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Informal breakfasts become an important venue for dialogue on post-2015 development agenda



Mateo Estreme, deputy permanent representative of Argentina to the United Nations, addresses a 20 November 2014 breakfast meeting on the topic of social protection floors in the context of the post-2015 development agenda negotiations.

NEW YORK — Can the world effectively move forward with a post 2015 development agenda if most countries are mired in policies of economic austerity?

To what extent do conflict and violence prevent the world from meeting development goals?

What kinds of new partnerships are needed in the face of increasing south-south development exchanges?

What new financial arrangements are needed to pay for global development?

These were among the questions explored over the last year at a series of breakfast dialogues at the offices of the Bahá'í International Community in New York, which were co-sponsored by the BIC and International Movement ATD Fourth World.

Designed to bring together diplomats, UN officials and representatives of civil society in an informal setting, the meetings have created an important venue for the free exchange of ideas as governments consider how to replace the much-acclaimed Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which expire in 2015.

In each session, public remarks were offered by specialists on a given topic, followed by a general, off-the-record discussion, using Chatham House Rules, which allow remarks to be recorded but not attributed. As of December 2014, there have been 22 such meetings since July 2012.

Builders of Civilization: Youth and the Advancement of Humankind

IN BRIEF

- **Young people are very much present in the neighborhoods and villages, work places and communities, of the world today, making an impact in countless ways.**
- **At issue is how their desire to contribute to constructive change and to offer meaningful service can be strengthened, supported, and expanded.**
- **The involvement of youth is not something to be sought for their sake alone, nor as a tool designed to advance their needs as a specific population group. Rather, it is a component critical to the well-being of all of humankind, young and old alike.**

[Editor's Note: The following is a statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the 2014 World Conference on Youth, held 6-10 May 2014 in Colombo, Sri Lanka.]

It is often said that youth are the leaders of tomorrow, the future of humanity. This is clearly true, but young people are very much present in the neighborhoods and villages, work places and communities, of the world today. We form a sizable segment of many populations, and the way those of our generation understand ourselves, our inherent capacities, and our role in society has, in every land, significant social consequences.

The issue, then, is not the difference youth can make in the life of society. Young people are already impacting their communities every day, in countless ways and to widely varying ends. The issue, rather, is how the desire to contribute to constructive change and to offer meaningful service — both characteristic of our stage in life — can be strengthened, supported, and expanded.

At the international level, discourse on the role of youth often focuses on issues of voice and participation. Integrating young people into formal structures of power is of course advantageous for a variety of reasons. But simply feeding “young” voices into “old” systems, if unaccompanied by more substantive forms of participation runs the risk of degenerating into mere tokenism. Young people are needed as leaders and decision-makers not only in youth forums and

special-purpose councils, but in those spaces where the course and direction of society as a whole are determined. This may well require the development of new systems of decision-making and collaboration — systems characterized by an unbiased search for truth, an attitude of cooperation and reciprocity, and an appreciation for the vital role every individual can play in the betterment of the whole.

But society is far more than a collection of impersonal laws, policies, programs, and organizations. It is equally shaped by norms, values, aspirations, and relationships. It is important, therefore, not to artificially limit young people's potential sphere of contribution. Youth might well contribute to social progress by participating in the structures of government or volunteering their time and capacities to development agencies or other civil society groups. But no individual is dependent on external organizations to better the condition of his or her community. None of us are reliant on the direction of others to begin working for the common good. None of us are incapable of making a difference in our own social spaces and circles.

In this light, the paths open to the youth of the world for selfless service to others are numerous. Few of these opportunities are found at the highest levels of global governance, such as the conference that has drawn us together today. Most are less formal and closer to home, but equally important. In partnering with other youth and like-minded adults, for example, we play a powerful role in catalyzing home-grown transformation and

progress. We make similarly unique contributions in the development of upcoming generations, providing those younger than ourselves with a model of conduct to emulate and a trusted partner in developing personal capacities and exploring how those talents might be dedicated to the well-being of the community. Put simply, our generation is a vibrant source of social advancement in a variety of contexts, ranging from the village square to the global stage.

In considering contributions to the post-2015 development agenda, it is important to recognize that an essential element of progress requires addressing patterns of thought and behavior if it is to be truly transformative. It must, in other words, enter into the realm of culture. The task of combatting corruption, for example, is ultimately a matter of building a culture of honesty and trustworthiness as well as one of fairness and equity. Reducing exclusion and addressing prejudice similarly requires norms of solidarity, respect, and mutual support. Youth, then, are crucial to the global development agenda not simply for the work we do and the projects we complete. Equally important are the social arrangements we and our contemporaries can envision, the constructive patterns of association and interaction we can promote that give practical expression to our natural sense of idealism, and the patterns of community life we can build and welcome others to take part in.

In this light, the involvement of youth is not something to be sought for our sake alone, nor a tool designed to advance our needs as a specific population group. Rather, it is a component critical to the well-being of all of humankind, young and old alike. Youth must be involved in development efforts because the construction of a new and better society rests on our shoulders as much as on those of any others, and everyone is worse off when the contributions of any group or population are marginalized or disregarded.

Y O U T H

Sri Lanka youth conference demonstrates global concern of young people



The Bahá'í International Community's delegation to the World Conference on Youth 2014 included, left to right: Pragalathan Ramasami, Suhawana Chourasia, Samadhi Paramitha, Nirvana Nawwab Saleh, and Daniel Perell.

COLOMBO, SRI LANKA — A global youth conference, designed to incorporate substantive input from the youth of the world to the post-2015 development agenda process, drew some 1,500 people from an estimated 150 countries from 6-10 May 2014.

Sponsored by the government of Sri Lanka and an international youth task force, the World Conference on Youth 2014 produced a 12-page outcome document, titled the “Colombo Declaration on Youth.”

Among other things, the Declaration called for “an enhanced and active role for youth in policy formulation and implementation and evaluation of processes related to development” and encouraged the establishment of a “permanent youth department within the United Nations.”

Daniel Perell, who headed the Bahá'í International Community's six-person delegation to the event — including youth from the United States, India and Sri Lanka — said that even aside from the conference's formal outcome, the energy and knowledge that came about from bringing together

so many young people in one place is certain to have a lasting effect.

“Any time you bring together so many youth leaders from around the world to share ideas and to learn from each other, it is a good thing,” said Mr. Perell, who is a representative of the BIC to the United Nations. “Connections of friendship and shared endeavor were made, and in this interconnected world, this will surely have an impact.”

In addition to issuing a statement to the Conference (at left), the BIC sponsored two side events that focused on the topic of empowerment.

Held on 7 and 8 May, the two events, which featured the same program, drew collectively some 80 participants. Designed to be highly interactive and participatory, the side events focused on the prerequisites of empowerment, and the need to place it in the context of service to the wider community.

“At the heart of the workshop was an exercise in which the youth were given a blank sheet of paper

Youth, continued page 27

Unprecedented act of senior cleric for religious coexistence resonates across religions

NEW YORK — In a symbolic and unprecedented act, Ayatollah Abdol-Hamid Masoumi-Tehrani, a prominent Muslim cleric in Iran, announced on 7 April 2014 that he has gifted to the Bahá'ís of the world an illuminated work of calligraphy of a paragraph from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith.

The gift comes in the wake of several recent statements by religious scholars in the Muslim world who have set out alternative interpretations of the teachings of Islam in which tolerance of every religion is, in fact, upheld by the holy Quran.

The action has generated a hopeful response from many quarters, including extensive comments from Arab and Muslim thinkers worldwide.

“This is a most welcome and hopeful development with possible implications for the coexistence of the peoples of the world,” said Ms. Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations.

Ayatollah Tehrani stated on his website that he prepared the calligraphy of the verse as a “symbolic action to serve as a reminder of the importance of valuing human beings, of peaceful coexistence, of cooperation and mutual support, and avoidance of hatred, enmity and blind religious prejudice.”

Ayatollah Tehrani presented this exquisite gift to the Bahá'ís of the world, particularly to the Bahá'ís of Iran, who he said “have suffered in manifold ways as a result of blind religious prejudice.” He further said that his act is “an expression of sympathy and care from me and on behalf of all my open-minded fellow citizens.”

In response, Ms. Dugal said: “The Bahá'í International Community is deeply touched by this act of high-mindedness and the sentiments of



Ayatollah Abdol-Hamid Masoumi-Tehrani perfecting an illuminated work of calligraphy. The words used in this piece are from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh.

religious tolerance and respect for human dignity that prompted it.

“This bold action by a senior Muslim cleric in contemporary Iran is unprecedented,” said Ms. Dugal. “It is also remarkable in light of the ongoing and systematic persecution of the Bahá'í community in that country by the Islamic government.”

The intricate artwork must have taken several months to painstakingly prepare by hand. It features at its center, a symbol known to Bahá'ís as “The Greatest Name” — a calligraphic representation of the conceptual relationship between God, His prophets and the world of creation. The gift measures at approximately 60cm x 70cm and is illuminated in a classical style. Ayatollah Tehrani’s other artworks include the illumination of the Quran, the Torah, the Psalms, the New Testament, and the Book of Ezra. His illumination of the Psalms is currently being held in the United States Library of Congress.

The excerpt that Ayatollah Tehrani chose to cite in the gift is taken from Bahá'u'lláh’s *Kitab-i-Aqdas* — “Most Holy Book.” It reads “Consort with all

religions with amity and concord, that they may inhale from you the sweet fragrance of God. Beware lest amidst men the flame of foolish ignorance overpower you. All things proceed from God and unto Him they return. He is the source of all things and in Him all things are ended.”

On previous occasions, Ayatollah Tehrani has with great courage publicly voiced concern about the ongoing and severe persecution of religious minorities, including the Bahá'ís in Iran. Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, hundreds of Bahá'ís have been killed and thousands have been imprisoned. There are currently more than 100 Bahá'ís being held in prison solely on the basis of their religious beliefs. Bahá'ís in Iran are denied access to higher education, obstructed from earning a livelihood, prevented from burying their dead in accordance with their own burial rites, and subjected to the demolition, desecration and expropriation of their cemeteries, all because of their religion.

Ayatollah Tehrani’s hope is that this gift “which will be kept by the

Universal House of Justice [the international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith] will serve as a reminder of the rich and ancient Iranian tradition of friendship and of its culture of coexistence."

