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## “Five Years Too Many” campaign shows global support for imprisoned Bahá’ís



In Paris, the Eiffel Tower was the backdrop for an event on 12 May 2013 calling attention to fifth anniversary of the wrongful imprisonment of seven Iranian Bahá’í leaders.

A global campaign to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the imprisonment of seven Iranian Bahá’í leaders led to an outpouring of support and concern for them and other prisoners of conscience in Iran.

Statements calling for the immediate release of the seven came from every continent, issued by government officials, religious leaders, human rights activists, and ordinary citizens during 10 days in May as part of the campaign, which was titled “Five Years Too Many.” Local and national media also gave the campaign — which ran from 5–15 May 2013 — extensive coverage.

“Our hope is that the government of Iran will understand clearly that the seven Bahá’í prisoners, who have been unjustly and wrongfully held for five long years simply for their religious beliefs, have not been forgotten,” said Diane Ala’i, the Bahá’í International Community’s representative to the United Nations in Geneva.

Six of the seven Bahá’í leaders were arrested on 14 May 2008 in a series of early morning raids in Tehran. The seventh had been arrested two months earlier on 5 March 2008.

After their arrests, the seven leaders—Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Saeid Rezaie, Mahvash Sabet, Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Vahid Tizfahm—were subjected to an entirely flawed judicial process, and ultimately sentenced to 20 years imprisonment, the longest of any current prisoners of conscience in Iran.

Among the most notable expressions of concern was a joint statement by four UN human rights experts which said that the seven are held solely because of their religious beliefs and that Iran’s treatment of religious minorities violates international law. [See page 14]

*Campaign, continued on page 13*

# The Roots of Equity, Justice and Prosperity for All

## IN BRIEF

- **As awareness of the oneness of humanity pervades human consciousness and social structures, development ceases to be something one group of people does for the benefit of another.**
- **All individuals must be engaged in a common enterprise of development, and work shoulder to shoulder to contribute to the development of the whole.**
- **Addressing economic disparities, then, will require addressing extremes of wealth in ways that have so far been resisted or declared impractical. Social norms and the laws reflecting them will need to ensure that those who have amassed fortunes share their wealth to provide for the essential needs of the masses and to promote the common weal.**

*[Editor's note: The following perspective is adapted from the Bahá'í International Community's recent contribution to the UN Global Thematic Consultation on "Addressing Inequalities." The full statement can be read at: <http://www.bic.org/statements/beyond-balancing-scales-roots-equity-justice-and-prosperity-all> ]*

**A**s deliberations about the Post-2015 development agenda gain momentum, it is becoming indisputable that the future we want is not a bisected world of haves and have-nots. The effects of social inequalities are apparent on all sides: apathy, alienation, social unrest, violence and the erosion of trust between individuals and the institutions of governance, to name but a few. The vitality and legitimacy of any vision of development rests on the degree to which it embodies the highest aspirations of the world's peoples and the extent to which they play a role in its articulation.

But even as we yearn for such a transformation, society remains enmeshed in norms of conflict and competition: political systems are organized as contests for power; legal systems as contests of legal advocacy; economic systems as contests of capital accumulation; and educational systems as contests of intellectual achievement and recognition. Such structures promote separation into opposing groups of "we" and "they"—groups that fight, compete, negotiate, even cooperate across the boundaries of their separateness. These norms exacerbate the many categories of "otherness" that distort human relationships and perpetuate injustice.

We propose that humanity is experiencing a transition that can be described as the passage from a collective childhood to our collective

maturity. During this transition, the thoughts and attitudes associated with the period of humanity's childhood are gradually being uprooted and the structures of a civilization that reflect our adulthood are gradually taking shape. Characterizing this transition is the redefinition of human relationships within the context of a single social body, animated by bonds of mutualism and reciprocity. Such a transition calls for an organic change in the structure of society on an unprecedented scale. It requires that the oneness of humanity become the operating principle of our collective life.

As awareness of the inescapable oneness of humanity pervades both human consciousness and the structures of society, a new vision of development begins to emerge—one in which labels of "donors," "recipients," "developing" and "developed" have to be re-examined. From this perspective, development ceases to be something one group of people does for the benefit of another. Instead, all individuals, whether materially rich or poor, engage in a common enterprise of development, and all work shoulder to shoulder—as is their right and responsibility—to contribute to the development of the whole.

## Oneness through justice

Viewed through the lens of the oneness of humanity, the principle of justice applies not only to social institutions but also at the level of the individual. At this level, justice can be seen as an evolving moral capacity that connects one's well-being and happiness to that of broader society. The very motivation to respond to the injustices of present-day society and the will to exert ourselves for the betterment of others is animated by this

moral principle. Justice calls for fair-mindedness in one's judgments and equity in one's treatment of others.

At the collective level, justice is the practical expression of the awareness that the well-being of society and of the individual are intimately linked and that the welfare of the individual is best secured by advancing the welfare of the whole. A concern for justice helps to curb the tendency to define progress in ways that bestow advantage on the privileged few, and can blunt tendencies towards partisanship and manipulation of decision-making processes.

Justice requires universal participation: all people have both the right to benefit from a materially and morally prosperous society and a commensurate responsibility to participate in its construction. If development is to be effective, it must promote the participation of the people in determining the direction of their communities, whether analysing specific problems, attaining higher degrees of understanding, exploring possible courses of action, or making collective decisions.

The lens of the oneness of humankind also sheds light on the vulnerable situation of national, ethnic and religious minorities. The imperative of preserving cultural diversity is implied by this principle: if a just international order is to emerge, then the infinitely varied cultural expressions must be allowed to develop and to interact with one another in ever-changing patterns of collective life.

