



Baha'i Report

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A newsletter
of the
Australian
Bahá'í
Community

Harmony sets tone at interfaith event



(Left to right) Cr Peter Matic, representing the Lord Mayor of Brisbane; Dr Chris Day; Ms Teresa Gambaro, Federal MP for Brisbane and Dr Janet Khan.

Voices raised in harmony adorned the opening of a World Religion Day celebration attended by a capacity audience at the Bahá'í Centre of Learning in Brisbane on 3 February 2013.

The *Sweet Chilli* women's choir from Maleny established a theme of religious unity in a musical invocation from various faiths performed in the a capella style.

Representatives of the Bahá'í, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Zoroastrian communities then read excerpts from their holy scriptures that illuminated the theme of the event: "Eliminating Racism - the Role of Religion".

Among the special guests were the Queensland Governor's representative, Commander Dominic Katter; the Lord Mayor's representative, Cr Peter Matic; Federal MP for Brisbane, Ms Teresa Gambaro; State MP for Mount Coot-tha, Mrs Saxon Rice; and Brisbane City Councillor Ms Kim Marx.

Other civil dignitaries included the Queensland Police Service Commissioner, Ian Stewart, former Police Commissioner, Bob Atkinson, and Indooroopilly State School principal, Helen Kenworthy. Bahá'í hosts included Dr Chris Day and Dr Janet Khan.

The MC, Audrey Aumua, paid a special tribute to the traditional owners of the land, before introducing the event's anti-racism theme by

saying that racial prejudice violates the dignity of human beings and blights human progress.

The interfaith event was a way of having a dialogue about the role of religion in eliminating racism, Ms Aumua said.

She introduced keynote speaker, Nikki A-Khavari, a member of the Bahá'í Council for Queensland, who said racism did not originate within the human spirit but rather within the human mind. It is an erroneous notion that humans belong to separate races and therefore deserve differential treatment, she said.

Ms A-Khavari, a lawyer by profession, said the Bahá'í view was that the oneness of mankind had to be implemented by appropriate legal measures, but that this was not enough.

"Full equality" Ms A-Khavari noted, "requires the transformation of the individual" to overcome racist ideas as they arise.

"Religion has the inherent capacity to instil in the hearts and minds an awareness of, and sensitivity to, human rights and the equality of all people," she said.

The musical interludes during the event included recitals by guitarist Joshua Toloui-Wallace and pianist Denzil Aumua, both Bahá'ís, as well as a performance on harp, drum and guitar by Helen Gilmour and Rachael Austin of the Pagan community.

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Award for feeding the soul with tranquillity and inspiration



Victorian Premier Mr Ted Baillieu (centre) with Mr Monib Mahdavi (left) and Dr Nima Ferdowsi

Two members of the Bahá'í community in Victoria have received a State award for their voluntary commitment over eight years to organising a public multi-faith devotional event, *Soul Food*.

Nima Ferdowsi and Monib Mahdavi received the Victorian Multicultural Award for Excellence at an event at Government House in Melbourne. The awards ceremony on 18 December 2012 was attended by the Governor of Victoria, His Excellency Alex Chernov, and the Premier, Mr Ted Baillieu.

Soul Food, held on the first Sunday of every month at the State Library of Victoria, is a meditative event involving a fusion of inspiring writings with live and recorded music, accompanied by visual images.

The event includes readings from religious scriptures, as well as from philosophers, authors, leaders and indigenous cultures from around the world.

Initiative

The aim of *Soul Food* is to provide a tranquil space for reflection and to inspire participants to transform their lives and neighbourhoods

by actions that promote the unity and betterment of society.

Soul Food was the joint initiative of Dr Ferdowsi and Mr Mahdavi.

Media recognition came quickly. It soared to number 10 on *The Age* newspaper's list of "20 things to do in Melbourne", and its popularity has continued.

In describing the appeal of the event, Mr Mahdavi said that many people in the community are seeking opportunities to explore their spiritual development.

"It provides Melbournians with a place to unwind and reflect once a month," Mr Mahdavi said.