Initial reaction

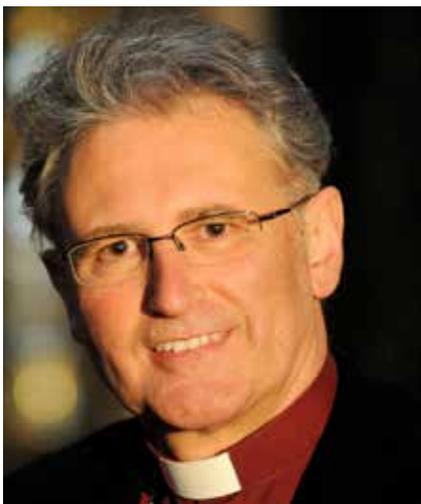
Religious leaders and prominent thinkers around the world offered praise for Ayatollah Tehrani's action almost immediately after it was announced.

In the United Kingdom, two senior leaders of the Church of England issued statements the following week.

Lord Rowan Williams of Oystermouth, the former archbishop of Canterbury, said the gift of Ayatollah Tehrani was of "immense significance."

"It represents not only a personally gracious gesture but also a strand within the Islamic world at its best and most creative which is deeply appreciative of all that helps human beings to respond to God's will for peace and understanding," said Dr. Williams.

"Along with many others of all faiths, I shall pray that this marks a turning point in Iran's attitudes to the Bahá'í community, and I give thanks for the courage and generosity which have motivated this gift."



Dr. Christopher Cocksworth, bishop of Coventry, Anglican Church, UK. He called Ayatollah Tehrani's gift to the Bahá'ís a "courageous step." (Photo courtesy of Dr. Cocksworth's office)

Christopher Cocksworth, the bishop of Coventry, said he was "heartened to learn" of Ayatollah Tehrani's gift to Bahá'ís.

"Given the systemic and long standing suffering experienced by the Bahá'í community in Iran, this is an imaginatively courageous step by a senior Iranian Islamic scholar," said Dr. Cocksworth on 9 April 2014.

Ayatollah Tehrani's "action reminds us all that despite the dehumanizing nature of many of today's conflicts, religious leaders have a shared responsibility to encourage freedom of religion and belief and to foster a deeper respect for human dignity," said Dr. Cocksworth, who is the Church of England's lead bishop in the Lords on foreign policy.

In India, likewise, leaders of the Buddhist, Islamic, Jain, Sikh, and Zoroastrian communities responded almost immediately with statements of support and hope.

Maulana Khalid Rasheed Farangi Mahli, head of the Islamic Centre of India, commented: "This friendliness towards a beleaguered religious minority is an exemplary act. It underscores the principle of the equality of all people before God, irrespective of religious belief.

Bhikshu Pragyanand of the Indian Buddhist Society (Bhartiya Buddha Samiti), a regionally prominent leader who is based in Lucknow, said Ayatollah Tehrani has set "an example for religious leaders of the world."

"His exhortation for the avoidance of hatred, enmity, and blind religious prejudice is very needed in today's world where freedom of conscience and freedom of belief are under constant threat in many countries," said Bhikshu Pragyanand.

Representing the Sikh community, Rajendra Singh Bagga, president of the Lucknow Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee, said Ayatollah Tehrani's gift "once again proves that humanity, compassion and peaceful coexistence is a very base of every religion of the world."

H. S. Sepai, leader of the Lucknow Parsi Anjuman of the Zoroastrian community, said Ayatollah Tehrani has



An illuminated calligraphic work by Ayatollah Abdol-Hamid Masoumi-Tehrani, containing the words of Bahá'u'lláh.

shown "the way towards realization of world unity and world peace."

Shailendra Jain, national vice president of Bhartiya Jain Milan, called Ayatollah Tehrani's statement "path-breaking." "His noble gesture for the Bahá'ís of the world is to be appreciated by one and all," he said.

Prominent individuals in the academic and development communities have also responded with praise, including the well-known social scientist Amitabh Kundu. Dr. Kundu, an internationally recognized author of more than 25 books on economics, development, and social science, said he felt "happiness and satisfaction" upon learning of Ayatollah Tehrani's action.

"Let us hope that this is a beginning of a new beginning," he said. "This would be the view and hope of all right thinking people in India desiring to live in an inclusive world."

In the Arab and Muslim world, a new discussion on religious coexistence emerges

MANAMA, Bahrain — Throughout the Arab and Muslim world, a new discussion on how to live peacefully side by side with the followers of all religions has begun to take shape.

This discourse has been inspired partly by the dramatic call of Ayatollah Abdol-Hamid Masoumi-Tehrani, an Iranian cleric who has called for religious coexistence with the Bahá'ís in Iran.

But the discourse has in some ways taken on a life of its own, emerging as a heartfelt discussion about the situation of religious freedom in Arab and Muslim lands and elsewhere.

In Bahrain, respected journalist Es'haq Al-Sheikh published a commentary in the newspaper *Alayam* saying that Ayatollah Tehrani's calligraphic gift offered insights about the need for bold action to promote the principle of religious coexistence in the entire region.

"The call of this Iranian cleric creates a genuine invitation for a spirit of peaceful and stable religious coexistence, firmly established in tolerance among all religions," wrote Mr. Al-Sheikh on 21 April 2014, in an article headlined: "Allow for the Bahá'í Faith amongst us."

"This is a blessed call that must take its path to...the Arabian Peninsula and all the Arab countries, to give Bahá'ís their rights in practicing their religion, and for those countries to strengthen their own concept of citizenship through justice and equality between all religions and beliefs in our Arab societies," wrote Mr. Al-Sheikh.

'Abdu'l-Hamid Al-Ansari, an expert on Islamic law in Qatar, wrote in the Kuwaiti newspaper *Aljarida* on 26 May 2014 that: "Man was created 'free,' and from the Islamic perspective, 'freedom'

is not a mere right, but rather a duty accountable by law.

"Islam grants 'religious freedom' to those who are at variance with it in belief and worship [as stated in the Quran]: 'To each among you have we prescribed a law and a system.'

"Hence," wrote Dr. Al-Ansari, a former dean in Islamic studies and law at the University of Qatar, "what will remain of the meaning of 'freedom' if we prevent the followers of other religions from practicing their religions?"

An "opening of the mind"

Suheil Bushrui, an authority on religious and interfaith issues in the Arab world, said the region "is an area where there are without any doubt tremendous forces of fanaticism, but at the same time there is an opening of the mind, and a tremendous desire to create a new way of thinking.

"Part of this new thinking is that violence is not what religion teaches, and there is an increasing discussion that emphasizes that freedom of worship and freedom of religion are guaranteed by the Quran itself," said Dr. Bushrui, who is director of the George and Lisa Zakhem Khalil Gibran Research and Studies Project at the University of Maryland.

In Iraq, one of the most senior Shiite clerics, Ayatollah Seyed Hosein Sadr, gave a long interview outlining a similar vision of religious coexistence and freedom of belief.

"I do not believe in dichotomy in God's message, just as I do not subscribe to dichotomy or conflict between God and mankind," said Ayatollah Sadr on 14 May 2014 in *Din Online*. "I believe that such presumption stems from erroneous understanding by religious fanatics and radicals....

IN BRIEF

- **Inspired partly by the gift of Iran's Ayatollah Tehrani, Arab and Muslim thinkers and scholars are opening a new discussion on religious coexistence.**
- **In articles, commentaries and interviews, these leaders are openly calling for religious freedom.**
- **Many cite passages from the Quran to support their vision, saying that Islam is at its heart a religion that supports equality and tolerance.**



Ayatollah Seyed Hosein Sadr, a senior Shia cleric in Iraq, has called for religious coexistence and freedom of belief.

“Religion should not be used to suppress mankind, or to force him or her, or cause pressure or duress; religion is meant to guide mankind to a more noble life, and to imbue feelings of joy and good fortune, to offer meaning and value to life,” said Ayatollah Sadr.

Ayatollah Sadr was also asked about a recent statement he made, in which he urged Muslims to have cordial relations with Bahá'ís. “I might not agree with followers of a certain religion, but that does not mean that I can deprive them of their natural human rights,” he said. “Religion has bidden us to treat others with equity and justice, even our enemies. As God has said: ‘Collective animosity should not make you cease being just! You must observe fairness and justice, and that is closer to piety.’”

In Iran in May, a high-ranking cleric — while not mentioning Ayatollah Tehrani — declared that interpretations of Islam that hold Bahá'ís to be impure are incorrect — and that Bahá'ís should therefore enjoy equal rights.

“Like all other religious jurists who believe that [all] people are ritually pure, I also believe that Bahá'ís are

pure,” wrote Hojatoleslam Mohammad Taghi Fazl Meybodi.

“In accordance with the citizenship rights of all citizens of a country, Muslims, Bahá'ís, Zoroastrians, or any people holding any set of beliefs should enjoy rights equal to those of any other citizens of the country,” wrote Hojatoleslam Meybodi in an essay on *Iranwire*.

“There should be no difference between a Bahá'í, a Jew and other religious minorities in other situations such as the right to education, the right to earn a living, the right to select one's residence, etc.,” said Hojatoleslam Meybodi.

Mahmoud Chreih, a noted author, editor, and scholar in Lebanon, said the new message of coexistence is clearly supported in the Quran and in other Islamic texts. “The Quran is clear — the verses are clear about tolerance — so there is no problem with the text of Islam,” Mr. Chreih said. “The problem is how it is applied.”

Accordingly, he said, the message of Ayatollah Tehrani and others resonates throughout the region.

Ahlam Akram, a prominent Arab activist for peace, wrote on 24 April 2014 in *Elaph*: “Surprisingly, and perhaps hopefully, a number of Muslim clergymen have adopted a new understanding of the teachings and principles of Islam, an understanding that takes a positive stance based on the spirit of the religion, and believes that the Holy Quran encourages coexistence between religions; in fact it welcomes it.”

Outside the Middle East

In the United Kingdom, the founder of the British Muslim Forum said he hoped Ayatollah Tehrani's initiative would “result in bringing much needed understanding” between Muslims and Bahá'ís in Iran and elsewhere.

“The Forum congratulates the Ayatollah for his courageous and dignified act and sincerely hopes that it will open the door of constructive inter-faith relations between the two faith communities in Iran,” wrote Maulana Shahid Raza on 5 May 2014.

Fiyaz Mughal, director of Faith Matters, an interfaith and anti-extremist organization based in the United Kingdom, praised the actions of Ayatollah Tehrani in the *Huffington Post*. “[T]he symbolism of [his] ‘reaching out’ comes in the wake of several recent statements by religious scholars in the Muslim world who have set out alternative interpretations of the teachings of Islam in which tolerance of every religion is, in fact, upheld by the holy Quran,” wrote Mr. Mughal on 12 May 2014.

