

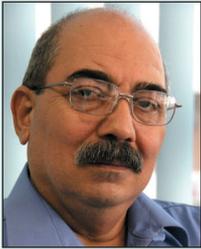


# AUSTRALIAN Baha'i Report

Volume 16, Issue 1 - February 2012

A newsletter of the Australian Bahá'í Community

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## Australian House of Representatives urges Iran to protect human rights of Bahá'ís

Australian MPs have called on parliamentarians in Iran to protect the human rights of citizens in their country, including members of the Bahá'í Faith.

The debate on the motion, which was supported by Government and Opposition MPs, took place on 13 February 2012 in the chamber of the House of Representatives of Australia.

The motion specifically calls upon the Iranian MPs to investigate the denial of access to higher education to Bahá'ís and others for reasons other than academic ability, and to seek a judicial review of trials of prisoners of conscience, including seven former Bahá'í leaders and human rights defenders and lawyers.

In moving the motion, Fremantle MP Melissa Parke noted that the subject of human rights in Iran was last debated in the Federal Parliament on 15 November 2010.

"Since that time, the number, range and frequency of serious human rights violations has increased," Ms Parke said.

"In 2011, Iran was cited repeatedly, including by the UN Secretary-General, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the major international human rights NGOs for violating international human rights law," she said.

Ms Parke said there was severe persecution of Iran's religious and ethnic minorities.

"But the Iranian state has perhaps been most savage in its oppression of the Bahá'ís, who are the largest non-Muslim religious minority in Iran and who are not recognised in the constitution because Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, came after the Prophet Mohammed," said Ms Parke.

She said the number of Bahá'ís imprisoned due to their Faith had doubled during the past year. The prisoners included seven Bahá'í leaders who had been held in appalling conditions since 2008 after receiving 20 year sentences.

"Several of these prisoners have immediate family members who are Australian citizens -



Melissa Parke MP

brother, sister, aunts, nephews and nieces, who wonder if they will ever see their loved ones again.

"Among the Bahá'í prisoners are a group of educators who have been sentenced to prison terms of four and five years for the purported crime of providing education to young people who are barred from accessing Iran's universities on the basis of their religion."

The 100 Bahá'ís currently in prison in Iran "represent a tiny portion of the many thousands of Bahá'ís who have been subjected to physical assaults, intimidation and questioning, property searches and confiscation, monitoring of their bank accounts, movement and activities, denial of work and education and even the desecration and destruction of graves and cemeteries."

Other speakers were Kelly O'Dwyer (member for Higgins), Michael Danby (member for Melbourne Ports), Luke Simpkins (member for Cowan) and Kelvin Thomson (member for Wills).

# New councils formed as programs develop

As the Bahá'ís of Australia develop their programs of service to their neighbourhoods and wider society, new administrative arrangements have recently been put in place.

In addition to the national and local Bahá'í administrative bodies, three regional councils now attend to administrative requirements in their areas.

One council looks after regional matters in Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory.

Another's role is in New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania, and a third's sphere of activity is Queensland.

Australian Bahá'í Community spokesperson Venus Khalessi said that Bahá'ís throughout Australia are serving their neighbourhoods in four principal ways.

"We are working with the wider community at the neighbourhood level in offering devotional meetings, study circles, children's classes and junior youth programs," Ms Khalessi said.

"These are aimed at helping to generate a community spirit within neighbourhoods and to provide a space for spiritual inspiration to those seeking it," she said.

"These activities have proved very appealing to Bahá'ís and members of the wider community. As they have expanded, new administrative arrangements have proved necessary."

## To contact the Regional Bahá'í Councils:

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**Bahá'í Council for Queensland:**  
[secretariat@qld.bahai.org.au](mailto:secretariat@qld.bahai.org.au)

Members of the Bahá'í Council for Queensland



# PM names community member 'Ambassador'

Prime Minister Julia Gillard has named a member of the Australian Bahá'í Community as a "People of Australia Ambassador".

The founder of Townsville's annual "Cultural Fest", Dr Farvardin Daliri OAM, was selected in January 2012 as one of 40 ambassadors from among hundreds of people nominated by the public.

The public had been asked to send in the names of inspirational people who have helped to build bridges, promote inclusion and strengthen ties in their communities.