## Addressing inequalities

Disparities of income and wealth, though far from the only kind of inequity, are another aspect of concern in relation to sustainable development and social harmony. Over 80 per cent of the world's population lives in countries where income differentials are widening. The poorest 40% of the world's population account for five per cent of the global income. Poverty eradication measures, even where finding some measure of success, have failed to address growing disparities in income and unprecedented concentrations of wealth.



In Norte del Cauca, Colombia, young people participate in a study program designed to encourage them to serve their communities.

The reticence to consider growing concentrations of wealth has resulted in a dangerous “blind-spot” in development discourse and policy and has failed to draw the important connection between the extreme wealth of some individuals and groups and the degrading poverty afflicting masses of the world's population. Resource-rich regions and resource-poor regions can no longer be treated as unrelated phenomena but, rather, as characteristics of a global system that selectively bestows advantage on the privileged few, while leaving the masses to make do with a small fraction of the world's resources.

The shortcomings witnessed in the economic systems of the 20th century are, in large part, a reflection of the failure of the materialist ideology on which they were founded. Though the productive output of the global civilization has grown significantly over the past century, the fruits of that production have not “trickled down” to the masses of humanity. Not only has the gap between the wealthy and the poor continued to widen, but the poor have, in many instances, become even poorer in absolute terms.

Addressing economic disparities, then, will require addressing extremes of wealth in ways that have so far been resisted or declared impractical. Social norms and the laws reflecting them will need to ensure that those who have amassed fortunes share their wealth to provide for the essential needs of the

masses and to promote the common weal. To be sure, a dynamic and creative world economy cannot flourish within an overly restrictive legal code. But neither can a just, vibrant, and prospering world civilization allow some members to accumulate personal fortunes larger than could be spent in a lifetime, while others die from lack of basic necessities.

Laying the foundations for a more equitable future will require the formation of new models of development, prosperity, and economics. These models must be shaped by insights arising from a sympathetic understanding of shared experience and a keen appreciation of the central role of relationships between humanity and nature, among individuals and communities, within the family, and between individuals and social institutions.

The injustices evident in the current global framework will require more than skilful methodologies and technocratic solutions, which have so far failed to alter the basic inequities in the way the fruits of human endeavour and prosperity have been distributed. No longer can people of good will be content with the goal of providing for people's basic needs. Only as all members of the human family are invited to make their contribution to the betterment of society, and only as the distribution and use of resources are arranged in a way that permits each to do so, will progress against the age-old specter of inequality and inequity be possible.

# Averting climate change will need help from faith-based organizations, says UN official

Christiana Figueres, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), speaking on 20 September 2013 at the offices of the Bahá'í International Community. She held up a piece of paper to illustrate that sustainable development and climate change are two sides of the same issue.



## IN BRIEF

- **There is still time to reduce greenhouse gases and meet international targets that would help limit global warming, said Christiana Figueres of the UNFCCC, speaking at the Bahá'í International Community offices.**
- **One key group to be enlisted are faith-based organizations, who understand the moral dilemma of climate change and its impacts on the poor and others who already produce fewer greenhouse gases.**

**N**EW YORK—The world will need an enormous push from the private sector and civil society—including religious organizations—if humanity is to make the transition to a low carbon future and prevent the catastrophic effects of global warming, a top UN official has said.

Christiana Figueres, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), said civil society and, in particular, religious groups have a key role to play in such a transition, because of the moral dimensions of the climate issue.

“Moral leadership is truly a scarce resource these days,” said Ms. Figueres during an interview after a talk on 20 September 2013 at the offices of the Bahá'í International Community. “But there is a moral necessity to stand up...and assume responsibility. And I would hope that the faith-based community would be even more active than it is right now in calling for that moral leadership.”

Ms. Figueres said the main moral dilemma in the climate issue is the discrepancy between those who caused the emissions that are responsible for

climate change and those who will feel the main impact of its effects.

“It is no secret that those at the bottom of the pyramid, independently of what country they live in, are the least responsible for having caused greenhouse gas emissions in the past,” she said. “And yet those at the bottom of the pyramid are the ones that are already getting it the worst, and certainly will continue to be hit the worst.”

“So that is a moral imperative,” said Ms. Figueres. “We cannot look ourselves in the mirror and be untouched by the fact that those of us who enjoy the privileges of modern comfort are doing so at the expense of the quality of life of those at the bottom of the pyramid.”

During her talk at a breakfast dialogue on the post-2015 development agenda, Ms. Figueres warned that there will be catastrophic effects if the international community does not do more to limit the production of greenhouse gases, which many scientists say have already caused global warming.

“This is a challenge that has economic consequences, poverty consequences, security consequences,

transportation consequences—you name it—the list is long,” said Ms. Figueres. “There is hardly a human endeavor that is not touched by climate change,” she said.

In that light, she said, the issue of climate change cannot be separated from the current discussions at the United Nations on the post-2015 development agenda, which seeks to devise new goals for poverty eradication and sustainability to replace the highly regarded Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which expire in 2015.

“You cannot continue to push forward with development without addressing climate change because climate [change] does have the capacity to wipe out everything that we have been able to achieve in development in the past 20 years,” she said.

### Post-2015 context

If climate change is adequately addressed, she said, it will help solve many of the issues being discussed as part of the post-2015 agenda, whether over energy, poverty, health, security, or biodiversity, among other issues.

“Real people do not experience climate change as two separate processes,” she said, referring to the twin tracks at the UN on climate negotiations and post-2015 discussions. “This is only an artificial construct that we have created in order to deal with these issues almost from a theoretical point of view. But the fact is no human being experiences any of the thematic areas or climate separately because this is all part of their lives.”

Ms. Figueres said there is still time to reduce emissions and meet an international target of preventing global average temperatures from rising more than 2 degrees centigrade.