Ibrahim Mogra, assistant secretary general of the Muslim Council of Britain, wrote an article about the need for religious coexistence on the website of *The Guardian* newspaper.

“He has reminded us that Islam is a religion of peace that recognizes diversity of every kind as part of God's design for his creation,” wrote Imam Mogra on 21 April 2014.

“The Ayatollah has done something unprecedented in Iran,” continued Imam Mogra. “And he is part of a growing trend in that country; others have also championed the inalienable rights of all Iranian citizens. Islam has a history of defending minorities and protecting their religious rights and freedoms.”

In an interview in May 2014, Clovis Maksoud, the former ambassador of the League of Arab States to the United Nations and now living in Washington, DC, said: “There is no doubt that there is a trend against dogmatism and intransigence among all religions at this moment.

“There is a discovery of what is common amongst the religions much more than what distinguishes them from each other.

“And what the Ayatollah has done, and the gift he has given to the Bahá'ís, is a testimony [to this] in a very subtle way. And it applies not only to what has happened to Bahá'ís but also what is happening in many situations between Shiites and Sunnis, and between Christians and Muslims,” said Dr. Maksoud.

Informal breakfasts become an important venue for dialogue on post-2015 development agenda

IN BRIEF

- **A series of informal breakfast meetings at the Bahá'í International Community have provided an important venue for diplomats, UN officials and NGOs to discuss the post-2015 development agenda.**
- **Topics have ranged from financing to peace and security.**
- **Chatham House Rules help create an atmosphere for frank consultation and exchange.**
- **As of December 2014, there have been 22 such meetings since July 2012.**

Breakfasts, continued from page one

“The main purpose of these meetings has been to create a space for dialogue that also allows diplomats and civil society to talk freely and also to listen,” said Cristina Diez, the main representative to the United Nations of ATD Fourth World.

“We feel we have succeeded. People give opinions in a free way where everyone can think about them and see the merits and bring points about how these ideas may be implemented.

“Another thing is we do it regularly. I haven't seen any other space at the UN like this. There are many meetings with panels or roundtables. But most of the time is for speakers to give their point of view. There is very little time for dialogue.

“We have had very supportive feedback. One diplomat said: ‘This is a space where I can listen to ideas without anyone trying to sell me anything or convince me that I have to do this or that.’” said Ms. Diez.

October 2013: Financial requirements

In October 2013, the meeting explored how the world can meet the financial requirements for a new post-2015 development agenda.

Eduardo Gálvez, deputy permanent representative of Chile to the UN, and Shari Spiegel of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs were featured speakers on 22 October.

They issued a broad plea for new mechanisms to finance the next set of goals, adding that such mechanisms should ultimately focus on creating enabling environments at the domestic and international levels to facilitate long term sustainable economic growth.

“We live in a globalized world and you need an international enabling environment,” said Mr. Gálvez. “And that means some changes with regard to trade and investment.”

Both also emphasized the importance of creating incentives to help shift investors from short-term to long-term thinking.

Participants in the breakfast meetings include diplomats, UN officials, and representatives of civil society. The format allows for a free and informal exchange of ideas. Shown here are participants at the 29 October 2014 meeting.



“We need good governance, we need good institutions, we need the rule of law, and we need a strong policy framework,” said Ms. Siegel. She said institutional investors, with some \$85 trillion in assets at their disposal, won’t invest in sustainable development unless there is a solid framework domestically and internationally to mitigate risk.

Participants said there is a need to change fundamentally patterns of consumption and production, because the world is now understood as finite in its resources, and it is clear humanity is “over-consuming.”

November 2013: Partnerships in a changing world

In November 2013, the dialogue explored the kinds of new partnerships that will be needed after 2015, especially in view of the changing relationships between donors and recipients in a more globalized world.

Ambassador Jean-François Régis Zinsou, permanent representative of the Republic of Benin to the UN, said on 19 November that any attempt to frame a new goal along the lines of MDG 8, which calls simply for the world to “develop a global partnership for development,” must take into account the fact that today “we are not talking about ‘a partnership’ — we are talking about ‘partnerships,’” which will encompass the whole range of new actors and trends in development.

The focus, said Mr. Zinsou, should ultimately be to provide resources for poverty eradication, which he considers to the main overall goal of any new development agenda.

Navid Hanif, director of the Office for ECOSOC Support and Coordination at the UN, said the targets set for MDG 8 — which included improvements to the international trading system, dealing with debt, improving information and communications technologies — were imprecise and vague. “Many labeled it as the weakest link,” he said, adding that its “weak accountability” meant that its achievement “was based largely on goodwill.”



Eduardo Gálvez, deputy permanent representative of Chile to the UN, left, gave opening remarks at a 22 October 2013 breakfast meeting on financial issues related to the post-2015 development agenda. On the right is Saul Weisleder, the deputy permanent representative of Costa Rica to the UN.

He said the international community should consider a “partnership” goal with a “robust accountability and measuring mechanism.”

“It should also be inclusive, people-centered, and transparent,” said Mr. Hanif, “and it should promote mutual learning and have feedback loops from the local to the global level.”

Such an agenda, he said, would address all the global challenges such as “climate change, inequality, migration, unemployment, and de-carbonization of our economies.”

December 2013: Impact of conflict and violence

The meeting in December 2013 considered the impact of violence and conflict on meeting the goals of any new development agenda.

“We can’t eradicate poverty without eradicating violence,” said Andrew Tomlinson, the director of the Quaker UN Office, which co-sponsored the meeting with the BIC and ATD Fourth World on 17 December. “In many societies [where conflict is prevalent], the development aid process is like pouring water into a bucket with holes.”

Sarah Cliffe, assistant secretary-general of Civilian Capacities to the UN,

said the threat of conflict and violence affects everything from whether children are able to go to school safely to the inability to access jobs, health care or education, whether because of conflict or high levels of crime.

“The impact of violence and conflict on social and economic development is deep,” said Dr. Cliffe. “Many countries have seen their development held back by these factors.”

Dr. Cliffe and other participants said new development goals could include measurable targets for good governance, institution building, and political processes that increase basic safety and security, justice, and confidence building.

When security and stability are re-established and sustained in post-conflict societies, said Dr. Cliffe, great development gains can be made. She cited Ethiopia, Mozambique and Rwanda as examples, noting for example that between 1990 and 2009, Ethiopia quadrupled access to improved water, while Mozambique tripled its primary school completion rate from 1999 to 2007.

“Building the justice system was not part of the MDGs,” she said. “For many countries, this will require international assistance,” said Dr. Cliffe.



The meetings feature full participation of civil society representatives. Shown are Nicole Bjerler, left, and Carsten Bockemuehl, with the microphone, both of Amnesty International, at the 29 October 2014 breakfast meeting.

“And we know that institution building takes time. It can take a generation.”

Kavita Desai, advisor to the Permanent Mission of Timor-Leste to the UN, discussed efforts to end and then heal the decades-long conflict there in the early 2000s, noting that her country had achieved stability and security — which allowed recently for double-digit economic growth.

She called violence “development in reverse,” noting that while MDGs were good, their focus was mainly limited to “water, health, and education” since the world community was unable or unwilling to address larger, more politically sensitive questions related to conflict.

February 2014: Austerity versus development

In February 2014, the focus was on the impact that national austerity measures might have on financing for development, exploring also the relation between domestic cut-backs in social programs and the rising tide of protests around the world.

Matthew Cummins, a policy specialist in UNICEF’s Public Finance and Local Governance Unit, said domestic austerity measures taken in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis had severely reduced budgets — and

especially social programs — in most of the world.

“About 50 percent of countries worldwide cut their budgets in 2010-2012 — and the overall size of that contraction was about 2.2 percent,” said Mr. Cummins. “And if we look at spending through this year, which I call the ‘intensification of contraction’ phase, we can see that 100 countries are going to be cutting their budgets by an amount of 3.3 percent of GDP.”

These kinds of cuts will leave little room to fund the post-2015 development agenda, said Mr. Cummins, since overseas development aid is declining and “what we are really talking about in funding development is domestic resource mobilization.”

Mr. Cummins identified seven areas where governments could find enough “financial space” to provide more funds for development. These included: efforts to make taxes more progressive, the elimination of tax havens, and the restructuring of debt.

Sara Burke, a senior policy analyst with Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, a German NGO, said the austerity policies of governments around the world have been a major factor in the increasing number of anti-government protests in recent years.

Citing a study she co-authored that analyzed world protests between 2006

and 2013, she said the main grievance expressed during the 843 anti-government protests they analyzed was a call for economic justice and against austerity.

“People need decent jobs, living wages and acceptable living conditions,” she said. “They want food they can afford.”

Another key demand was “the cry for real democracy,” she said, noting that nearly half of the protests indicated some level of “discontent with the workings of government.”

“The problem is much more than austerity... A real transformation is needed in terms of policy shifts” if the world is to meet any kind of development agenda, she said.

April 2014: “Break down the silos”

In April 2014, the topic was climate change but the discussion focused largely on how to counteract the tendency among policy makers to consider the main issues facing humanity — poverty, climate change, women’s advancement, and so on — as separate problems.

Francois Gave, counselor of the Permanent Mission of France to the UN, said global problems must be seen as interrelated — and so must the overall approach in any development agenda.

“Problems tend to be more and more complex,” said Mr. Gave. “We must try to break down the silos” that confine each issue. For example, he said, “climate change cannot be addressed in isolation” of other issues such as poverty, access to water, desertification and, even, violence.

Held 25 April, the specific topic of the meeting was “Post-2015 and climate: Highlighting appropriate environmental targets for the SDGs.” Mr. Gave was joined in the discussion by Abigail Jones, a managing director at Climate Advisors, a Washington, DC-based consultancy.

Ms. Jones noted that the latest scientific report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) says global warming and other coming climate impacts

are likely to affect the world's poor disproportionately.

At the same time, she said, while climate change has global relevance, “countries have different priorities and different capacities to address it.”

She agreed there is a growing consensus that any future goals in relation to climate change or sustainable development should be interlinked with cross-cutting effects related to food, water, poverty and disaster risk, among other issues.

June 2014: The end of “North” and “South”

In June 2014, the breakfast session examined the degree to which globalization has meant the end of “differentiation” in concerns and responsibilities for development.

Traditionally, development has been seen as something done by the rich for the poor. The “developed” nations “helped” the “less developed.”

