordered from www.bahai bookstore.com ■

Annual Bahá'í World volume examines the science of morality, concept of progress, and global activities

The Bahá'í World 2004-2005

Bahá'í World Centre Publications

Haifa

An examination of the science of morality, a look at the opportunities and challenges presented by human progress, and a report on a small but inspiring educational project in Mali are among the articles in the latest volume of *The Bahá'í World*.

An annual record of Bahá'í activities and perspectives, *The Bahá'í World 2004-2005* also includes reports on the 2004 Parliament of the World's Religions, an historic restoration of the prison cell where Bahá'u'lláh was held in the late 1800s, and the use of arts in Bahá'í community life.

Released in April 2006, the book is the 13th volume in an annual series aimed both at Bahá'í readers and the general public.

"One of our main goals in the production of these volumes is to document the activities and thinking of the worldwide Bahá'í community in a way that will be of interest to any serious researcher," said Ann Boyles, editor of *The Bahá'í World*.

"However, we also believe that the general reader will find the topics — which explicitly analyze current trends in our global society from a Bahá'í point of view — to be of relevance."

The article on "Science and Morality" by Graham Walker discusses some of the latest scientific findings in neuroscience relating to brain capacity and the evolution of altruism, addresses the probability that life in the universe was created by chance, and examines the role of genetics in the development of human character.

Like many of the other articles in the new volume, Dr. Walker's essay also approaches its subject from a practical standpoint.

"As cities become increasingly multiracial, cultural moral relativity is causing problems," writes Dr. Walker. "For example, imbibing alcohol is seen as immoral hedonism by one but as a harmless pleasure — almost a rite of passage — to another; the thigh-high skirt and bare midriff are wanton to some but an innocent fashion to others..."

The article about an effort by the Nosrat Foundation to establish village level primary schools in Mali likewise offers practical lessons on the subject of how to promote community involvement in education, especially in an underdeveloped country.

"The schools that Nosrat has established are owned by the community," reports the article. "The villagers themselves provide many of the construction materials for the buildings, which generally consist of three classrooms and latrines. Parents make mud bricks and do the actual construction, while Nosrat provides what is difficult to find or provide locally, such as cement and iron to cover and protect the walls and sustain the long-term roofing..."

A "World Watch" essay on some current views of the opportunities and challenges

Review, continued on page 15



This photograph of a study circle at the Bahá'í center in Suva, Fiji is among those featured in The Bahá'í World 2004-2005.