“Many reports say that we actually no longer have the possibility of being able to decrease emission to the point where we might enjoy a planet of 2 degrees temperature rise—that we are heading towards a planet with a 3 or 4 or 6 degree temperature rise,” she said.

“...in fact, we still have a window of opportunity in which we could, if all efforts are really brought to their

maximum, that we could stay within the two degree limit,” she said, noting that the two degree limit has already been agreed to by 195 nations.

“But the longer we delay, the more costly the two degree limit will be. Because the more we invest in high carbon technology, the more we are locking ourselves into technologies that will make adaptation and

resilience and the transformation more and more costly,” said Ms. Figueres.

The breakfast dialogue meeting at which Ms. Figueres spoke was the 13th in a series of such dialogues on the post-2015 development agenda sponsored by the Bahá’í International Community and the International Movement ATD Fourth World.

## E U R O P E

### Rachel Bayani joins Bahá’í International Community office in Brussels

**B**RUSSELS—The Bahá’í International Community has appointed a new representative to head its Brussels office.

Rachel Bayani, a lawyer who has worked for the United Nations and more recently for the Permanent Representation of Luxembourg to the European Union, joined the Brussels office of the BIC in May 2013.

“We are delighted to have Rachel Bayani join the Bahá’í International Community as the representative to the European Union in our Brussels Office,” said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the BIC to the United Nations.

“Ms. Bayani has substantial experience in government and international relations, with the Luxembourg government in its work with the EU, and with the United Nations on various missions.

“As the BIC’s representative to the European Union, she will seek mainly to engage with institutions and agencies of the European Union, the Council of Europe, civil society and other relevant organizations, focusing broadly on issues such as gender equality, religious freedom, poverty eradication and human rights, among others,” said Ms. Dugal.

Before coming to the BIC, Ms. Bayani had served since 2004 as a justice and home affairs counselor to the Permanent Representation of Luxembourg to the EU, dealing mainly with asylum and migration issues.

Prior to that, she served with the United Nations in Bosnia-Herzegovina



Rachel Bayani

in several capacities, first working with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and later for the peacekeeping mission there. She also served with the EU’s police mission to Bosnia-Herzegovina. Just prior to joining the BIC, she served briefly with the UN good offices mission in Cyprus as part of the peacekeeping effort, dealing with legal affairs.

A citizen of Luxembourg, Ms. Bayani has a law degree from the University of Sorbonne in Paris and a master’s in international law from Cambridge University. She is married and has one child.

Ms. Bayani replaces Sarah Vader, who has moved to Haifa, Israel, where she now serves as Deputy Secretary General in the Bahá’í International Community Secretariat.

# Role of religion in international development strong and growing, say participants in forum

## IN BRIEF

- According to participants in a forum on "Faith, Belief, and Development," the role of religion in international development is growing as faith-based organizations have an increasing impact.
- Such impacts include gender discrimination backed by "traditional practices."
- Positive impacts include the religious motivation to do good and help others.

BIC representative Ming Hwee Chong (center) was among the participants last month at a forum on "Faith, Belief and Development," at the Université du Québec en Outaouais in Canada.

**G**ATINEAU, Quebec, Canada—The worldly practice of promoting economic progress is sometimes seen to be at odds with the spiritual goals of religion.

But at a conference in August, academics, practitioners and religious leaders examined the role of religion in international development and concluded that the impact and importance of faith-based communities and organizations in development is significant and growing.

Participants in the day-long forum, held 27 August 2013 on the topic of "Faith, Belief and Development," offered a wide range of perspectives.

On the one hand, there were suggestions that religions and religious leaders sometimes hinder development, as when, for example, the advancement of women is blocked in the name of "traditional practices."

Others pointed out that religious people and communities have always been front-and-center in development work, whether in charitable efforts like building schools or health clinics or simply in inspiring many development practitioners to help others.



One thing, however, was agreed upon: that the role of religion must be factored into any development program or process.

"Religion must be mainstreamed within development," said Tamsin Bradley, a senior lecturer in international development studies at the University of Portsmouth, who gave the keynote speech.

## Religion a moral code

"Religion is important to local people in many developing countries because it forms a lens through which they see and relate to the world and provides a sense of identity and belonging. Religion also provides a moral code to live by and therefore impacts on decision-making processes and human actions," said Dr. Bradley.

As such, she said, the public and private expression of religion "can be a useful source of motivation in the achievement of development goals."

Jennifer Henry, executive director of Kairos Canada, a coalition of Canadian churches working for peace and justice, agreed, saying however that there are a number of ways in which faith-based organizations and development organizations function differently—even though they work for similar goals.

Religions tend to take a long term view, she said, whereas development practitioners often operate on more limited time frames.

She added, "religious communities know that not everything important is of this world—whereas development people are preoccupied with this world."

The material-spiritual dichotomy in development work was also discussed by Ming Hwee Chong, a representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations.

He suggested that international development efforts were hindered by prevalent conceptions of human nature that, for example, reduced human beings to an “economic man” that “pursues his self-interests in a rational, calculated, and self-maximizing manner within an arena of competition over scarce resources.”

Mr. Chong suggested that an alternate view that recognizes an underlying spiritual reality “that makes it possible for us to understand and satisfy material needs within appropriate limits, while rising above the exigencies of mere animal existence.”

This conception can help practitioners focus on the expansion of those human capacities and capabilities that will promote the greatest level of individual and community empowerment in the long run, he said.

The forum was sponsored by the Canadian Association for the Study of International Development and the Canadian Council of International Cooperation (CCIC). It was held at Université du Québec en Outaouais.