That view is increasingly called into question in the face of rising middle income countries, growing inequalities in the North, and the realization that some problems — like climate change — affect everyone.

The topic, “Universality, differentiation, and our shared responsibilities,” generated a wide range of insights about the evolution of thinking about development, development assistance, and international cooperation.

“As we know, the whole UN development cooperation system functions more or less on the basis of a north-south set up,” said Guilherme de Aguiar Patriota, Deputy Permanent Representative of Brazil to the UN, who offered opening remarks at 11 June event.

“But it is not well equipped for south-south cooperation. And most of the resources that we are funneling toward development are of the voluntary kind.”

At the Rio+20 conference two years ago, he said, governments decided that proposed sustainable development goals (SDGs) should be “universal in nature.”

“This is very different from North-South — it is something that would apply to the developed countries, too,” he said, adding, as well, that even in

the United States now, “inequality” has become an issue.

“The world is now more like a continuum across the scale of development,” he added, “rather than a binary division of the world.”

Following Mr. Patriota’s opening remarks, there was a general discussion about “common but differentiated responsibilities” (CBDR) and universality. Among other things, participants said that new development goals cannot be met without some level of overseas development assistance (ODA) from “developed” countries; that private sources of funds will also be needed; and that “rich” countries cannot be expected to pay for everything.

October 2014: The role of civil society

In October 2014, the focus was on civil society and its role in helping to create and implement the post-2015 development agenda.

“We are talking about a profound transformation of society,” said Csaba Kőrösi, permanent representative of Hungary to the UN, speaking on 29 October, about the potential of the proposed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Implementing such sweeping changes will require a profound

transformation in our global mindset, he said, adding that civil society organizations are among the best positioned to inspire that kind of change.

Ambassador Kőrösi said that while technology has facilitated such transformations in human society in the past, setting SDGs is different because of its deliberative process.

“We have never tried to design the process in the course of the development of human history,” said Ambassador Kőrösi.

To implement the proposed SDGs, which range from “ending poverty everywhere” to “ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns,” new coalitions and institutional mechanisms will be required, said Ambassador Kőrösi.

“You were the first among all stakeholders, to recognize that we need a transformation,” he said. “A transformation that will start in minds.”

Joe Colombano, a senior officer and economic advisor in the Executive Office of the UN Secretary General, said civil society plays a key role in providing an outside perspective — and a level of passion — to the SDG deliberations and subsequent implementation.

“It is the main responsibility of the international community to listen to these voices to ensure we leave no one behind,” said Mr. Colombano.



The informal breakfast meetings have been sponsored by the Bahá’í International Community and International Movement ATD International Movement Fourth World. Above are Cristina Diez Sagüillo of ATD Fourth World, left, and Daniel Perell, with microphone, of the BIC, at the December 2013 meeting.



Vinicius Pinheiro, deputy director of the UN office (New York) for the International Labor Organization, speaks at the 20 November 2014 breakfast meeting, which explored how social protection floors relate to the post-2015 agenda.

November 2014: Social protection can stimulate growth

In November 2014, at the 21st such breakfast meeting, the focus was on “social protection floors” and their relation to the post-2015 agenda.

One idea that emerged was that efforts to provide minimum education, income and pensions for people across all ages can be a source of economic growth for countries, rather than a drag on national budgets.

“I believe we have to look at social protection floors not as an expenditure but as an investment,” said Mateo Estreme, deputy permanent representative of Argentina to the UN, speaking on 20 November 2014.

“And it is not only an investment in the human resources of the country but also, I believe, an important way of promoting growth.”

Mr. Estreme said economic growth was among the many reasons that strong language promoting social protection floors should be included in the SDGs.

“Our motto for post-2015 is ‘no one left behind,’ and with these social protection floors, the main purpose is to not leave anyone behind,” said Ambassador Estreme.

“From early childhood until old age, social protection floors are a way of introducing the idea that all sectors of society, at all ages, should be included, should be protected, and should have income, security, access to health services, education services and so forth,” said Mr. Estreme.

Philip Alston, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, agreed that the economic benefits of good social protection floors make their inclusion in the SDGs a very rational decision.

He added, however, that social protection should also be cast in terms of human rights — so that states will feel more obligated to provide minimum levels of social security once new SDGs are agreed on.

“The current draft avoids the use of human rights,” said Mr. Alston. “The consensus we can take from this is that human rights are not relevant, let alone even central, to the development process.”

“I think we have to push back on that,” he said, speaking to a mixed group of diplomats, UN agency officials and representatives of civil society.

Prof. Alston said the language used in the SDGs will matter very much.

He said, for example, that the World Bank seems to prefer the default

phrase “safety net” to “social protection floor.”

The word “net” implies “a number of bureaucrats making fine line decisions” about what social protections to provide, he said.

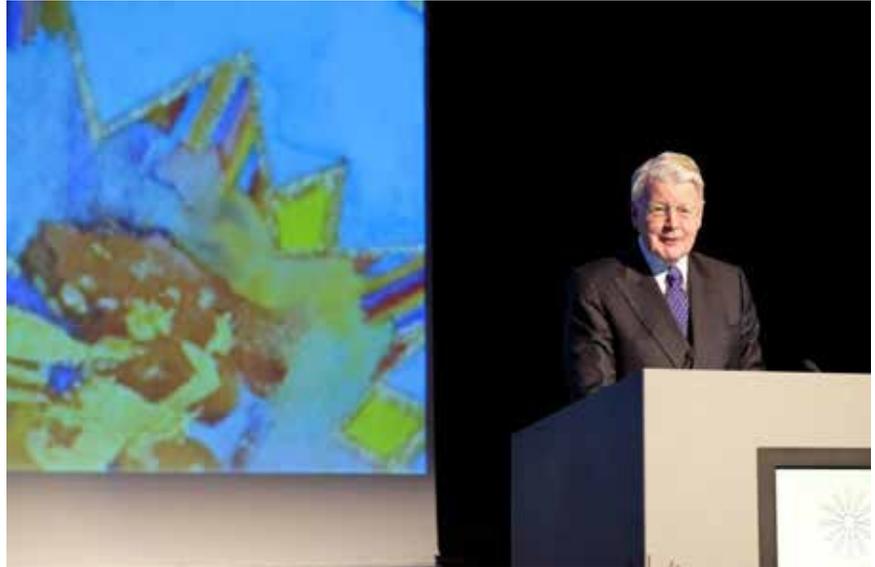
However, he said, if social protections are cast as human rights, along the lines of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, then the SDGs “will be much more robust.”

Prof. Alston and Mr. Estreme also spoke about the importance of establishing well considered indicators and targets in the SDGs.

“If there isn’t accountability under implementation, then the work will have little impact,” said Prof. Alston.

In from the cold: love, compassion and governance explored in Iceland

Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, the president of Iceland, addresses the Spirit of Humanity Forum, held 10-12 April 2014 in Reykjavik, Iceland.



IN BRIEF

- A “Spirit of Humanity” forum in Iceland drew more than 230 current and former UN officials, civil society representatives, and business and religious leaders in April 2014.
- They explored the role of human values and spirituality in relation to decision-making at community, national and international levels.

REYKJAVIK, Iceland — The words “love” and “compassion” are rarely juxtaposed with terms like “governance” and “leadership.”

And, yet, shouldn’t they be?

That was essentially the main theme of the Spirit of Humanity Forum, a rather bold and brave conference held 10-12 April 2014.

The Forum sought to explore the role of higher human values and spirituality in empowering effective decision-making at personal, community, national and international levels.

Participants — numbering more than 230 from some 40 countries — encompassed a wide range of current and former United Nations officials, representative from non-governmental organizations and civil society, along with prominent leaders in business, education, and government.

Among the organizing partners was the City of Reykjavik, and participants in the Forum included Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, the president of Iceland; Ruud Lubbers, the former prime minister of the Netherlands; and

Kul Chandra Gautam, former deputy executive director of UNICEF.

The Bahá’í International Community was represented by Daniel Perell, a representative to the UN.

“It is undeniable that both love and compassion are required for good governance, and so this event was really an important and significant effort to study that relationship,” said Mr. Perell.

“It was a gathering of individuals who are directly involved in various forms of governance — and who are also trying to see the practical benefits and results that come from expressing love and compassion.

“Put another way, it reflected part of what can be seen as a global movement towards more values-based governance, and as Bahá’ís this is something that we are very much concerned with and involved in,” said Mr. Perell.

For more, go to the Spirit of Humanity Forum website, at: <http://sohforum.org/>

New report examines Iran's failed promises from 2010 Universal Periodic Review

IN BRIEF

- A new report from the Bahá'í International Community examines Iran's record of delivering on promises it made to the UN Human Rights Council in 2010.
- Examining recommendations accepted by Iran at its Universal Periodic Review that year, the report says Iran failed to live up to any of the 34 that affected the Iranian Bahá'í community.
- One item, for example, called on Iran to "judicially prosecute" those who incite hatred against Bahá'ís. Yet hundreds of anti-Bahá'í articles were published by government-run media in 2014.

The full report can be read at: <http://www.bic.org/unfulfilledpromises>

GENEVA — Iran has completely failed to live up to a series of promises it made regarding its treatment of Iranian Bahá'ís four years ago, according to a new report from the Bahá'í International Community.

Titled "Unfulfilled Promises," and launched 15 September 2014 at the United Nations in Geneva, the report discusses 34 specific pledges made by Iran in February 2010 at the Human Rights Council that in some way could address human rights violations faced by members of Iran's Bahá'í community.

"Iran has utterly failed in every case to fulfill the commitments it made to improve human rights in relation to its treatment of Bahá'ís when it stood before the Human Rights Council four years ago," said Diane Ala'i, the BIC's representative to the United Nations in Geneva, discussing the report.

"The Council is built on the idea that its members will be honest and sincere in their pursuit of human rights, and Iran's record of 'unfulfilled promises' is a sad testimony of the gap

between that country's rhetoric and reality," said Ms. Ala'i.

The pledges made by Iran came during its Universal Periodic Review (UPR), which each member state undergoes every four years.

During its 2010 review, Iran accepted 123 of 188 recommendations made by other countries about specific steps it could take to improve its human rights practices. Four of those recommendations referred specifically to Iran's treatment of the Bahá'í community — and three of those four specifically called for a "fair and transparent" trial for the seven imprisoned Iranian Bahá'í leaders, who were then on trial.

