



6.1.2011

IRAN Raids on homes linked to Baha'í higher education initiative

The Bahá'í Community of the United Kingdom reports that 16 Bahá'ís were arrested in a coordinated series of raids on an estimated 30 homes in Tehran, Karaj, Isfahan, Shiraz, Gohardasht, Sari and Zahedan on May 21. One of those arrested has since been released. Eight others were interrogated by Intelligence Ministry officers and released afterwards.

The homes belong to employees of the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), an initiative offering higher education to young Baha'is. Since the 1979 Islamic revolution, Bahá'ís have been systematically prevented from accessing higher education. They are often denied admission to university, or expelled once they are identified as Bahá'ís. This prompted the community to initiate its own educational programme, and the (BIHE) was established in 1987 to meet the educational needs of young Bahá'ís. However, Iranian officials have sought to disrupt it with a series of raids on its facilities and staff. Prior to the raids on May 21, there were significant raids and arrests in 2003, 2000 and 1998.

There has been a recent upsurge in the harassment of religious minorities in Iran. Seven Bahá'í leaders, who have been detained since early 2008 and initially held for two years without charge, were informed in April that their 20-year prison sentences handed down in August 2010 for espionage, acting against national security and forming an illegal cult had been upheld. The group had earlier been acquitted of the two former charges at an appeal.

There is also concern for six members of the Church of Iran in Shiraz, who are still awaiting the outcome of a consultation on their blasphemy case. After struggling to find evidence to convict them, the case was adjourned to allow time for the prosecution to seek the opinion of Iran's traditional churches concerning the validity of the charge. Another member of the Church of Iran, Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, is still awaiting a date for his appeal against a death sentence for apostasy, and house church pastor Vahik Abrahamian remains detained without charge.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "The raids on the Bahá'í community are wholly unacceptable and CSW urges the international community to press Iran to release those detained and to end its discriminatory educational policies. Despite being a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), by which countries pledge to uphold international standards of religious freedom for all citizens, Iran is clearly targeting both the Bahá'ís and certain Christian communities solely on account of their beliefs. CSW calls on the Iranian government to honor its commitments under the ICCPR and ensure that religious minorities are able to enjoy the freedoms outlined within the covenant."

Notes to Editors:

1. The seven Bahá'í leaders are Fariba Kamalabadi, Mahvash Sabet, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Saeid Rezaie, Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Vahid Tizfahm.
2. The six Church of Iran members in Shiraz are: Behrouz Sadegh-Khandjani, Mehdi Furutan, Mohammad Beliad, Parviz Khalaj, Nazly Beliad and Amin Afsharmanesh.

3. Pastor Vahik Abrahamian was detained along with eight others, including his wife Sonia Keshish Avnessian, during a raid on his home in Hamadan on 4 September 2010. Five of those arrested were soon released but four, including Vahik and Sonia, were placed in solitary confinement in an unknown location for forty days before being transferred to Hamadan Public Prison. The group was held in Hamadan for over eight months without charge. An exorbitant sum was demanded for the release of each individual, which was unable to be met. In April 2011 the three other detainees were released but Vahik remains imprisoned.