The ambassadors will be able to provide advice to the Federal Government and the Australian Multicultural Council.

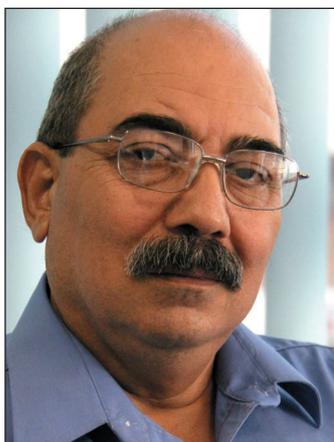
Dr Daliri said the privilege of being a People of Australia Ambassador will enable him to

advise on the enhancement of national cohesion and social inclusion policies.

"Multiculturalism is an Australian innovation which has evolved within our democracy and is based on the bedrock of respect for human rights, equality and freedom of individuals within the framework of Australian law," Dr Daliri said.

"It takes moral commitment on the part of all Australians to make the most of this unique feature of our great nation and present Australia to the world as a successful model of unity in diversity," he said.

Dr Daliri began the Cultural Fest 18 years ago and has developed it into a major means of overcoming cultural barriers and celebrating Australia's inclusive multicultural identity.



Dr Farvardin Daliri OAM

# Thinkers discuss ethical responses to climate change

International and Australian speakers addressed the theme "ethical responses to climate change" at a conference held in the Bahá'í Centre of Learning for Tasmania.

A keynote speaker at the conference of the International Environmental Forum, a Bahá'í-inspired organisation based in Geneva, was IEF president Arthur Dahl.

"Around the world, there is growing awareness that there are ethical and moral questions at the root of the climate change crisis," Dr Dahl told the conference, held 10-11 December 2011 in Hobart.

"These are questions of justice and equity that will determine the survival of cultures, ecosystems, and present as well as future generations," he said.

The conference brought together thinkers with scientific, activist, religious and artistic perspectives.

Peter Adriance, environmental liaison officer for the Bahá'ís of the United States, said Bahá'í environmental involvement is rooted in three principles:

- nature is a reflection of the Divine
- all things are inter-connected and flourish according to the law of reciprocity
- humanity is one, the fundamental truth shaping our age.

Tony Press, CEO of the Antarctic Climate and Ecosystems Cooperative Research Centre at the University of Tasmania, spoke of humanity's joint responsibility: "We are the first generation with the capacity to see what we've done to the planet, to model the future and make choices about it."

Al Riebau, principal scientist at Nine Points South Technical, said governments had made significant achievements in recent decades and so we should not give up on the political process.

## Beyond partisanship

Natalie Mobini, External Affairs Director for the Australian Bahá'í Community, said many people were understandably disillusioned with the failure of the partisan political system to address complex social challenges such as climate change.

"How can we move beyond partisanship to create innovative governance alternatives that are democratic, non-competitive, and serve the common good?" Dr Mobini said.

Peter Boyer, of Climate Tasmania, Todd Houstein, of Sustainable Living Tasmania and Gareth Johnston, of Future Ready, spoke about community-based methods that could contribute to good environmental outcomes.

Miriam Pepper, secretary of the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change, said climate change was not only a technological problem, but more deeply a spiritual one: "The language we [faith communities] bring to the discussion is important—we add words like love, compassion and justice into the public sphere."

## Capacities

Tessa Scrine, a member of the Bahá'í Continental Board of Counsellors for Australasia, outlined how the Bahá'í community is responding to climate change by translating the Bahá'í teachings into practice in daily life.

She described the global process of learning, known as the training institute, by which individuals learn to apply the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith to the transformation of society, and are helped to walk an individual path of service to humanity.

The conference presentations are available online at <http://iefworld.org/conf15>



*Peter Adriance*



*Conference participants, Natasha Homsey and Neil Podger*

## Youth shine at World Religion Day event in Brisbane

"Youth in Service to Humanity" was the theme of the World Religion Day celebration which attracted more than 250 people to the Bahá'í Centre of Learning in Brisbane on 15 January 2012.

Youth representing the Bahá'í, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Zoroastrian communities presented excerpts from the scriptures of their religion, as did adult representatives of the Buddhist and Christian religions.

Youth also provided most of the music. Leaders and other members of the various faith communities also attended.