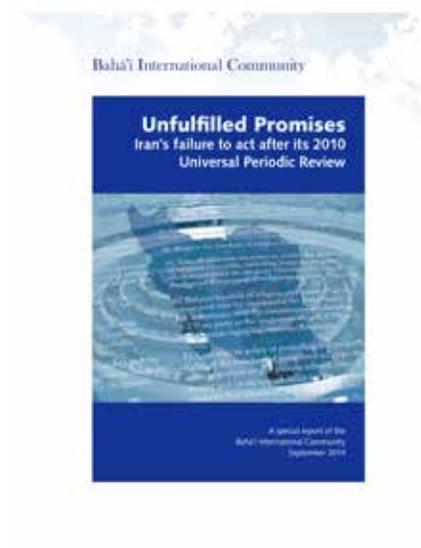
"Unfortunately, as everyone knows, that trial was marked by numerous violations of due process, from a closed courtroom to obvious judicial bias," said Ms. Ala'i, noting that their lawyers have said the indictment against the seven was "more like a political announcement, rather than a legal document" that was "written without producing any proof for their allegations."

Another recommendation called on Iran to "judicially prosecute" those who incite hatred against Bahá'ís.

"Yet, during the first half of 2014, the volume of such media attacks rose sharply, from 55 in January to at least 565 in June," said Ms. Ala'i, recounting figures from the report. "Yet the government has done nothing, as these attacks are made at the government's instigation.

Another 26 recommendations cover human rights, such as protection from torture or freedom from economic and educational discrimination, that have also been withheld from Iranian Bahá'ís in recent years.

"Our report shows, on a recommendation-by-recommendation basis, how none of these commitments have been fulfilled," said Ms. Ala'i.



At 2014 UPR, Iran's faces numerous questions about religious freedom and Bahá'ís

GENEVA — During a major review of Iran's human rights record at the Human Rights Council in October 2014, governments from around the world repeatedly called attention to Iran's lack of religious freedom — and its continued persecution of Iranian Bahá'ís.

During the four-hour session, known as the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), 104 governments made statements, yielding 291 recommendations about how Iran might improve its commitment to human rights.

Of these recommendations, at least 36 expressed concern about Iran's use of the death penalty, 22 appealed for greater religious freedom or tolerance, at least 20 urged Iran to treat women with greater equality, and 20 or more called on Iran to cooperate more fully with international human rights mechanisms and monitors.

Of the recommendations on religious freedom or tolerance, 10 specifically mentioned the situation of Iranian Bahá'ís, while a recommendation regarding discrimination against women and girls from Chile also urged Iran to promote access to higher education for Bahá'ís.

During its time during the session, held 31 October 2014, the Iranian delegation to the Council generally avoided addressing the specific concerns of other countries, maintaining instead, in a general way, that Iran “continues to fully participate in the international deliberations and activities for the promotion and protection of human rights.”

The head of the Iranian delegation, Mohammad Javad Larijani, did respond late in the session to questions from other governments about the status of Bahá'ís, saying “they enjoy all the privileges of any citizen in Iran.”

Diane Ala'i, the representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations in Geneva, said Mr. Larijani's description of the situation facing Bahá'ís was flatly wrong.

“Sadly, what we saw at today's Human Rights Council session was an attempt to gloss over the issue of religious discrimination, repeatedly cited as a concern by other governments,” said Ms. Ala'i shortly after the meeting.

“In response to questions posed by member states about Bahá'ís, Iran's representative once again completely distorted the facts and hypocritically stated that Bahá'ís enjoy all citizenship rights.”

“In response to questions posed by member states about Bahá'ís, Iran's representative once again completely distorted the facts and hypocritically stated that Bahá'ís enjoy all citizenship rights.”

— Diane Ala'i, Bahá'í International Community

“If there were the least thread of truth in what he said, why then on Saturday were at least 79 Bahá'í-owned shops in Kerman, Rafsanjan, and Jiroft, summarily closed by officials because proprietors had stopped doing business to observe a recent Bahá'í holy day. Those closures obviously violate the freedom of these Iranian citizens to practice their religion.

“Moreover, why has it been over 30 years since Bahá'ís have been officially allowed to attend university or work in the public sector or even be gainfully employed in their own businesses?” said Ms. Ala'i.

Ms. Ala'i noted that governments from every region raised the issue of religious tolerance in Iran, and that concern over the treatment of

Bahá'ís — along with Christians, Sunni Muslims, and Sufis — were frequently and specifically raised.

“Sadly, the comments made by Iran's representatives once again were clearly nothing less than prevarication, whether it be on the issue of religious freedom, freedom of the press or assembly, or due process in legal proceedings,” said Ms. Ala'i.

Ms. Ala'i noted that Mr. Larijani also suggested there is a “multicultural universality of human rights.”

“Such a concept would give the government a license to interpret international human rights law as it pleases,” said Ms. Ala'i.

“How Iran treats its Bahá'í citizens is really a litmus test on how the government respects the rights of all its citizens,” she said, adding that they “pose no threat to the government, and so there is no reason it cannot simply and reasonably uphold their rights.”

On 4 November 2014, the Iranian delegation said it would tell the Council which recommendations it would accept sometime before the next session of the Council in March 2015.

UN Experts: The inclusion of minorities can help stem extremism and hatred

IN BRIEF

- **A greater emphasis on the inclusion of ethnic and religious minorities in the processes of governance could help to quell violence and extremism.**
- **Two high level UN experts gave a briefing for NGOs on 23 October 2014.**
- **It is not enough for governments to say, simply, “our communities just don’t get along.”**
- **Efforts to promote freedom of religion or belief are another measure that can actually help to promote tolerance, they said.**

NEW YORK —Two United Nations high level experts issued a plea for a greater emphasis on the inclusion of ethnic and religious minorities in the process of governance as an antidote to violence and extremism.

“When you don’t include minorities in the government, you don’t realize how much you are dividing the community,” said Rita Izsák, the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues.

Heiner Bielefeldt, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, said: “It is to the benefit of everyone to see minorities respected.”

Their remarks came on 23 October 2014 at a briefing for non-governmental organizations, organized by the NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief and held at the offices of the Bahá’í International Community, which co-sponsored the event, along with the International Center for Law and Religious Studies.

Both experts highlighted their belief that the UN and its member states must make greater efforts to ensure that the rights of minorities, both ethnic and religious, are protected at all levels, and not just in a perfunctory manner.

Ms. Izsák said it is not enough for governments just to say “our communities just don’t get along.”

“It is never like that,” said Ms. Izsák. “The biggest issue is the deficit of good governance. Competition for power and resources is normal. The problem is that this is not always a fair competition. Because some groups are excluded at the very beginning from this competition.”

Ms. Izsák said if justice systems, for example, were improved, those who spew ethnic or religious hatred or who manifest corruption on behalf of their ethnic or religious group could be prosecuted. “That could eliminate a lot of hatred,” she said.



Heiner Bielefeldt, left, and Rita Izsák, speak at a briefing for NGOs on 23 October 2014 at the offices of the Bahá’í International Community.

Prize-winning film sheds light on misunderstood minority in Myanmar

Dr. Bielefeldt stressed the importance of using the international human rights framework to bolster protections for minorities — something he said will ultimately also improve life for the majority.

“The minorities are the ones who see the advantage of stressing freedom of religion or belief,” he said. “But it is also to the benefit of majority religions, and that is why one has to form very broad alliances to promote freedom of religion or belief as part of human rights broadly.

“You can’t work on behalf of minorities without addressing the majority,” he said.

Both also spoke about some of the difficulties they face as unpaid experts in the UN system who have very limited resources at their disposal.

Dr. Bielefeldt described how difficult it can be for him as an individual investigator on a country visit to safely talk to those who feel under persecution in the presence of government minders.

He also evaluated the overall impact of his work on promoting change, saying that is the “people on the ground” who make a real difference.

He added that advocacy groups should use the pro-human rights rhetoric of governments as a lever to encourage them to meet the higher standards they promise.

“First, there may be some in the same government who want to go further,” said Dr. Bielefeldt. “So turn rhetorical statements into binding commitments. Turn it into legal language. Turn it into institutions.”

Ms. Izsák spoke about the limited resources all of the special mandate holders have in publicizing their findings, noting that the UN has only one individual assigned to produced press releases for the entire group of 50 some special rapporteurs.

In her case, Ms. Izsák has turned to social media as an alternate means of getting her message out. “I have my own Facebook and Twitter accounts but it is a struggle,” she said. “And organizing meetings like this one are very important.”



The cast and makers of *Kayan Beauties* at the 56th Annual Myanmar Academy Awards. The film won best cinematography and best sound. Left to right: Nwe Ni Win, Nin Mai, Mu Tho, Aung Ko Latt, Hector Carosso, Rose Mary and Khin Mar Win.

YANGON, Myanmar — Often misunderstood in their own homeland, members of the Kayan Lahwi minority are known in particular around the world for the coils of decorative brass rings they wear around their necks.

A film about their lives — *Kayan Beauties* — has recently received a series of awards and honors.

In April 2014, the film took a special jury award at the ASEAN International Film Festival in Malaysia. That same month, the film’s writer and director, Aung Ko Latt, and its screenwriter, Hector Carosso, were honored at the annual Layan tribal festival.

Earlier, the film won for best cinematographer and best sound at the 56th Annual Myanmar Academy Awards.

The feature-length drama tells the story of three Kayan women who travel from their village to sell handicrafts in a distant city. A young girl who has recently acquired her first brass rings accompanies them. In the city, human traffickers abduct the girl. So, far from home and out of their element, the women find themselves involved in a desperate search for their friend.

Mr. Latt, who is a member of Myanmar’s Bahá’í community, said his desire to create a film about the Kayan was very much motivated by his religious beliefs. “Very simply, humankind is one,” he said. “*Kayan Beauties* is a movie for humankind, containing lessons and ideas for all humans.

“No religion accepts discrimination, trafficking and selling people,” he said. “Also, the promotion of women’s empowerment is strong in the story. It shows that in remote areas and villages, there are real people; they are not somehow less than city people.”

Mr. Latt first visited the region some years ago to teach music in the villages. He stayed almost eight months.

“From the very beginning, I felt a strong connection to the people and to their culture,” said Mr. Latt. “Through our conversations, I had the spark of an idea for the film.”

Minority groups are, as a whole, marginalized in Myanmar, said Mr. Carosso, “and with regard to films, normally not considered. And the horrible reality of human trafficking is growing in every country of the world.”

