

July 8, 2009

Mr. Leonard Leo  
Chair  
United States Commission on International Religious Freedom  
800 North Capitol Street, NW, Suite 790  
Washington, DC 20002

Dear Mr. Leo:

I am writing to request that your Commission, the White House and the U.S. Department of State do more to raise the case of the seven Baha'is who are scheduled to go on trial on Saturday in Iran and to call for their immediate release.

In addition to the hundreds of Iranians who have been detained in the context of Iran's disputed presidential poll, many other "security detainees" arrested long before the June election remain behind bars. Several are "prisoners of conscience" who are being held without due process and solely because they peacefully pursued freedom of expression, freedom of association or religious beliefs.

These Iranians and the authorities who have detained them need to know that the Iranian people's human rights are a matter of international concern.

Two "prisoners of conscience" I came to know at Tehran's Evin Prison are Mahvash Sabet and Fariba Kamalabadi. The women, along with their five male colleagues, are leaders of Iran's largest religious minority group, the Baha'i community.

Over the years, Iran's Baha'is have faced discrimination and persecution for their faith, which promotes progressive ideas about gender equality and unity of religion and humanity. They have also been labeled heretics who have turned their backs on Islam. Many followers of the Baha'i faith have been harassed, imprisoned, and some, even executed because of their faith.

Mahvash, Fariba and their five male colleagues were arrested in the spring of 2008. Mahvash was held in solitary confinement for six months; Fariba for four. All seven have been detained without access to their attorneys, (one of whom, Abdolfattah Soltani, was recently incarcerated).

The group is now expected to go on trial on July 11, according to the Baha'i International Community, which is calling for their immediate release, or at least a fair and public trial. The seven Baha'is reportedly face charges including spying for Israel and "spreading corruption on earth," both of which can result in the death penalty. In the past, vague charges such as these have allowed Iranian authorities to arbitrarily punish a wide range of peaceful activities in the name of "protecting national security," in breach of international human rights' treaties to which Tehran is party.

The seven Baha'is, along with at least 20 other Baha'is imprisoned across Iran, are not threats to Iran's national security but are being held because of their beliefs and peaceful activities on

behalf of the Baha'i community. They have been willing to cooperate with Iran's Shiite Islamic regime, but they refuse to surrender to pressure to abandon their beliefs, knowing that the decisions they make could have far-reaching implications for the estimated 350,000 Baha'is and other religious minorities in Iran.

Mahvash, Fariba and their five male colleagues are expected to be tried in Branch 28 of Tehran's Revolutionary Court. This was where I was convicted in April on a bogus charge of espionage and sentenced to 8 years' imprisonment. I was extremely fortunate that my case gained growing international attention, which helped lead to my release.

The Baha'is' case also requires this attention. The U.S. government and international community can boost their efforts at the highest levels to raise this case and put pressure on the Iranian authorities to drop the charges against the Baha'is, as well as other prisoners of conscience, and to release them immediately.

I thank you for your immediate attention on this matter where the lives of numerous innocent people could be at stake.

Sincerely,  
Roxana Saberi