## The role of religion in Canadian public discourse explored at Montreal conference



A panel on religion and secularism in Canadian society at McGill University in May. (Photo © Louis Brunet)

**M**ONTREAL—Concerned about the increasing polarization between secularists and religious believers, along with the growing divide between fundamentalists and more liberal followers of every ideology, religious leaders from across Canada joined with scholars and public figures to explore the role of religion in a modern and diverse society here in May.

“Bridging the Secular Divide: Religion and Canadian Public Discourse” drew about 150 participants, who sought to reflect on the state of religion in society at large. The event was held 27-28 May 2013 at McGill University. Its sponsors encompassed a diversity of religious groups in Canada, including the Canadian Bahá'í community.

The discussion was wide ranging, touching on issues of religious freedom in a secular society, protecting the rights of minorities, and the role of religion in addressing social issues, such as poverty and inequality, the environment, and education.

Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, in an opening panel discussion, said secularism has a double role: “To protect the rights of religious minorities by guarding secular space, but also by showing a diversity of religious voices in our public discourse.”

Patrice Brodeur of the University of Montreal said religious communities

sometimes feel pressured by secularism, but “our spiritual principles call on us to transcend victimization discourses... We have a common human identity and we need to start with this to contextualize our other identities.”

Susanne Tamas of the Canadian Bahá'í community, in another panel, said that as religious communities seek involvement in the public sphere, they should “regard participation in discourse as a search for truth rather than an opportunity to persuade others to our views.”

“We understand that the purpose of religion is transformation and that the transformation of the individual and society are complementary and interdependent processes,” said Ms. Tamas.

The keynote plenary of the first day featured a conversation between two prominent public intellectuals—political philosopher Daniel Weinstock and former Member of Parliament Bill Blaikie. Weinstock asserted that Canadians should be less concerned about the gap between religious and secular thought, and more attentive to the gap between citizens and the public sphere. “We want everyone involved in making our society better, and we want people speaking in an authentic voice.”

Blaikie added, “We need to find solidarity in the context of diversity; that is the task before us.”

# Around the world, young people come together to talk about community service

Some 1,150 young people attended the youth conference in Patna, India. The conference was one of 114 held around the world from July to October 2013.



## IN BRIEF

- **From July through October, the worldwide Bahá'í community organized 114 regional youth conferences.**
- **Drawing more than 80,000 young people, the events promoted a vigorous discussion on how participants might commit "to a life of service."**
- **The meetings sought to inspire youth from diverse backgrounds to consider deeply what it means to look beyond their own concerns and work for the betterment of the world.**

**U**LAANBAATAR, Mongolia—With temperatures below freezing here for most of the year, Mongolians cherish the short summer, a season for celebrating and enjoying the good weather.

So it was significant when more than 800 youth from all parts of the country chose to gather in August to discuss what it means to be a young person and how they can contribute to the social and spiritual advancement of their region.

"If we strive towards the betterment of society together, we will be able to correct social ills and create a new civilization," said one youth.

Those remarks reflected the inspiration felt by the more than 80,000 young people who participated in a series of 114 youth conferences that were undertaken around the world by the worldwide Bahá'í community during the months of July through October 2013.

Called for by the Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith, the conferences had the aim of helping youth around the world commit themselves

"to a life of service" and to encouraging them to work for the "transformation" of society so that "the light of justice may shed its radiance upon the whole world."

By all accounts, the meetings were overwhelmingly successful in inspiring and motivating young people from diverse backgrounds to consider deeply what it means to look beyond their own concerns and work to help others.

"What I took to be the goal was to inspire and move youth to action, to serve their communities and to overcome obstacles in their way to serve, and to clarify their vision about how they could meaningfully serve and help transform their communities," said Ann Boyles, a member of the Continental Board of Councilors for the Americas, who was present at four conferences.

"And I think many participants came away with a sense of clarity not only that they can serve in their neighborhood—but also that this is happening all over the world, as a global movement, and that there are thousands and thousands of other youth who share with them a deep conviction that they can actually work



together for the betterment of society by learning how to promote unity and the transformation of their communities in small settings around the world,” said Dr. Boyles.

## Broad reflection

Youth attending the conferences were asked to reflect deeply on a series of broad questions. These included: What is the role of your generation in society? What is special about the period of youth? What is the nature of friendship and how can one foster support for service to others? What role do youth have in building a “vibrant” new life in their communities? And how can one balance work, marriage and education with the vision of building a new society in the world?

“They were given these broad themes, and invited to think about them,” said Dr. Boyles. “But the actions they decided to undertake were really all their own. Nobody was telling them what to do.”

Many young people pledged to return to their home communities and begin service projects. Such commitments to action included things like acting as facilitators of groups for the spiritual empowerment of younger youth or volunteering to teach moral education classes for children.

In Bophal, India, one youth said: “Until the conference I had never thought about my community. All I knew and thought of was of my work and career. But during these three days, I came to understand that the purpose of my life is to care for others. So when I go home, I will gather the younger youth in my neighborhood and help them to develop the capacities they need to bring about constructive change in our community.”

At the conference in Cali, Colombia, youth drew maps of their neighborhoods and villages, analyzed their needs and opportunities, and planned the next steps. The young representatives from the community of Alegrías, a village of about 2,000 inhabitants, wrote down the names of their closest friends and planned to invite them to a gathering where they



Nearly 350 young people gathered in August in Apia, Samoa, to reflect on their efforts to widen the circle of those contributing to the betterment of their communities.

would share the concepts discussed during the conference, and invite these friends to serve their communities alongside them.

## Local officials involved

In many places, local officials praised the conferences and their purpose. At a conference in Kenya, for example, a local chief attended the first session and expressed his support for the efforts of the Bahá’í community to bring youth together and facilitate their efforts to rise to build a better society.

In Otavalo, Ecuador, the mayor visited the conference and expressed happiness at seeing young people from different backgrounds working together, noting the “beauty of the diversity of the human race.”

