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## IRAN | Concerns Raised Over Treatment of Baha'i Community

Ayatollah Abdol-Hamid Masoumi-Tehrani, a senior Shi'a cleric, has given the Baha'i International Community a symbolic gift and raised concerns over their mistreatment in Iran.

The gift, which was presented to the Baha'i community this week, is an illuminated work of calligraphy made from the writings of Baha'u'llah, the Prophet-founder of the Baha'i Faith. Ayatollah Tehrani stated on his website the giving of the gift was a "symbolic action to serve as a reminder of the importance of valuing human beings, of peaceful coexistence, of cooperation and mutual support, and of avoidance [of] hatred, enmity and blind religious prejudice." He went on to say Iranian Baha'is in particular "have suffered in manifold ways as a result of blind religious prejudice and that the gift was "an expression of sympathy and care from me and on behalf of all my open-minded fellow citizens."

Commenting on this gift, Ms. Bani Dugal, Principal Representative of the Baha'i International Community at the United Nations, said, "The Baha'i International Community is deeply touched by this act of high-mindedness and the sentiments of religious tolerance and respect for human dignity that prompted it." She added, "This bold action by a senior Muslim cleric in contemporary Iran is unprecedented...it is also remarkable in light of the ongoing and systematic persecution of the Baha'i community in that country by the Islamic government."

Despite being the largest religious minority in Iran, numbering over 300,000, the Iranian Baha'i community is not recognized and refused official legal status by the Iranian regime. Baha'is are actively targeted by the authorities, and the Baha'i religion is deemed as undermining Shi'a orthodoxy.

Since 1979, over 200 Baha'i leaders have been killed or executed, with thousands more imprisoned. Baha'is are barred from accessing further education and employment in the public sector, with over 10,000 dismissed from university and government jobs. According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, as of February 2013, at least 110 Baha'is are being held in prison solely because of their religious belief, twice the number held in early 2011.

April 14, 2014 marks the sixth year in detention of seven Baha'i leaders who were initially detained in 2008, and were sentenced to 20 years imprisonment in 2010 for "forming an illegal cult".

Despite promises by President Rouhani to ensure equality for all Iranians, the situation for Baha'is and other religious minorities has not improved. The first religiously-motivated murder of a Baha'i in 15 years occurred in 2013, which followed a speech by Supreme Leader Ayatollah

Khamenei a week earlier that had denigrated the community.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) said, "Ayatollah Tehrani's kind gesture to the Baha'i community is particularly welcome at a time when the community is being actively targeted and vilified by the Iranian regime. Dozens of Baha'is are languishing in jail and the community is subject to attack, harassment and intimidation. CSW urges President Rouhani to emulate the Ayatollah's inclusivity by upholding the rights of the Baha'i community as equal citizens and to guarantee freedom of religion or belief for all religious communities, in line with Iran's international obligations as a signatory to the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). We also urge the Iranian authorities to release, without reservation, the seven Baha'i leaders and all members of religious minorities who have been unfairly detained."