"One of the most rewarding outcomes of *Soul Food* has been the way people from all backgrounds actively participate by helping with set-up, readings, promotions and suggestions for enhancing the event," he said.

Public devotional gatherings along the lines of *Soul Food* are hosted by Bahá'ís throughout Australia and world wide.

For further information about *Soul Food*, visit: <http://www.soulfood.com.au>

'Giving and forgiving' theme at Adelaide event



(Left to right): Mr Andre Amrein, Mrs Liz Scarce, Governor of South Australia His Excellency Rear Admiral Kevin Scarce, Dr Roshanak Amrein, Mrs Safoura Chittleborough

Bahá'í representatives participated in a multi-faith celebration hosted by the Order of Australia Association (SA) at the University of Adelaide on Australia Day, 26 January 2013.

Among the dignitaries attending were the Governor of South Australia, Rear Admiral Kevin Scarce, and Mrs Liz Scarce and Lieutenant Governor Mr Hieu Van Le, who is

also chairman of the South Australian Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs Commission.

The theme "Australians Together: Giving and Forgiving" was highlighted in uplifting songs and speeches after a formal welcome to country by a Kurna Elder.

During the event, representatives from the Bahá'í, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish and Sikh communities carried symbols of their religions to the stage while musical pieces were performed.

Bahá'í representative Roshanak Amrein carried a bouquet of colourful flowers, symbolising the diversity and unity of the human race.

Bahá'í musician Yasmine Tavakoli chanted the Healing Prayer from the Bahá'í Writings as the flowers were carried to the stage.

Other Baha'i representatives included Mr Andre Amrien and Mrs Safoura Chittleborough.

'Octocopter' captures spectacular aerial views of Temple

A video showing spectacular aerial views of the Bahá'í Temple in Sydney, Australia has been launched.

The video includes close-up as well as more distant views of the 40-metre-tall Temple together with its surrounding gardens and bushland.

A low-altitude aerial video production team, *Rotor Works*, undertook the filming before sunrise on 7 January 2013 with the permission of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia, the Faith's national governing body.

Rotor Works, which is based in Sydney, used an innovative remote-controlled Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) known as an "Octocopter" to capture the footage.

Owners Peter Maruncic and Matt Chang designed and built the Octocopter as well as its camera gimbals, which carry a wide variety of cameras from small up to cinema size.

The Octocopter has eight small aeroplane propellers which spin to generate lift. A small on-board computer tells the motors to speed up and slow down in order to maintain a level altitude. This happens 400 times every second.

The controller can command the computer to make some propellers spin faster than others to make the Octocopter change direction.

"We arrived at 5.00 am and what a great time it was to experience the tranquillity of the Temple and its surrounds," Mr Maruncic said.



Rotor Works owners Matt Chang (left) and Peter Maruncic during the filming session



View from the 'Octocopter'

"We both grew up on the Northern Beaches and have always looked at the Temple as one of Sydney's great icons."

A spokesperson for the Australian Bahá'í Community, Venus Khalessi, said the filming took only an hour to complete.

"We were fortunate on the morning of the filming that the sun's rays shone through an opening in the clouds to provide an uplifting backdrop to the Temple," Ms Khalessi said.

"The Temple is a precious and sacred place to Bahá'ís and is also well loved by many members of the surrounding communities who often drop by to spend some quiet time there," she said.

"We are very grateful to the *Rotor Works* team, who offered to film the Temple and to produce the wonderful video.

"We are also grateful to singer Shadi Toloui-Wallace, accompanied by her sister Hoda Toloui-Wallace for the gift of a beautiful melody, using the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, that is so appropriate to this House of Worship.

"The Temple is open daily from 9am to 5pm and is located at 173 Mona Vale Road, Ingleside - anyone is welcome to drop in for a visit."

To watch the video, visit: <http://vimeo.com/59395602>



'Octocopter' films the Temple

Artists portray nobility of Bahá'ís persecuted for ideals



(Left to right) Mehrzad Mumtahan, The Hon. Philip Ruddock MP, The Hon. Catherine Cusack MLC, Shadi Eshragi, Monir Rowshan and Maryam Master

Four Australian Bahá'í artists who have personal or family experience of religious persecution in Iran contributed to an exhibition in Sydney in December 2012.