The conferences were open to youth of all religions, and many who are not Bahá’ís participated. In Dakar, it was estimated that more than half of the conference attendees were friends of Bahá’ís, from other religious backgrounds.

The conference also featured extensive use of music and the arts. In Helsinki, Finland, for example, young people wrote a spoken-word poem about the qualities of a person who assists younger youth, performed a skit exploring the power of language to strengthen or impede one’s desire to

be of service, and created a visual presentation where they intertwined strips of fabric to show the level of trust and faith implied in mutual support.

At the conference in Nuku’alofa, Tonga, young people used songs, skits, dances, and visual arts to articulate the concepts they were exploring. One group, for example, presented a poster that illustrated how young people are like a coral reef that will one day become an island, and how, with service at the center of their lives, they must be united against the waves of negative forces in order to build healthy and vibrant communities.

In Bidor, Malaysia, a group of youth from a particular village discussed the conditions that had led some peers to travel to bigger towns and cities for employment, highlighting the contribution that they felt their generation could make by staying in the village and helping it to advance materially and spiritually. Another group considered how the processes of studying, getting married, or having children are enriched when one places service to the community as a cornerstone for living. “Now that we have a child,” said one young mother from Kampung Das, “I don’t want to stop working for the betterment of my community. I hope that my efforts will contribute to creating a healthy environment for our child to grow up in.”

## In Iran, the religiously motivated murder of a Bahá'í draws condemnation and concern

**N**EW YORK—The assassination-style murder of a prominent Bahá'í in the southern Iranian city of Bandar Abbas in August has drawn international condemnation—and expressions of concern over evidence that the killing was religiously motivated.

Ataollah Rezvani was shot in the back of the head in his car by assailants who apparently forced him to drive to an isolated location near the railway station on the outskirts of Bandar Abbas sometime on 24 August 2013. His body was discovered the next day after he failed to return home.

His murder came after a series of threats and incidents that were apparently designed to force him and his family to leave the city. To begin with, he had come under pressure from agents of the Ministry of Intelligence, who instigated his dismissal from a job in water purification. He had also begun to receive menacing telephone calls from unknown persons.

Recently, as well, local Bahá'ís and the Bahá'í Faith generally had been attacked from the pulpit by senior clergymen in the region, according to several reports.

“There is little doubt that the killing of Mr. Ataollah Rezvani was motivated by religious prejudice,” said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations. “Therefore, it is essential that the government at the highest levels investigate this without delay under its international obligations.

“In recent years, clerics and the authorities in Iran have sought to create an atmosphere of anti-Bahá'í hatred, using the pulpit and state-sponsored media.

“The newly instituted government of President Hassan Rouhani now has a clear choice. It can continue as



Ataollah Rezvani, who was murdered in Iran on 24 August 2013.

his predecessors have, allowing such incidents to take place with impunity, indicating to the world that nothing has changed. Or it can show the world that it is committed to upholding justice and human rights for all Iranians.”

**“The newly instituted government of President Hassan Rouhani now has a clear choice. It can continue as his predecessors have... or it can show the world that it is committed to upholding justice and human rights for all Iranians.”**

Since 2005 in Iran, at least nine Bahá'ís have been murdered or died under suspicious circumstances, and another 52 have been physically assaulted, both by government agents and plainclothes or unidentified attackers—all without prosecution.

“Mr. Rezvani had been well-known and respected by ordinary citizens in

Bandar Abbas as a man of honesty and helpfulness,” said Ms. Dugal, noting that he is survived by a wife and two children.

“Yet sinister forces sought to drive him from the city he sought only to serve, leading ultimately to his untimely death,” she said.

Governments, civil society and news media around the world have expressed concern about Mr. Rezvani’s killing.

In the United Kingdom, more than 20 Members of Parliament signed a motion urging the UK government to press Iranian authorities for a full investigation of Mr. Rezvani’s murder.

In Brazil, Federal Deputy Walter Feldman delivered a statement to the Brazilian Congress on 28 August taking note of Mr. Rezvani’s murder and calling on Iran to demonstrate its commitment to religious freedom by releasing prisoners of conscience.

The group Christian Solidarity Worldwide issued a statement of concern over Mr. Rezvani’s death, noting in particular the role played by hate speech. Coverage of his murder appeared in *The Hindu*, one of India’s largest newspapers.

A number of commentators connected the murder with the recent publication of a series of fatwas issued by Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Among them was an edict calling the Bahá'í Faith “deviant and misleading,” and calling on Iranians to avoid all dealings with Bahá'ís, according to the Associated Press.

Perhaps the most interesting expression of concern came from a group of prisoners in Iran’s notorious Rajai Shahr prison in Gohardasht, where members of the Bahá'í Faith are also being held. According to [www.rahesabz.net](http://www.rahesabz.net), some 49 prisoners signed a letter objecting to “this terrorist and inhuman act” and calling for an immediate investigation.

# ILO expresses concern over economic repression of Iranian Bahá'ís

## IN BRIEF

- **Two new reports from the United Nations highlight the economic and social repercussions of Iran's systematic persecution of Bahá'ís.**
- **In June, the International Labor Organization expressed deep concern over the economic repression of Iranian Bahá'ís, saying Iran had failed to meet international non-discrimination standards.**
- **In May, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights noted "widespread and entrenched" discrimination against Bahá'ís and issued a plea for Iran to ensure that all citizens, regardless of religious belief, enjoy full rights without any discrimination.**

**G**ENEVA—The International Labor Organization (ILO) has expressed “deep concern” over continuing economic and educational discrimination against Bahá'ís in Iran.

In a report released in June, an ILO committee charged with monitoring global compliance with the right to non-discrimination in employment and occupation said the case of Iranian Bahá'ís remains “particularly serious” because of “systematic discrimination” by the government.

