

9 September 2007

To the Baha'i students deprived of access to higher education in Iran

Dear Baha'i Friends,

In these difficult days laden with tribulation, we are with you in spirit, our hearts heavy at the injustice that continues to rain upon you. The persistent position of the Iranian authorities in banning Baha'i students from access to higher education is deeply saddening. The policy was clearly confirmed in a recently disclosed communication by the Central Security Office of the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology, confidentially conveyed to the officials of eighty-one universities in Iran, which called for the expulsion of any student discovered to be a Baha'i. It has now been reaffirmed by the action taken recently by the Education Evaluation Organization, which declared as "incomplete"--and therefore invalid--the applications of some 800 Baha'is who took the national exam for university entrance for the coming academic year (2007-2008). These official acts are disappointing and shameful.

Only a few months ago, reports carried by newspapers about the expulsion of Baha'i students in Iran were denied by a spokesperson for Iran's mission to the United Nations, who said outright that no one in Iran is expelled from university because of religion. That same assurance was given by the embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the United Kingdom, in a written response to the concern a British Member of Parliament had expressed about the government's treatment of Baha'i students. A similar avowal by the Iranian embassy in Ethiopia appeared in a newspaper in that country following the publication of a story reporting Iran's covert plan to identify Baha'is and secretly monitor their activities throughout the country.

For more than two decades Baha'i students in Iran were unable to enter university because the only way open to them would have been to misrepresent their Faith. Then, consequent to a concerted worldwide effort--involving governments, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations, and individuals--that raised questions about this situation, your government's representatives responded by averring that the reference to religion on the forms was not to identify university applicants by belief but only to specify the religion on which they wished to be examined.

That you would have received such explanations with a degree of scepticism is understandable. However, as a gesture of good will and to find a solution to an issue that adversely affects the good name of Iran, the Baha'i community accepted this apparent clarification. At long last, you were able to feel hopeful that the way would now be clear for you to continue your education. Thus, some of you sat for the 2006-2007 entrance examination and were able to register at university. Your hopes were, however, short-lived, as over the course of this academic year more than half of those who had been enrolled were expelled, and we now have the Ministry's letter which confirms that for no other reason than your adherence to the Baha'i Faith you will not be permitted to continue your education at institutions of higher learning in your country.

Recent events call to mind heart-rending episodes in the history of

the Faith, of cruel deceptions wrought against your forebears. It is only appropriate that you strive to transcend the opposition against you with that same constructive resilience that characterized their response to the duplicity of their detractors. Peering beyond the distress of the difficulties assailing them, those heroic souls attempted to translate the Teachings of the new Faith into actions of spiritual and social development. This, too, is your work. Their objective was to build, to strengthen, to refine the tissues of society wherever they might find themselves; and thus, they set up schools, equally educating girls and boys; introduced progressive principles; promoted the sciences; contributed significantly to diverse fields such as agriculture, health, and industry--all of which accrued to the benefit of the nation. You, too, seek to render service to your homeland and to contribute to a renewal of civilization. They responded to the inhumanity of their enemies with patience, calm, resignation, and contentment, choosing to meet deception with truthfulness and cruelty with good will towards all. You, too, demonstrate such noble qualities and, holding fast to these same principles, you belie the slander purveyed against your Faith, evoking the admiration of the fair-minded.

This action of the government in obstructing youth, Baha'i or otherwise, from access to higher education stands in contrast to the noble history of Iran's past attainments. How is it to be explained to the people of the world, especially the youth, when such doings can be perpetrated in a nation that claims adherence to Islamic principles? What then of the value of education as upheld in past centuries by these principles, which stimulated the establishment of renowned centres of learning and produced in your nation brilliant minds that, in advancing knowledge, made enduring contributions to the arts and sciences? What must be the repercussions for the nation when thoughtful people and eminent institutions abroad, in utter dismay, find it inconceivable that a Ministry charged with promoting learning would issue such directives as would deny citizens of its own country access to education? What can possibly be said by the officials responsible as to the moral grounds for such decisions? Can it reasonably be assumed that they have any regard for international commitments Iran has made to justice and fair-mindedness or, indeed, bear any awareness of the fear of God?