Shadi Eshragi, Maryam Master, Leila Barbaro and Mehrzad Mumtahan exhibited works to convey the nobility and courage of those facing persecution in Iran because of their religious beliefs.

The Crimson Ark exhibition was launched by Brendan Penzer, Managing Director of Newtown's At the Vanishing Point - Contemporary Art Inc. on 15 December.

Special guests attending the launch included the Hon. Philip Ruddock, MP for Berowra, the Hon. Catherine Cusack MLC representing

NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell, Councillor Emanuel Tsardoulis, Deputy Mayor of Marrickville, and Dr Keith Suter, global affairs commentator and broadcaster.

All the artists have either experienced persecution for their faith in Iran or currently have Bahá'í friends and family facing persecution and imprisonment by the regime.

For example, when Shadi Eshragi was six, she was expelled in front of her entire school, because she was a Bahá'í.

She also remembers the phone call from her mother telling her that her grandmother's grave had been desecrated in an act of religious hatred.

Speaking at the exhibition on behalf of NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell, Catherine Cusack said the exhibition was about a situation beyond the imagination of Australians - "and that is why it is so incredibly important."

"It speaks the truth about injustice and oppression and it is moving in its authenticity, with each artist testifying through their work on the basis of personal experience," Ms Cusack said.

"Although the exhibition exposes a terrifying oppression on the other side of the planet, it is, I think, very Australian the way in which the artists have banded together, shared, drawn upon their creativity and skill using their art to



Bahá'í artist Shadi Eshragi with two of her exhibited works

speak, in their words, directly to our emotions.

“Even in the worst of times, even the worst acts of man against another man, actually you see the incredible nobility which man possesses - values like steadfastness, forgiveness and I would say optimism as well.

“Because people who are victims of oppression, who have been stripped of everything, from their comforts to their rights, still have hope - what an inspiration that is to each and every one of us with our own tribulations.”

Ms Cusack said the Premier is “a great admirer of this community and very honoured to have been invited to such a distinguished event.”



Bahá'í sculptor Mehrzad Mumtahan at the exhibition

Award recognises a life of community service

On a brief visit home from Timor-Leste, Vahideh Hosseini of the Lismore Bahá'í community received a surprise invitation from local MP Thomas George to drop by at his office.

When she arrived, Mr George presented Dr Hosseini with a Premier's Community Service Award for her 18 years of service with the Red Cross.

As Red Cross regional manager for northern NSW, Dr Hosseini was often on the spot in disaster-hit areas, lending a helping hand to the victims and organising others to do the same.

The victims of cyclones, floods and fires in such places as Innisfail, Mackay, the Hunter valley, Victoria and her home town of Lismore have been the beneficiaries of her renowned management and training skills.

“The award is in recognition and appreciation of her outstanding contribution to the community,” Mr George said.

“After her recent work in East Timor, now she needs a bigger award,” he said.

Timor-Leste

Dr Hosseini and her husband, Ezzat, moved to Timor-Leste more than a year ago. Since then, they have assisted in the development of the fledgling Bahá'í community - including in its role of undertaking acts of community service - worked with children and, on weekends, taught local people how to be English teachers.

An initial successful project involved leading a team of 27 unemployed young people to build a youth centre. Now the team members have jobs.

In basic conditions, the couple teach English as volunteers to students at Unital University, a major aim being to assist them get jobs. Dr Hosseini is also assisting the university to develop facilities there.

Dr Hosseini has a background in volunteer work.

Due to the persecution of members of the Bahá'í Faith in Iran, she was accepted as a refugee in India in 1979.

While studying for her PhD in economics there, she taught English at night to local children.

The International Red Cross then assisted her to come to Australia as a refugee in 1987, where she soon became a volunteer with the Refugee Council of Australia. Later she joined the Red Cross, working in Western Sydney for six years before moving to Northern New South Wales.

Dr Hosseini told the Northern Rivers newspaper of Lismore that she had not encountered people with such a passion for knowledge as the young Timorese.

“I have been to so many countries around the world and I have never seen youth like in Timor,” she said.