In China, Nishan Forum examines global values in a changing world

IN BRIEF

- An international, scholarly forum on world civilizations, held in China in May 2014, explored the need for a global system of ethics.
- The meeting compared and discussed various spiritual and moral systems of belief and thought, including the Bahá'í Faith.
- An outcome document stressed the importance of “the full implementation of human rights and fundamental freedoms” proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international legal agreements.



Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Baha'í International Community to the United Nations, addresses the Third Nishan Forum in Jinan, China, in May 2014.

JINAN, China — Humanity's increasing interdependence, coupled with closer relationships among people of all nations, offers new possibilities for a global conversation about common values and ethics.

That was among the main themes of the Third Nishan Forum on World Civilizations, a major international conference held at Shandong University 20-23 May 2014.

Bringing together some 130 scholars, diplomats, and civil society representatives from China and abroad, the Forum sought to develop new ideas about cooperation and dialogue among diverse world civilizations under the theme: “Common Human Ethics amid Different Beliefs.”

“The meeting was unprecedented in many ways in that it allowed an exchange of views between scholars who study diverse ethical and cultural systems and representatives of different faiths and belief systems,” said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the

United Nations, who was a participant and guest speaker at the event.

The Forum produced an outcome document, titled “The Agreement On Fostering the Duty Consciousness For the Human Welfare Through Civilization Dialogues,” which the participants had the opportunity to endorse.

In its draft form, that agreement stressed the importance of “the full implementation of human rights and fundamental freedoms” proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international legal agreements.

The draft agreement also said: “We believe that, in order to maintain the respect for human rights as well as for the diversity of cultures, we must foster a duty consciousness for the common welfare for human beings as a whole, rather than narrowly insist our own individual benefits [and] nationalist interests.”

The Forum's program explored a wide range of topics related to religion, ethics, and globalization.

Ms. Dugal participated at numerous sessions during the Forum, including

the giving of closing remarks, in which she summarized some of the main themes of the event.

“Thousands of years of intellectual and social history — and the moral and ethical development that has been achieved over that timespan — have brought us to the point where we can gather here today to explore, to imagine, and to articulate the elements of an ethic that will promote human flourishing,” said Ms. Dugal.

A “global conversation”

“The possibility of a truly global conversation has for the first time appeared on our horizon. Not only can we see our physical unity represented in stirring photographs of our planet, but we have developed the technologies which make conversations about the contours of our shared future together possible.

“We are, for the first time, part of a global conversation — learning together what it means to be human,” she said.

Many voices, she noted, remain to be heard. And there are destructive forces in the world that are tearing apart old structures and attitudes, such as the environmental crisis, corruption, extremes of wealth and poverty, and the exploitation of women and children.

“At the same time, we witness the sweeping forces of integration, drawing diverse groups together, forging a sense of world citizenship, and opening new opportunities for cooperation and collaboration,” said Ms. Dugal.

“It is clearer than ever that our reality as human beings is one that is deeply rooted in relationships — in our relationship with fellow human beings, within the family, the community, the nation, the global community, with the natural environment, and, for many of us, with a notion of God, or of Heaven, or transcendence,” she said.

Other Bahá’í participants included Hoda Mahmoudi, holder of the Bahá’í Chair for World Peace at the University of Maryland, and David Palmer, associate professor of sociology at the University of Hong Kong.

Design of Colombian House of Worship unveiled



The design of the central edifice of the local Bahá’í House of Worship, to be built in Norte Del Cauca, Colombia, was unveiled in September 2014.

NORTE DEL CAUCA, Colombia — The design for the local Bahá’í House of Worship in the Norte del Cauca region of Colombia was unveiled at a meeting in September at the site designated for its construction.

A small team from the Colombian architectural firm CUNA presented the approved plans before an audience of 500 people from the region and elsewhere on 14 September 2014.

Eduard Lopez, one of the architects, described the design process. He said the design team spent many hours, over the course of months, visiting different communities and groups, listening to their ideas and thoughts about the planned Temple, coming to understand their aspirations, and participating in their community-building activities.

“People tell us that we are designing this House of Worship. But it is actually all of you who have designed it, and we are channeling your ideas.”

Mr. Lopez said the team studied the natural surroundings and the architecture of the homes in the region in order to prepare a design that would be in harmony with the culture of the people and the physical environment.

“We chose the materials for the buildings with a number of variables in mind,” Mr. Lopez said. “We wanted materials that were from this region; materials that would not harm the natural surroundings.”

The Temple is one of five local Bahá’í Houses of Worship that are planned in the coming years. The other locations are Battambang, Cambodia; Bihar Sharif, India; Matunda Soy, Kenya; and Tanna, Vanuatu. In addition, two national Bahá’í Temples are planned in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Papua New Guinea.

The last in a series of eight continental Houses of Worship is under construction in Santiago, Chile. The other seven are located in the USA, Uganda, Australia, Germany, Panama City, Samoa, and India.

Bahá’í Houses of Worship are distinctive buildings, open to all, where visitors can simply pray and meditate in a serene atmosphere, or listen to the holy scriptures of the world’s religions being recited and sung. Each provides a spiritual center around which agencies of social, humanitarian, and educational service are established for the surrounding population.

Post-2015 forum calls for a comprehensive approach to women's empowerment

IN BRIEF

- **A forum at the UN in December 2013 considered the importance of a goal promoting the empowerment of women in the post-2015 development agenda.**
- **Panelists said there was “very strong and consistent support for a stand-alone goal on women’s equality, women’s rights and women’s empowerment.”**
- **Current MDGs fail to address structural inequalities facing women and girls.**
- **A greater emphasis on community-based efforts, which operate at the level of culture, could help to promote the advancement of women.**

UNITED NATIONS—The post-2015 development agenda needs a comprehensive goal to promote the equality of women and men, said panelists at a major UN forum on women’s issues and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Speakers at the forum, held 4-5 December 2013, also said the empowerment of women and girls should be woven into all other future goals for sustainable development and poverty eradication because women worldwide play a key role in such issues and are greatly affected by them.

“There was very strong and consistent support for a stand-alone goal on women’s equality, women’s rights and women’s empowerment,” said John Hendra, deputy executive director of UN Women, summarizing the first day of a stakeholder’s forum on “Challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls — The road ahead.”

“There was also equally very strong support for the integration of gender equality across all the goals, across the whole framework, especially in the area of sustainability and global partnership,” said Mr. Hendra.

Sponsored by UN Women, the forum brought together UN ambassadors, UN agency officials, and civil society representatives to discuss progress on MDG 3, which seeks to improve women’s education — and to consider new goals for women after 2015, when the MDGs expire.

Panelists said the world had made significant headway towards achieving MDG 3, which specifically called for the elimination of “gender disparity in primary and secondary education.” But speakers also said it did not go far enough, failing to address disparities beyond education.

“There are structural sources of gender inequality that are not adequately dealt with in the MDGs,” said James Heintz, a research professor at the University of Massachusetts.



Panelists at a stakeholder’s forum on “Challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls — The road ahead” on 5 December 2013. (UN Photo by Ryan Brown)

Prime Minister of Samoa pays tribute to Bahá'í community on 60th anniversary



Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi with cabinet ministers and members of the Bahá'í community of Samoa at the celebration of their 60th Anniversary.

Dr. Heintz and others said such structural inequities include issues related to unpaid care work, reproductive rights, pay and job differences in the labor market, and pervasive violence against women.

Violence against women was identified by a number of speakers as an impediment to sustainable development and poverty eradication.

“On a daily basis, we deal with cases of women and girls being raped, girls being sold, forced into marriage, underage marriage, or girls being exchanged for a crime someone else has committed,” said Manizha Naderi, executive director of Women for Afghan Women, which has some 25 shelters or facilities in ten provinces across Afghanistan.

“The elimination of violence against women is very important because it addresses every other single MDG,” said Ms. Naderi. “Not being able to attend school is a form of violence. Not having access to health care is a form of violence. So in the next set of development goals, I would really recommend that violence against women is addressed.”

Community efforts emphasized

Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations, said one element of any comprehensive framework to advance the rights of women should be a greater emphasis on community-based efforts.

“An important actor, yet one that is seldom mentioned in relation to the development and implementation of development frameworks, is the community,” said Ms. Dugal, an official discussant at the Forum.

“There is a tendency to overlook the relevance of community to human development,” she said, adding that “community is also the locus of culture.

“It is at the deep level of culture — of worldviews, attitudes, values and beliefs — where the most powerful and sustainable transformation can occur,” said Ms. Dugal.

APIA, Samoa — The Prime Minister of Samoa has expressed his gratitude to the country's Bahá'í community for its long service to the development of Samoan society.

The Honorable Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi made his remarks on 14 January 2014 during celebrations marking the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the Bahá'í Faith in the Pacific island nation.

“I take this opportunity to express the appreciation of the government for the important contribution that you make to the spiritual life of our country,” he said.

The Prime Minister noted that the work of the Bahá'í community, along with all churches in Samoa, is paramount in bringing out the best in people.

In a special observance at the Samoa Tradition Resort, the Prime Minister also said the Samoan Government strives to protect the right of all to worship.

“We are also very conscious of abuses of human rights and freedom that persists in many countries around the world,” he said. “As part of Samoa's engagement internationally through

its membership with the UN, Samoa endeavors to support efforts to protect the rights of people in various countries including Iran where the Bahá'í Faith struggles through persecution.”

The Bahá'í Faith was first established in Samoa in 1954 with the arrival there of a Swiss-Australian woman, Lilian Wyss. The Samoan Head of State from 1962-2007, His Highness Susuga Malietoa Tanumafili II, became the first reigning sovereign to accept the Bahá'í Faith. He dedicated the Bahá'í House of Worship in Tiapapata in 1984. A special commemorative service was held there on 12 January for Bahá'ís and their friends to celebrate, reflect and review milestones in their community's development.

A member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Samoa, Peseta Demetrius Fogaseuga Taofiga, said the events offered an occasion to reflect on the challenges and accomplishments of the past six decades.

“It is also an opportunity to consult on ways and means to build better communities, and to continue serving Samoa and its people,” he said.

Three high-level UN human rights experts condemn the destruction of a historic Bahá'í cemetery in Iran

IN BRIEF

- **Three UN Special Rapporteurs issued a joint press release in September 2014 calling destruction of a Bahá'í cemetery in Shiraz "unacceptable."**
- **Iran's Revolutionary Guards began digging on the site in April, to make way for a new cultural and sports complex.**
- **Despite an outcry from Bahá'ís and others inside and outside the country, the demolition was resumed in August 2014. Reports say human remains from 30-50 graves have been removed.**

By August 2014, the Revolutionary Guards had poured a concrete foundation in a large excavation at a historic Bahá'í cemetery in Shiraz, apparently to build a sports and cultural complex. Demolition of the cemetery, which began in late April, had temporarily stopped after the international media reported on the desecration and other governments expressed concern.

