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WASHINGTON, DC - Seven Baha'i leaders who have been in prison for two years were sentenced to 20 years in prison by an Iranian court, according to Baha'i activists who spoke with the media.

The five Baha'i men and two women had been charged with several baseless and unsubstantiated crimes which carry the death penalty, including espionage, propaganda activities against the Islamic order, and spreading "corruption on earth." Their attorneys are in the process of filing an appeal.

"This is an outrageous miscarriage of justice and one more example of how the Iranian regime is a gross violator of human rights and religious freedoms," said Leonard Leo, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) chair. "The prosecutions and sentences are, pure and simple, politically and religiously motivated acts, and the Commission calls for the unconditional release of these seven individuals."

The Iran Sanctions Act, signed into law by President Obama roughly a month ago, for the first time imposes sanctions on Iran because it continues to engage in serious, systematic, and ongoing violations of human rights, including suppression of freedom of expression and religious freedom. USCIRF urges the Obama Administration to immediately implement sanctions on human rights and religious freedom violators included in the Iran Sanctions Act and urge our European and other allies to do the same.

The United States also should make use of another available and important tool, the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), to impose additional sanctions for the government of Iran's violations of religious freedom or belief. Each year, since 1999, the State Department has designated Iran a "Country of Particular Concern," or CPC, due to its systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. As a CPC, Iran can be subjected to economic and other sanctions under the IRFA. Despite being designated a CPC for 10 years, no IRFA-related sanction has been imposed on Iran, with the U.S. government relying on existing sanctions already in place. USCIRF concludes that the rapidly deteriorating conditions for religious freedom justify specific, additional sanctions under IRFA.

"Sanctions against religious freedom violators signals the United States' solidarity with the Iranian people and sends a stark message to the Iranian regime that it should end more than 30 years of repression," said Mr. Leo.

In recent years, religious minorities, particularly Baha'is, as well as Christians and Sufi Muslims, have suffered intensified physical attacks, harassment, detention, arrests, and

imprisonment. Heightened anti-Semitism and repeated Holocaust denial threats and activities by senior government officials have increased fear among Iran's Jewish community. The government continues to impose lengthy prison sentences on prominent reformers from the Shia majority community, many of whom have been tried on charges of "insulting Islam," criticizing the Islamic Republic, and publishing materials that allegedly deviate from Islamic standards.

USCIRF highlighted these abuses in a National Press Club seminar in May and has worked on the Iranian persecution of Baha'is in the past.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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