The sufferings you bear, the sacrifices you ceaselessly make, however grievous the circumstances, are only a part of the horrors agonizing millions upon millions in Iran and throughout the world in these times of global ferment. Such acknowledgement does not diminish in the least your adversity, but it is essential that you grasp its context. Baha'u'llah remarked often on the dire state of the world. "The winds of despair are, alas, blowing from every direction, and the strife that divides and afflicts the human race is daily increasing," He wrote. "The world is in great turmoil and the minds of its people are in a state of utter confusion."

In response to their agonies, some feel impelled to rise against their oppressors, some can only flee for refuge, some capitulate to their fate. But while most of the afflicted peoples of the world are often the victims of random forces of oppression, prejudice, or injustice, you know clearly why you suffer, and your response must be equally clear. Consider some of the exhortations of Baha'u'llah and of 'Abdu'l-Baha: "Do not busy yourselves in your own concerns; let your thoughts be fixed upon that which will rehabilitate the fortunes of mankind and sanctify the hearts and souls of men." "Pay ye no heed to aversion and rejection, to disdain,

hostility, injustice: act ye in the opposite way." "If others ... poison your lives, sweeten their souls ..." "Should any one of you enter a city, he should become a centre of attraction by reason of his sincerity, his faithfulness and love, his honesty and fidelity, his truthfulness and loving-kindness towards all the peoples of the world...." "Be ye the helpers of every victim of oppression,

the patrons of the disadvantaged." "Let him do some good to every person whose path he crosseth, and be of some benefit to him." "...undertake in all sincerity and purity of intent and for the sake of God alone, to counsel and exhort the masses and clarify their vision with that collyrium which is knowledge."

Did Baha'u'llah Himself not endure hardship to promulgate His Teachings? Did He not consent "to be bound with chains that mankind may be released from its bondage"?

With an illumined conscience, with a world-embracing vision, with no partisan political agenda, and with due regard for law and order, strive for the regeneration of your country. By your deeds and services, attract the hearts of those around you, even win the esteem of your avowed enemies, so that you may vindicate the innocence of, and gain ever-increasing respect and acceptance for, your community in the land of its birth. Think not that these are mere words meant to soothe your disappointed hearts. Think rather of the situation which has developed as a result of the disciplined reaction to the torment borne by Iranian Baha'is since 1979. Has the manner of their response to oppression thus far not elicited the warm admiration of increasing numbers of their compatriots? To defend yourselves is, of course, only fair, and every principled means is being taken to defend you against oppression. Is there not an active defense mounted on your behalf by governments and non-governmental organizations, at national and international levels, and well-respected institutions of higher learning everywhere? Obviously, you are not alone. But your perseverance must be accompanied by patience; indeed, the patience required in the usually slow processes of social evolution is painful.

Opposition to a newly revealed truth is a common matter of human history; it repeats itself in every age. But of equal historical consistency is the fact that nothing can prevail against an idea whose time has come. The time has arrived for freedom of belief, for harmony between science and religion, faith and reason, for the advancement of women, for freedom from prejudice of every kind, for mutual respect between diverse peoples and nations, indeed, for the unity of the entire human race. The deepest yearnings of the Iranian people resonate with implications of the world-revolutionizing principles enunciated by Baha'u'llah.

Service to others is the way. Let it be your watchword, 'Abdu'l-Baha being your exemplar. Like Him, you can find practical ways of serving your fellow citizens. Strive to work hand-in-hand, shoulder-to-shoulder, with your fellow citizens in your efforts to promote the common good.

This surely is a time for the gallantry of illumined souls. Very dear friends, we pray that you can be counted among this noble company.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]