GENEVA — One month after Iran's Revolutionary Guards resumed demolition of an historic Bahá'í cemetery in Shiraz, three high-level United Nations human rights experts issued a call to Iranian officials to do more to halt the destruction, saying the action is an "unacceptable" violation of freedom of religion.

In a joint news release issued on 4 September 2014, Heiner Bielefeldt, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, and Rita Izsák, the Special Rapporteur on minority issues, said they were "dismayed" at reports that demolition work had resumed in August.

"Cemeteries, like places of worship, are an essential part of how people exercise and manifest their right to freedom of religion or belief. Their significance goes beyond their physical presence," said Dr. Bielefeldt.

"Attacks on cemeteries are unacceptable and are a deliberate violation of freedom of religion or belief," he

added. "The government of Iran must take urgent action."

The site, moreover, has particular significance to the Iranian Bahá'í community. It is the resting place of a number of prominent Bahá'ís — including ten Bahá'í women whose cruel hanging in 1983 came to symbolize the government's deadly persecution of Bahá'ís.

Excavation of the cemetery resumed in August after an apparent hiatus of several months in the face of an international outcry that began in May, shortly after reports emerged that the Guards had begun excavating at the cemetery in late April.

Those early reports indicated that, with little advance warning, the Guards had suddenly dug up an area 1.5 meters deep and 200 square meters in area, and that 40 or 50 trucks were lined up to remove the excavated earth.

The Guards acquired the land about three years ago from the government, which had confiscated the site from the Bahá'ís of Shiraz in 1983, at which time its grave markers were leveled and its main buildings destroyed.



Subsequent reports indicated that the Guards have also begun to remove human remains from the site. There are some 950 graves in the cemetery, and reports suggested at least 30 to 50 graves had been disturbed, with human remains taken from them and placed in an open canal.

The Guards have said they plans to build a new cultural and sports complex at the site. The plans reportedly include a library, mosque, restaurant, theatre, child care facility, and sports hall.

Attacks on Bahá'ís in Guards' speech

In June, the Guards held a public celebration of their progress in clearing the site. In advance of that celebration, to which the media was invited, they used a heavy roller to compact the ground. A carpet was then laid over a number of graves and the commander of the Guards gave a speech attacking Bahá'ís and calling the Bahá'í Faith a “foul,” “perverse sect.”

According to *IranWire*, this same commander or another high-ranking official in the Revolutionary Guards of Fars Province subsequently stated, “We will use a vehement approach with those who teach about the perverse sect in this province.... Their religion, or sect, is not genuine.”

At the same time, Bahá'ís in the province have given voice to their deep anguish over the site's destruction. In an open letter written to local authorities in May, for example, a 50-year-old Bahá'í woman spoke of facing decades of oppression, capped now by this latest attack on a place where the bodies of her father, mother, and sister — who were all killed by the government in the 1980s — had been laid to rest.

“Yesterday...the cemetery where the bodies of my beloved family were buried was dug up and the soil was loaded onto trucks and taken away, so that no trace of evidence would be left of the crimes and atrocities committed by you over the past thirty years,” she wrote.

“End this long-standing rancor and enmity,” she said. “We are your countrymen, your fellow citizens, your neighbors, your family, and your



A banner at the entrance to the Bahá'í cemetery in Shiraz shows images of the Revolutionary Guards' planned construction of a sports and cultural complex, saying it will include a library, mosque, restaurant, theatre, child care facility and sports hall. This photograph, taken sometime in the summer of 2014, also shows the presence of building materials stacked outside the cemetery.

relatives. We work for the dissemination of love; we adore affection and kindness; and believe we all have a right to the life which God has bestowed upon us.”

In the joint press release in September, Dr. Shaheed said “Bahá'ís have religious rites and practices for the disposal of the deceased in their own cemeteries and the government has the obligation not only to respect them but to protect them from destruction.”

Protection urged

Ms. Izsák urged the Iranian government to take substantive steps to protect religious minorities.

“The Bahá'ís have been subjected to persecution and acts of violence,” said Ms. Izsák. “The authorities must protect them from further discrimination and stigmatization.”

“Measures should be put in place to protect and maintain the cultural heritage of religious minorities, including burial grounds and other sites of religious significance,” she added.

Members of the Shiraz Bahá'í community have pleaded with local authorities to enforce a permanent halt in the construction, offering also a compromise in which the sports

complex could be built on the site away from areas where Bahá'ís are buried, while the graveyard itself is turned into a green space. The Bahá'ís have been told, however, that local authorities have no control over the Revolutionary Guards, who acquired the land about three years ago.

Diane Ala'i, the Bahá'í International Community's representative to the United Nations in Geneva, welcomed the statement of the three UN officials.

“We are grateful for the strong stand that these three independent human rights experts have taken on the situation in Shiraz,” said Ms. Ala'i.

“The statement by Dr. Bielefeld, Dr. Shaheed, and Ms. Izsák is a clear signal to Iran that these acts are completely unacceptable, and that it is the responsibility of the government to uphold and enforce its commitments to human rights law, regardless of who the perpetrators are.”

“The current government has made numerous promises to improve its human rights record but failed to take action. Words must now be followed by deeds,” said Ms. Ala'i.

Three Bahá'ís stabbed in Iran, emblematic of widespread religious hate crimes

BIRJAND, Iran — It was a quiet Monday evening in February in this provincial capital in eastern Iran when a man surreptitiously entered the home of the Moodi family.

He was wearing a mask.

And he immediately moved on the attack, stabbing Ghodratollah Moodi, his wife, Touba Sabzehjou, and their daughter, Azam Moodi.

He then quickly left without stealing anything.

Mr. Moodi was seriously injured in the abdomen. Mrs. Sabzehjou was cut in the neck. Both soon lost consciousness from blood loss.

Ms. Moodi, despite deep wounds of her own, was able to phone for help, and all three were soon taken to the hospital. In critical condition at first, they eventually recovered.

The perpetrator, however, remains at large.

The whole episode, which occurred on 3 February 2014, reflects the degree to which hate crimes against Iranian Bahá'ís have been allowed to flourish in recent years, under a government that itself widely disseminates anti-Bahá'í propaganda in the state-controlled news media.

Diane Ala'i, the Bahá'í International Community's representative to the United Nations in Geneva, noted that the attacker stole nothing — and his only goal appears to have been to kill three innocent Bahá'ís in their home.

“As such, there can be no doubt that this crime was religiously motivated. Mr. Moodi was well known as a leader in the Bahá'í community in Birjand.

“The sad fact is that there have been more than 50 physical assaults on Iranian Bahá'ís since 2005 — and none of the attackers has been prosecuted or otherwise brought to justice. And at



The Moodi family, shown recovering at home, after a stabbing attack in Birjand, Iran, on 3 February 2014. The arm of Azam Moodi, center, is visibly bandaged. No one has been brought to justice for the attack, which sent all three to the hospital.

least nine Bahá'ís have been murdered under suspicious circumstances in the same period, and the murderers have likewise enjoyed impunity.”

Ms. Ala'i noted, for example, that a Bahá'í in Bandar Abbas was killed on 24 August 2013 — and that police have yet to charge anyone with the crime. Mr. Ataollah Rezvani, who was also a leader in the Bahá'í community in his locality, was murdered in his own car by a gunshot to the head.

In addition to those two attacks, the Iranian Bahá'í community has faced numerous attacks on its cemeteries in recent years — more than 40 since 2005 — and Bahá'ís have faced threats and discrimination throughout the country.

In June 2014 in Yazd, for example, someone anonymously distributed leaflets calling Bahá'ís “godless,” suggesting it was a religious duty to attack their

properties. The leaflets appeared on the eve of an important Shiite holy day.

In a report issued in October 2011, the Bahá'í International Community documented more than 425 instances of anti-Bahá'í propaganda or statements in the Iranian news media or on government-controlled or government-sponsored websites between December 2009 and May 2011.

That effort has continued and actually increased by some measures. The BIC logged some 55 anti-Bahá'í articles in the Iranian media in January 2014, a figure that rose steadily month by month, culminating in at least 565 such articles in June 2014.

In reports and resolutions, the United Nations expresses its concern over human rights in Iran

IN BRIEF

- **The UN and its representatives have stated clearly and repeatedly over the last year that the human rights situation in Iran has not improved.**
- **These expressions of concern come after Iranian officials tried to project a new tone of moderation and respect for the rights of its citizens since the election of President Hassan Rouhani in 2013.**
- **But Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and Special Rapporteur Ahmed Shaheed have found few improvements and voting by the General Assembly and Human Rights Council suggest the international community is unconvinced.**
- **Concerns include the high rate of executions, the treatment of women, and discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities, including the Bahá'ís.**

NEW YORK — In a series of reports and resolutions issued from late 2013 through the end of 2014, the United Nations and its special representatives have made clear that the human rights situation in Iran has not improved, amounting to a collective call for Iran to take steps to meet international obligations to respect the rights of its citizens.

These expressions of concern stand in sharp contrast to the statements and promises made by Iranian officials, who have sought since the election of President Hassan Rouhani in mid-2013 to portray Iran as moderate and cooperative in the face of international concern over its human rights policies.

The most recent of such expressions of concern came in December 2014, with the passage in the General Assembly of a six-page resolution enumerating the violations made by Iran recently and calling for it to allow UN monitors to visit the country.

The resolution, which passed by a vote of 83 to 35, with 68 abstentions, expressed “deep concern at serious ongoing and recurring human rights violations” in Iran, listing the high frequency of executions, torture, restrictions on freedom of assembly and expression, the targeting of journalists, pervasive gender inequality, and religious discrimination — including against Iranian Bahá'ís — as among the Assembly’s concerns.

The resolution — the 27th such in the General Assembly since 1985 — followed strongly worded reports from UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and Special Rapporteur Ahmed Shaheed, who both expressed alarm over broad and continuing human rights violations in Iran.

Mr. Ban’s report, issued in September 2014, said there have been no improvements in the human rights situation for religious and ethnic

minorities. “Religious minorities such as Bahá'ís and Christians face violations entrenched in law and in practice,” he wrote.