The report “urged the Government [of Iran] to take decisive action to combat discrimination against ethnic minorities and unrecognized religious minorities, in particular, the Bahá'ís.”

The report also quoted worker, employer, and government representatives about the situation in Iran. Such comments are kept anonymous to ensure the committee's independence from pressure by governments.

“The Worker members stated that in spite of numerous examinations of this case, no real progress had been made to comply with the Convention,” said

the report. “The lack of ability of the Government to repeal even the most patently discriminatory legislation and regulations was deeply regrettable.”

The worker members also proposed that a high-level mission be sent to visit the country as soon as possible, with the goal of fact-finding and setting a time-bound action plan aimed at ensuring compliance with the Convention, said the report.

Employer members, likewise, “urged the Government to take concrete steps to ensure comprehensive protection against direct and indirect discrimination on all the grounds enumerated in the Convention.”

## Global opinion

Diane Ala'i, representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations in Geneva, said the report was especially significant because it reflects the opinion of groups beyond government.

“The ILO is a tripartite body representing governments, workers, and employers from around the world,”



An official notice affixed to the door of a Bahá'í-owned clothing store in Semnan, Iran, declaring it closed.

said Ms. Ala'i. "The fact that it has joined the outcry of international concern over Iran's continued discrimination against Bahá'ís in the workplace and education is an important yardstick of global opinion."

Several governments, including the European Union and Canada, were also quoted in the report.

The government representative from Canada, for example, said religious minorities faced persistent and pervasive discrimination.

"Members of the Bahá'í Faith were discriminated against in access to education, universities and occupations in the public sector; they had been deprived of property, employment and education. The Government's continued failure to respect its obligations under the Convention in the face of repeated calls for change by the

Committee demonstrated a lack of seriousness and good faith," said the government member from Canada, according to the report.

### Increase in closures

Ms. Ala'i said discrimination against Bahá'ís has continued throughout 2013. "Since January of this year, there has been a sharp increase in the number of Bahá'í shops that have been closed or had their business licenses revoked."

Ms. Ala'i said, for example, that some 32 Bahá'í-owned shops were closed in Hamadan late last year, and, with two exceptions, all other Bahá'í shopkeepers in that city were summoned by the authorities for questioning in late February. Many of those shopkeepers later had their shops closed.

"One Bahá'í shop in Hamadan was closed down because the shopkeeper refused to open the shop on Bahá'í holy days," said Ms. Ala'i. "When he began to sell goods out of his truck, his vehicle was confiscated. His residence was also raided and his bank account closed. Such forms of discrimination against Bahá'ís are occurring throughout Iran."

Discrimination in higher education against Iranian Bahá'ís has also continued, said Ms. Ala'i, noting that this discrimination also extends to vocational schools, which fall under the ILO's area of concern.

"A number of vocational schools were among the 81 Iranian universities that were specifically instructed to expel any students who were discovered to be Bahá'ís in 2006," said Ms. Ala'i, referring to a confidential memorandum issued by the government.

## UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights says Iranian Bahá'ís face "widespread and entrenched" discrimination

**G**ENEVA—The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has issued a series of pointed recommendations to the Iranian government—recommendations that included a plea for Iran to ensure that all citizens, regardless of religious belief, enjoy full rights without any discrimination.

In a report issued on 22 May 2013, the Committee specifically referred to the Bahá'í community, expressing its concern that Iranian Bahá'ís face "widespread and entrenched discrimination, including denial of access to employment in the public sector, institutions of higher education, as well as to benefits of the pension system." It recommended that Iran "take steps to ensure that members of the Bahá'í community are protected against discrimination and exclusion in every field."

Diane Ala'i, the representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations in Geneva, welcomed the Committee's findings, known as

"concluding observations." She said: "The Committee's report highlights the extent of the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran, which includes employment, education, and cultural issues."

**Bahá'ís face "widespread and entrenched discrimination, including denial of access to employment in the public sector, institutions of higher education, as well as to benefits of the pension system."**

She noted that Committee members questioned Iranian officials during a day-long session earlier in the month, asking, among other things, why the government feels it has to recognize a particular religion at all in order to grant individuals certain rights, and why discrimination against Bahá'ís appears to be so pervasive.

"People are the holders of their freedom of religion, and that is not the

public power of states," said Nicolaas Schrijver, a Committee member from The Netherlands, during the 1 May session with Iranian officials.

In its report, the Committee recommended that Iran take steps to guarantee "the unhindered access of Bahá'í students to universities and vocational training institutions."

The report also covered a wide range of other human rights violations in Iran, from concern over discrimination against women and ethnic minorities in education and employment to the lack of protection for independent trade unions.

# “Five Years Too Many” campaign leads to global outpouring of support

L.K. Advani, chairman of the BJP Parliamentary Party, center, with former Indian Attorney General Soli Sorabjee, right, and Mrs Zena Sorabjee, at left, at the Five Years Too Many event in New Delhi on 14 May 2013.



## IN BRIEF

- For 10 days in May, thousands around the globe participated in a campaign to call attention to the wrongful imprisonment of seven Iranian Bahá'í leaders.
- Government officials, religious leaders, human rights activists, and ordinary citizens urged the Iranian government to immediately release the seven, who have been imprisoned since 2008.
- One theme that emerged was the degree to which religious leaders—including Muslims—find Iran's persecution of Bahá'ís unconscionable.

### **Campaign**, continued from page one

Prominent figures in national governments also spoke out during the campaign, which was organized by the BIC. In Australia, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator Bob Carr, issued a statement on 7 May calling for their immediate release. In Germany, Markus Löning, the Government's Commissioner for Human Rights Policy, called on Iran to repeal the judgment against the seven and to release them immediately.

