

## May 15, 2008: Iran: USCIRF Calls for Strong International Condemnation of Arrest of Baha'i Leaders

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WASHINGTON-The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom is gravely concerned by the arrest of seven prominent leaders of the Baha'i community in Iran and appeals to the U.S. government and international community strongly to condemn this flagrant abuse of religious freedom.

"The arrests of six Baha'i leaders yesterday, following the arrest of another leader in March, is the latest sign of the rapidly deteriorating status of religious freedom and other human rights in Iran," said Michael Cromartie, the Commission Chair. "This development signals a return to the darkest days of repression in Iran in the 1980s when Baha'is were routinely arrested, imprisoned, and executed."

The Baha'i community, Iran's largest non-Muslim minority, has long suffered especially severe religious freedom violations in Iran. The Iranian authorities view them as apostates; since 1979, Iranian authorities have killed more than

200 Baha'i leaders, thousands have been arrested and imprisoned, and more than 10,000 have been dismissed from government and university jobs.

The last time the Iranian government systematically arrested the Baha'i leadership in Iran in the early 1980s, 17 Baha'i leaders on two successive national governing bodies were either summarily executed or were abducted and disappeared. They are presumed dead.

Over the past several years, and particularly since President Ahmadinejad came to power, members of the Baha'i community have been harassed, physically attacked, arrested, and imprisoned. During the past year, young Baha'i schoolchildren in primary and secondary schools increasingly have been attacked, vilified, pressured to convert to Islam, and in some cases, expelled on account of their religion. In November 2007, three Baha'is were sentenced to four years in prison for allegedly spreading propaganda against the regime; 51 others received suspended sentences. Their alleged crime was setting up a program to educate poor Iranian children.

The seven Baha'i leaders arrested are members of an informal Baha'i national coordinating group, known to the Iranian government, which was established to help meet the needs of the 300,000-350,000-member Baha'i community after the Iranian government banned all formal Baha'i activity in 1983. In the early morning hours on May 14, officers of the Intelligence Ministry in Tehran reportedly entered the homes of six of the seven members of the informal national coordinating group and conducted extensive searches, following which the six-Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Saeid Rezaie, Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Vahid Tizfahm-were arrested and brought to the notorious Evin Prison in Tehran. The other member, Mahvash Sabet, was arrested two months earlier in Mashhad.

The Commission held a public hearing on the state of religious freedom and related human rights in Iran in February. In addition to the plight of the Baha'is, the hearing focused on the problems faced by other religious minority communities and dissenting Muslims in Iran:

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Sufis face growing government repression of their communities and religious practices, including increased intimidation and harassment, and the detention of prominent Sufi leaders by the intelligence and security services in the past year;

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President Ahmadinejad's denials of the Holocaust and statements calling for Israel to be "wiped of the map" have created a climate of fear among Iran's 30,000-member Jewish community;

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Christians, in particular Evangelicals and other Protestants, in Iran continue to be subject to harassment, arrests, close surveillance, and imprisonment; many are reported to have fled the country; and

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dissidents and political reformers continue to be imprisoned on criminal charges of blasphemy and for criticizing the Islamic regime. A number of senior Shi'a religious leaders who have opposed various Iranian government policies on political or religious grounds have also been targets of state repression, including house arrest, detention without charge, trial without due process, torture, and other forms of ill-treatment.

"The international community must send a strong, united signal that such violations of religious freedom will not be tolerated," Cromartie said. "U.S. and foreign leaders should call at the highest levels for the release of all religious prisoners in Iran and draw attention to the need to hold Iranian authorities accountable in specific cases where severe violations have occurred."