“They have so much desire to improve their own lives.”



Dr Vahideh Hosseini

Australia Day parade in Adelaide



Bahá'í participants in the Australia Day parade

Bahá'í participants in an Adelaide parade to celebrate Australia Day symbolised the diversity of Australia and of the Bahá'í Community and its friends.

The Bahá'ís chose the theme of "Unity of Mankind", which was presented in three banners, paper lanterns of the earth and colourful traditional costumes.

The banners carried exhortations inspired by the Bahá'í Writings: "Let your vision be world embracing"; "One Planet One Home"; "The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens."

The parade was organised by Multicultural South Australia.

New interns at the Office of External Affairs



External Affairs Office Interns: Carmel Imani (left) and Camellia Imani

Two sisters from the United States with an interest in women's rights have been working as interns with the Australian Bahá'í Community's Office of External Affairs.

Based in both Sydney and Canberra, psychology graduates Carmel Imani, 24, and Camellia Imani, 23, have had a series of roles since taking up their posts early in the new year.

They have worked in coordination with the three permanent staff members of the Office of External Affairs: the director, Natalie Mobini (Canberra); public information director, Venus Khalessi (Sydney) and national media officer, Michael Day (Brisbane).

Their career background and their experience as Bahá'ís have suited them for their roles in Australia.

In 2011, during an interval in their studies, Carmel and Camellia left their home in California and went to India, where they focussed primarily on human rights issues and carried out volunteer work with other youth from around the world at the Bahá'í House of Worship in New Delhi.

Part of that experience involved stints with the external affairs team at the national centre of the Bahá'í community in India.

The experience helped Camellia decide what she wanted to do with her career.

"It was in the Office of External Affairs in India that I realized how important it was for me to dedicate my passion to help individuals going through adversity and injustice," she said.

Back home, both sisters developed their professional experience by working in Washington DC in the United States Senate, working on drafts, talking points, media releases and research documents.

Before coming to Australia, Carmel worked as a paralegal at the Tahirih Justice Center, a non-profit organisation that through its legal services protects immigrant women and girls from violence.

"I met the bravest women from all around the world who were seeking justice for the harm that had been done to them simply because they were women," Carmel said.

She worked with lawyers to assist the women to file for asylum and other legal remedies so they could remain in the United States.

"Hearing stories from women around the globe who were victims of female genital mutilation, torture, and domestic violence inspired me to be an advocate for human rights," she said.

Meanwhile, Camellia worked as a fellow for the Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs in Washington, DC, where she represented the organisation at policy meetings with elected officials and legislative staff, promoting laws, policies and regulations that advanced the status of all women and overall gender equality.

After their return home, they will both head to law school when the university year begins in August.

Speakers focus on links between education and human rights

Education to overcome prejudice and the human right to education were among the topics addressed at events held by Bahá'ís in Australia to mark Human Rights Day.

Sydney

A representative of Together for Humanity described that organisation's work in schools in a keynote address at a public reception following the annual Human Rights Day service at the Bahá'í Temple in Sydney on 9 December 2012.

Award-winning storyteller Donna Jacobs Sife said that by pupils questioning existing prejudices, they gained greater appreciation of others.

"We unpack prejudice and bring together those of different religions and beliefs," Ms Jacobs Sife said.

"We bring together people from Jewish, Christian, Muslim and agnostic backgrounds and provide presentations at schools in an open and supportive setting," she said.

Emphasis is placed on listening skills and on the use of non-inciting language and tone, she said.

At the service preceding the address by Ms Jacobs Sife, there were readings of excerpts from scriptures of the major world religions focusing on human rights. An unaccompanied choir sang prayers between the readings.

Canberra

At a similar event held at the Bahá'í Centre in Canberra, the chairperson Jane Boardman noted that the Australian Capital Territory



Human Rights Day in Canberra: (left to right) Senator Gary Humphries, Mr Kevin Boreham, Professor Fazel Naghdy

Government had recently amended its Human Rights Act to include recognition of the right to education - an Australian first.