In Canada, the national Ambassador for Religious Freedom, Andrew Bennet, called for their release. And Lloyd Axworthy, former Minister of Foreign Affairs in Canada, published an article in *The Globe and Mail* that said Iran's treatment of its Bahá'í minority offered a “litmus test” to judge Iran's record on human rights.

In the United States, Thomas O. Melia, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, said the wrongful imprisonment of the seven was “emblematic” of the persecution faced by Bahá'ís throughout Iran—and a “reminder” of the situation facing other minority religious communities in Iran. “This is a government that also prevents Sunnis from

worshiping, flogs Sufis, and detains Zoroastrians without charge simply for who they are,” said Mr. Melia.

In India, a letter calling for the “immediate release of the seven” was signed by L. K. Advani, chairman of Bharatiya Janata Party; Soli Sorabjee, former Attorney General of India; Imam Umer Ahmed Ilyasi, Chief Imam of the All India Organization of Imams of Mosques; and Miloon Kothari, former UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, among others. “We call for the immediate release of the seven, along with countless other prisoners of conscience in Iran,” their statement said. “We plead people of good conscience everywhere in India to raise their voices in support and urge the Iranian Government to live up to its international human rights obligations.”

**UPDATE:** As this issue of *ONE COUNTRY* goes to press, the seven Iranian Bahá'í leaders are still in prison, as are at least 100 other Bahá'ís. This is so despite promises by Iran's new president, Hassan Rouhani, to end discrimination based on religion and to release prisoners of conscience.

— the Editor

In Austria, a broad range of officials and prominent individuals issued statements calling for the release of the seven. The officials included Efgani Donmez, the first Muslim elected to the Austrian Parliament, who said: “The Bahá’ís in Iran are part of the society, part of the Iranian culture. They should also have the (same) rights as all the other citizens in Iran.”

In the Netherlands, Nico Schrijver, a senator and vice-chair of the Geneva-based UN Committee for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, said: “The leaders of the Bahá’í community have been detained for the sole reason that they are Bahá’ís. This is of course a complete violation of human rights law.”

## Religious leaders speak out

One theme that emerged was the degree to which religious leaders find Iran’s persecution of Bahá’ís unconscionable.

In South Africa, Shaykh Achmat Sedick, vice president of the national Muslim Judicial Council, used a Five Years Too Many campaign event on 15 May to talk about freedom of religion from an Islamic perspective. He described how the teachings of the Qur’an support religious freedom—and added that Iran’s persecution of the Bahá’í community is entirely unjust.

On 14 May, some 50 religious leaders representing virtually every religious community in the United Kingdom sent a letter to UK Foreign Secretary William Hague, calling on him to demand that Iran immediately release the seven. Signatories included Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury; Jonathan Sacks, then Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth; and Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra, an Assistant Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain.

“Iran has abandoned every legal, moral, spiritual and humanitarian standard, routinely violating the human rights of its citizens,” they wrote. “The government’s shocking treatment of its religious minorities is of particular concern to us as people of faith.”

In Uganda, the Inter-Religious Council issued a joint statement calling

on Iran to respect the fundamental human rights of Iranian Bahá’ís.

“These sheer violations of basic human rights of Iran’s religious minorities by the regime of that country gave rise to international outrage from governments and civil

society organizations and all freedom-loving people worldwide,” said Joshua Kitakule, Secretary General of the Council.

*For more, visit: <http://www.bic.org/fiveyears>*

## Four UN human rights experts call for immediate release of the seven



Rita Izsák, the UN Independent Expert on minority issues. (Photo: OHCHR)

**G**ENEVA—Four high-level United Nations human rights experts issued a joint statement in May calling on Iran to immediately release the seven imprisoned Bahá’í leaders.

In a press release dated 13 May 2013, the four experts emphasized that the seven are held solely because of their religious beliefs, that their continued imprisonment is unjust and wrongful, and that Iran’s treatment of religious minorities violates international law.

“The Iranian government should demonstrate its commitment to freedom of religion by immediately and unconditionally releasing these prisoners of conscience,” said Ahmed Shaheed, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran. “These cases are apparently characterized by failures to safeguard fair trial standards and jeopardize overall religious freedom in Iran.”

Joining Dr. Shaheed, with each contributing a short statement, were

El Hadji Malick Sow, head of the UN’s Working Group on arbitrary detention; Rita Izsák, the UN Independent Expert on minority issues; and Heiner Bielefeldt, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.

“These seven Bahá’ís are imprisoned solely for managing the religious and administrative affairs of their community,” said Mr. Malick Sow. “These persons were condemned after trials which did not meet the guarantees for a fair trial established by international law.”

Ms. Izsák noted that Bahá’ís are Iran’s largest non-Muslim religious minority. “Their existence and religious identity must be protected under the UN Declaration on Minorities,” she said. “Otherwise, their right to profess and practice their own religion freely and without interference or any form of discrimination may be violated.”

Dr. Bielefeldt said “Iran must ensure that Bahá’ís and other unrecognized minority faiths can practice their beliefs without hindrance and fear.”

## Review: The Great Partnership

*Sacks, continued from page 16*

many non-believers have contributed much to society. But he believes that, in the long run, a flight from God will inevitably make society more self-centered and, ultimately, self-destructive.

All this is not to say that Rabbi Sacks does not acknowledge the great harm that has been done in the name of religion when its followers are fanatical or intolerant. But he notes, also, that the advance of science, if separated from moral concerns, has also caused harm.

“Religion has done harm,” he writes. “But the cure of bad religion is good religion, not no religion, just as the cure of bad science is good science, not the abandonment of science.”