Dr. Shaheed, the UN’s special investigator on human rights in Iran, also issued a report in September 2014. It discussed a wide range of violations, from the lack of legal due process, especially for executions, and “continuing arbitrary arrests, detention and prosecutions of individuals for exercising their fundamental rights.”

Dr. Shaheed devoted several paragraphs to the ongoing persecution of Iranian Bahá'ís, noting that they face wide-ranging discrimination in education and work, and that more than 100 Bahá'ís are in prison.

Promises of moderation

In September 2013, Iranian President Rouhani, who had been elected just three months before, came to the United Nations with a message of tolerance and moderation. His UN speech mentioned those words frequently — leading to this headline in the *New York Times*: “Iran’s New President Preaches Tolerance in First UN Appearance.”

“Human society should be elevated from a state of mere tolerance to that of collective collaboration,” said President Rouhani on 24 September 2013. “We should not just tolerate others. We should rise above mere tolerance and dare to work together.”

In other speeches, President Rouhani promised to put forward a new “Charter of Citizen’s Rights” for Iranians that would, according to published reports, “call for equality for all citizens without discrimination based on race, religion or sex” as well as “greater freedom for political parties and minorities.”



Unknown attackers destroyed portions of the Bahá'í cemetery in Sanandaj, Iran, sometime in the morning of 12 December 2013. As the photographs above indicate, the morgue, where bodies are washed, along with the prayer room, a water tank, and the walls of the cemetery were destroyed. Since 2005, there have been at least 42 attacks on Bahá'í cemeteries in Iran.

October 2013 reports

In October 2013, however, Secretary-General Ban issued a report on the situation of human rights in Iran, expressing concern over a wide range of issues, including reports of torture, amputations, flogging, increased application of the death penalty, arbitrary detention, and unfair trials.

Mr. Ban also said he continues to receive reports that ethnic and religious minorities continue to face discrimination, citing also reports of “widespread and entrenched discrimination faced by members of the Bahá'í community.”

Dr. Shaheed, in his October 2013 report, indicated that despite recent signals by Iran that it intends to improve on its human rights record, there had been little evidence of change.

Among other things, Dr. Shaheed expressed concern over Iran's high level of executions, continuing discrimination against women and ethnic minorities, poor prison conditions, and limits on freedom of expression and association.

He also said that religious minorities in Iran, including Bahá'ís,

Christians, Sunni Muslims, and others, “are increasingly subjected to various forms of legal discrimination, including in employment and education, and often face arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment.”

He said, moreover, there “appears to be an escalating pattern of systematic human rights violations targeting members of the Bahá'í community, who face arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment, national security charges for active involvement in religious affairs, restrictions on religious practice, denial of higher education, obstacles to State employment and abuses within schools.”

2013 General Assembly Resolution

In December 2013, the General Assembly expressed “deep concern” over Iran's continued use of torture and its high rate of executions, noting the “high frequency of the carrying out of the death penalty in the absence of internationally recognized safeguards.” It also noted “widespread and serious

restrictions on the right to peaceful assembly, freedom of association and of opinion and expression,” the “systematic targeting and harassment of human rights defenders,” and “pervasive gender inequality and violence against women.”

The 2013 resolution also expressed concern about discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities, noting “severe limitations and restrictions on the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief” affecting “Christians, Jews, Sufi Muslims, Sunni Muslims and Zoroastrians and their defenders.”

The resolution devoted three paragraphs to the situation of Iranian Bahá'ís, noting their “continued persecution” including “targeted attacks and murders, without proper investigation to hold those responsible accountable, arbitrary arrests and detention, the restriction of access to higher education on the basis of religion, the continued imprisonment of the leadership of the Iranian Bahá'í community, the closure of Bahá'í-owned businesses and the de facto criminalization of membership in the Bahá'í faith.”

2014 Human Rights Council

In March 2014, Mr. Ban and Dr. Shaheed again issued reports, this time to the Human Rights Council.

Dr. Shaheed's report said President Rouhani's draft Charter of Citizen's Rights, which had been promulgated by the office of the President in November 2013, “falls short of strengthening protections for the equal enjoyment of human rights for women and members of the country's religious and ethnic minority communities.”

“It also fails to address the use of cruel, inhumane or degrading punishment, including flogging, hanging, stoning and amputation.”

“The charter does not ban the execution of juveniles and also fails to address concerns about the use of capital punishment, in particular for offenses that do not meet the standards for most serious crimes under international law,” Dr. Shaheed said.

On 28 March, the Council voted to extend Dr. Shaheed's mandate as its special investigator on Iran.

Review: *To Light a Candle*

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to do with the reality of the Bahá'í Faith and its community.”

Both Dr. Akhavan and Mr. Bahari acknowledged, however, that in recent years increasing numbers of Iranians have changed their minds about the Bahá'í community.

“Many people are learning from the Bahá'ís,” Mr. Bahari said, adding that, in the past, Iranians “were indifferent to the fate of the Bahá'ís. We didn't care to care... I find it shameful we didn't hear about any Bahá'ís being kidnapped and killed.”

“People will eventually reconcile with that shameful past,” Mr. Bahari said. “Most young Iranians today have Bahá'í friends despite the fact the government continues to harass them and portray them in the same negative light.”

“For me — and this is one of the reasons I wanted to make this documentary — the Bahá'ís are a barometer for what's going on in Iran. If the country opens up a little, perhaps through a reformist government, the Bahá'ís are

given certain freedoms. When society is more repressed, it's the Bahá'ís who are the first victims.”

“Bahá'ís are a barometer for what's going on in Iran... When society is more repressed, it's the Bahá'ís who are the first victims.”

— Maziar Bahari

Mr. Bahari used the premiere to announce an international “Education is Not a Crime Day,” to be marked on 22 February 2015, which he hopes will raise awareness of the right to education.

“These sorts of international events, which focus on some of the key themes the documentary raises, are not only instrumental in drawing attention to the hardships the Bahá'ís have had to endure over many decades in Iran, they incite positive change.

“While Bahá'ís continue to face injustice, and as long as Iranian authorities treat them as second-class citizens, much remains to be done,” he said.

Sri Lanka youth conference shows global concern of young people

Youth continued from page 3

and asked to respond to the idea of empowerment,” said Mr. Perell, “We found that youth — regardless of their background — were able to articulate themes of empowerment, opportunity, and service in creative and profound ways. It was inspirational to all involved and, we hope, will stay with the participants as they continue their efforts to better their communities.”

Mr. Perell said the Bahá'í International Community felt it was important to be at the Colombo Conference because of the importance of young people in shaping humanity's future — but also its present.

“The period of youth is increasingly recognized by the international community as a key time in people's lives around the world, because of the forces they can release into their communities. History, recent and ancient,

teaches us the impact of youth on their societies. How to channel the energy is a key question we must all grapple with,” said Mr. Perell.

Mr. Perell noted that the Bahá'ís around the world have organized a number of programs aimed at fostering among young people the importance of serving their communities and approaching life with an attitude of learning.

“Last year, for example, the worldwide Bahá'í community organized 114 youth conferences,” said Mr. Perell. “These drew more than 80,000 young people, both Bahá'ís and youth from other religions and no religion alike, where they discussed things like how they can contribute to the betterment of society and what it means to serve their communities.”



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Documentary film charts Iranian Bahá'ís' peaceful response to oppression

To Light a Candle

— A film by Maziar Bahari

IN BRIEF

- A new documentary film, premiering in London and elsewhere in fall 2014, explores the constructive resilience of Iran's young Bahá'ís in the face of government efforts to bar them from higher education.
- The filmmaker, Maziar Bahari, a former reporter for *Newsweek*, was himself imprisoned in Iran in 2009.

LONDON — A powerful new documentary film, telling the story of the Bahá'ís of Iran and their peaceful response to decades of state-sponsored persecution, had its UK premiere on 12 September 2014.

Using interviews, personal stories, and archival footage — often smuggled out of Iran at great personal risk — the film, *To Light a Candle*, highlights the constructive resilience of Iran's young Bahá'ís who, in the face of systematic attempts by the Iranian regime to bar them from higher education, developed an informal arrangement known as the Bahá'í Institute of Higher Education (BIHE), through which they could have access to university-level courses.

“It's a beautiful and simply told documentary that will hopefully draw attention to an issue that is in and out of the news only very sporadically,” said actor and comedian Omid Djalili, who introduced the screening at the Hackney Picturehouse in London.

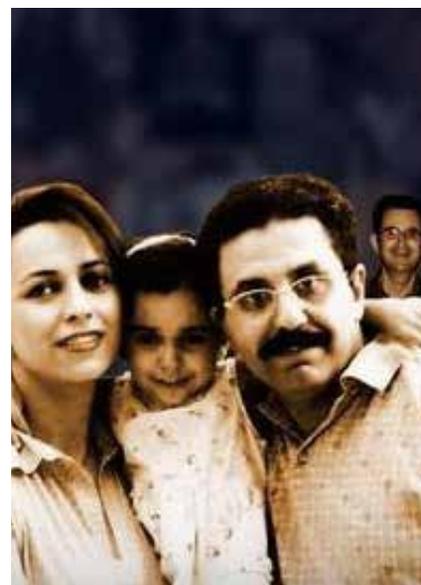
The film has been made by acclaimed journalist and filmmaker Maziar Bahari. He was *Newsweek's* Iran reporter from 1998 to 2011 and has produced a number of other documentary films about Iran. In 2009, he was himself imprisoned in Iran for 118 days, apparently because of his coverage of the 2009 presidential election. Mr. Bahari is not a member of the Bahá'í community.

“The story needed a level-headed journalistic approach and that's precisely what it got,” said Mr. Djalili, who described the documentary as “both extraordinary and highly emotional.”

The film vividly documents that the threat of arrest and imprisonment

is a daily reality for Iran's Bahá'ís, as academics barred from pursuing their professions attempt to educate young people in private homes.

The premiere of the film was followed by a panel discussion chaired by Mr. Djalili. In addition to Maziar Bahari, the panel included international human rights lawyer Payam



A still photograph promoting Maziar Bahari's new film, *To Light a Candle*, which examines the efforts of Iranian Bahá'ís to obtain higher education in the face of a government ban on their enrollment in university.

Akhavan.

“In order to justify the widespread repression in Iranian society, an enemy needed to be constructed and this fell on the Bahá'ís,” Dr. Akhavan said. “The conception of the Bahá'ís that the regime has put together is based on paranoia and hatred and has nothing

Candle, continued on page 27