The first keynote speaker was Kevin Boreham, lecturer in international law at the Australian National University, who spoke about the right to education under international human rights law, and its application to the situation of Bahá'ís in Iran.

Mr Boreham described the denial of the right to education for Bahá'ís in Iran as an important human rights issue which had recently been raised at the United Nations in New York.

"It is clear that Iran has violated the right to education in relation to Bahá'ís," he said

His point was reinforced in a video presentation by American actor Rainn Wilson about the Bahá'í Institute of Higher Education in Iran, which was subjected to raids and arrests by the Iranian authorities in 2011.

Several of its staff members remain imprisoned due to their work in providing tertiary level education to Bahá'í students who are denied access to Iranian universities due to their belief in the Bahá'í Faith.

The second speaker, Professor Fazel Naghdy of the University of Wollongong, provided a Bahá'í perspective on the importance of universal education.

He quoted from Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith: "Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom."

Felix Machiridza, a Zimbabwean journalist and human rights activist who has gained asylum in Australia, treated the audience to an African percussion performance.

Senator Gary Humphries and members of the Canberra Interfaith Forum were among the special guests who attended the event.



Together for Humanity storyteller, Donna Jacobs Sife



The Australian Bahá'í Report is published three times a year by the Australian Bahá'í Community, a non-governmental organisation which encompasses and represents the membership of the Bahá'í Faith in Australia.

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Australia co-sponsors UN resolution in support of human rights in Iran

The Australian Bahá'í community has expressed its gratitude to the Australian Government for co-sponsoring a successful United Nations resolution condemning serious human rights abuses in Iran.

The resolution, passed on 20 December 2012 by the General Assembly, expressed "deep concern" at Iran's "serious ongoing and recurring" human rights violations.

It cited torture, an increase in executions, widespread restrictions on freedom of expression and discrimination against minorities, including members of the Bahá'í Faith.

The General Assembly called upon Iran to stop such violations, to release prisoners of conscience and to open its doors to international human rights monitors.

Australia condemns abuses

In November 2012, Tanisha Hewanpola, First Secretary, Australian Mission to the United Nations, expressed the Government's concerns to the UN Third Committee.

"Australia condemns the wide-spread human rights abuses occurring in Iran, including the use of the death penalty, intimidation and arbitrary arrest of human rights defenders and political activists, violation of political and media freedoms, and unfair trials," Ms Hewanpola said.

"Australia is deeply concerned by policies and practices that discriminate against ethnic and religious minorities, including Arab Iranians, Bahá'ís and religious converts, as well as women and girls," she said.

"We continue to urge Iran to engage in a transparent manner with UN human rights



The UN Headquarters in New York City

mechanisms, including with the Special Rapporteur on Iran."

Australian Bahá'í Community spokesperson Natalie Mobini said Australian Bahá'ís are extremely concerned at the widespread abuses, including "the cruel, systematic and entirely unjustified attacks on the Bahá'ís of Iran".

"There are more than 100 Bahá'ís in prison for their faith, and many more are awaiting trial," Dr Mobini said, noting that some were relatives of Australian Bahá'ís.

"Seven innocent Bahá'í leaders, jailed since 2008, remain imprisoned in appalling conditions, as are Bahá'í educators who provided secular education to young people.

"Young Bahá'ís are banned from universities, businesses are being shut down, cemeteries are being desecrated and the homes of ordinary families are subjected to violent raids, confiscation of belongings and the arrest of their loved ones.

"It is reassuring and heart-warming to see the Australian Government standing up against the ongoing and intensifying repression of so many people and groups in Iran."

About the Bahá'í Faith

The Bahá'í Faith is an independent world religion. Its central theme is that humanity is one family and that the time has come for its unification into a peaceful global society.

The Bahá'í Faith was founded in Iran in 1844. There are more than five million Bahá'ís worldwide. They come from all backgrounds and can be found in virtually every country on earth.

The Faith arrived in Australia in 1920 and has spread to all cities and most towns and rural areas.

The Founder of the Bahá'í Faith is Bahá'u'lláh (1817-92), who brought new spiritual and social teachings for our time.

"A new life is, in this age, stirring within all the peoples of the earth," Bahá'u'lláh said.