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**“We need both religion and science; that they are compatible and more than compatible. They are the two essential perspectives that allow us to see the universe in its three-dimensional depth.”**

— Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Moreover, Rabbi Sacks does not merely say that we should believe in God for our own sake. He also demonstrates that science is incapable of either proving or disproving God—and that once that is acknowledged, we can search elsewhere for evidence of God’s existence. For one thing, he writes, the degree to which the universe seems “tuned” for life in its fundamental cosmic constants weighs powerfully on the side of a Creator—even against new theories that such tuning is only the result of an infinite number of multi-verses. “The rule of logic known as Ockham’s Razor—do not multiply unnecessary entities—would seem to favor a single unprovable God over an infinity of unprovable universes,” writes Rabbi Sacks.

But the main thrust of Rabbi Sacks’ book is not to prove God—a task he says is ultimately impossible with either

science or religion—but rather to show the consequences for society for failing to take into account the enormous moral power of religion in giving meaning to life and substance to society.

“[W]e need both religion and science... they are compatible and more than compatible,” he writes. “They are the two essential perspectives that allow us to see the universe in its three-dimensional depth. The creative tension between the two is what keeps us sane, grounded in physical reality without losing our spiritual sensibility. It keeps us human and humane.”

On that point, the Bahá’í teachings strongly concur—and go further, saying that they are simply two sides of the same coin, each describing a different aspect of reality.

“Religion and science are intertwined with each other and cannot be separated,” says ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. And: “The religion which does not walk hand in hand with science is itself in the darkness of superstition and ignorance.”

The Bahá’í teachings also stress the importance of religion as a civilizing force, and the main driver of human advancement throughout history.

But ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also said that “if religion becomes a cause of dislike, hatred and division, it were better to be without it, and to withdraw from such a religion would be a truly religious act.”

Rabbi Sacks might not go so far but his book is nevertheless a clear-eyed assessment of the importance of religion in the modern world. While he doesn’t gloss over the problems created by religious believers who have become too fanatical or otherwise become infected with hatred, he shows how the belief in God has a capacity to take individuals outside themselves, to give the moral agency, and to imbue them with dignity.

“Without that belief there is no meaning, there are merely individual choices, fictions embraced as fates,” he writes. “Without meaning there is no distinctively human life, there is merely the struggle to survive, together with the various contrivances human beings have invented to cover their boredom or their despair.”



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# Could humanity survive without religion?

## *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion and the Search for Meaning*

By Rabbi Jonathan Sacks  
Schocken Books, New York

### IN BRIEF

- In a new book, the former Chief Rabbi of the UK puts forward a powerful case for the necessity of religion in private and public life.
- Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says any worldview that embraces only science and a material explanation can never give deep meaning to human existence.
- Without the meaning supplied by religion, he writes, the primary fact of human motivation is the self—which can only lead to disastrous consequences for society, as evidenced by history's experiments with Nazism and Stalinism.

**W**ould the world be a better place without religion? It's a question that many have asked through the ages, and one highlighted more recently by thinkers like Richard Dawkins, who wrote *The God Delusion*, and the late Christopher Hitchens, who claimed that "religion poisons everything."

In his recent book, *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning*, Jonathan Sacks puts forward a powerful case for the necessity of religion in both public and private life.

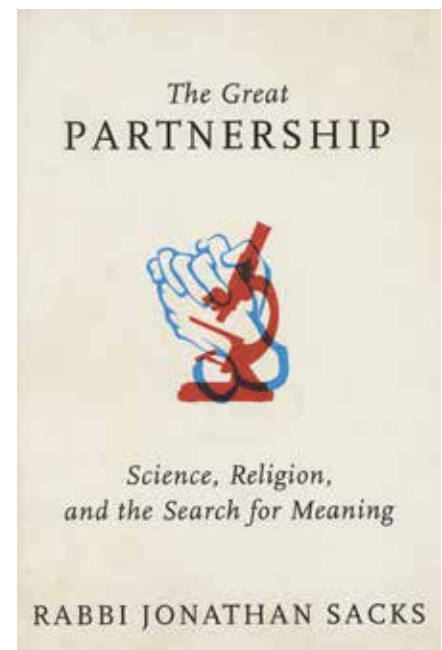
The former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, who also studied philosophy at Oxford, Rabbi Sacks writes that religious belief is not only rational, standing side-by-side with science as an indispensable framework for understanding reality, but that it is also an essential element in the creating the social and moral bonds without which human society will eventually fall apart.

He believes that any worldview that embraces only scientific thought and a purely materialist explanation of reality can never give genuine meaning to human life. And without meaning, he writes, and using only a Darwinian explanation for our existence, the self becomes all that matters—with disastrous consequences for society.

"In a world in which God is believed to exist, the primary fact is relationship," writes Rabbi Sacks. "There is God, there is me, and there is the relationship between us, for God is closer to me than I am to myself. In a world without God, the primary reality is 'I,' the atomic self. There are other people, but they are not as real to me as I am to myself."

The great civilizations were founded on the basis of such religious beliefs—and, he writes, they have continued along a trajectory of social cohesion even as many people have lost faith.

But ultimately, he writes, "[w]hen a society loses its religion it tends not to last very long thereafter. It discovers that having severed the ropes that moor its morality to something transcendent, all it has left is relativism, and relativism is incapable of defending anything, including itself."



Proof of this, he believes, lies in a review of the history of those societies that were built on the rejection of God or the discarding of religious teachings on inclusion and oneness.

"Knowing what happened in Russia under Stalin, in China under Mao and in Germany under Hitler is essential to moral literacy in the twenty-first century," he writes. "These were programs carried out under the influence of ideas produced by Western intellectuals in the nineteenth century to fill the vacuum left by a widespread loss of faith in God and religion."

Rabbi Sacks is careful to say that he does not believe atheists cannot be good people; indeed, he acknowledges,

**Sacks**, continued on page 15