World Religion Day, celebrated on the third Sunday of January, was initiated by the Bahá'ís of the United States in 1950 as an effort to foster interfaith understanding.

Among the special guests attending were Michael Choi, Parliamentary Secretary for Trade and Multicultural Affairs, representing Queensland Premier Anna Bligh, the Federal MP for Ryan, Jane Prentice, and Councillor Andrew Wines of Enoggera.



*Josh Toloui-Wallace is second from the right in this group of participants at the event*

A Bahá'í youth from Brisbane, Josh Toloui-Wallace, presented an address on the importance of youth serving their communities.

"The youth who are guided by a strong spiritual foundation ... are now given the responsibility to shift the common mind set from selfish materialism to selfless service to the advancement of mankind," Mr Toloui-Wallace said.

## Medals and memories feature in Adelaide exhibition

Gold medals make up just one of the special features of a Bahá'í exhibition that continues in Adelaide until 24 February 2012.

The exhibition, entitled Bahá'í Heritage, Migration and Global Community, is being hosted by the Migration Museum of South Australia, Australia's first museum to concentrate on immigration history and cultural diversity.

The exhibition traces in objects, images and text the history of the South Australian Bahá'í community, which was founded in the 1920s.

The senior curator of the Migration Museum, Catherine Manning praised the exhibition.

"They have produced a thought provoking and colourful display introducing visitors to the Bahá'í Faith and the diverse cultures who follow it in Adelaide," Ms Manning said.

"Visitors to the Migration Museum have found the exhibition positive and uplifting. It is

fantastic to see the Bahá'í community add their voices to the story of South Australia's history."

Adelaide was the first home of the national secretariat of the Australian Bahá'í community (1934-44).

One of the South Australian community's members is 101-year-old Margo Bates, whose swimming victories in the world Masters competition attracted national attention. Her gold medals are on display.

At the opening in December 2011, poet Roshanak Amrein read her verses about the birthplace of the Bahá'í Faith, Iran. Another Bahá'í speaker, Fuzzy Trojan, spoke about the tradition of migration to South Australia.

The Local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Adelaide organised the exhibition, asking professional designers and artists Richard and Jan Coker, who are members of the Bahá'í community, to be the designers and curators.



*Display with photo of Margo Bates and her medals*

# Community leaders attend holy day celebrations



*Participants at the holy day celebration in Melbourne*

Community leaders joined with Bahá'ís in celebrations throughout Australia to celebrate the holy day commemorating the birth of Bahá'u'lláh.

In Perth, those attending the event on 12 November 2011 included State MP Peter Abetz, his wife Jenny Abetz, and Councillors Clive Robertson and Effie Nicholson from the City of Melville.

Other special guests included Marissa Verma and Laurel Nannup from Djidi Djidi Aboriginal Women's Group, and representatives of other faith communities in Western Australia.

Dockers football star, Luke McPharlin, a member of the WA Bahá'í Community, performed two of his original musical items as part of the program.

Another WA Bahá'í, Professor Duane Varan, delivered an address that focussed on the life of Bahá'u'lláh, the aims of the Bahá'í Faith, and the programs offered by the Bahá'í community that aim to nurture spiritual virtues in children and youth.

## Melbourne

In Whittlesea, a northern suburb of Melbourne, some 150 people from 40 local cultural and ethnic groups attended a banquet that has now become an annual event held to commemorate the holy day.

The community leaders attending included the State MPs for Mill Park and Thomastown, Lily D'Ambrosio and Bronwyn Halfpenny, Whittlesea Mayor Rex Griffin and five other City of Whittlesea councillors.

Cr Griffin spoke about the history of the Bahá'í Faith and commended the Bahá'í community as good citizens of the city.

Ms D'Ambrosio spoke about the current persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran.

"By being here, we each declare our support for the Bahá'í community in the challenges it faces and its striving for equality", Ms D'Ambrosio said.

"But it is not enough to come together in support - when we leave, it is important for all of us to talk about what is going on for Bahá'ís in Iran in our workplaces, our family, our community and our volunteer roles," she told the guests, who represented a wide cross-section of one of Melbourne's most diverse suburbs.

## Role of religion

A representative of the Australian Bahá'í Community, Natalie Mobini, spoke about the role of religion in building unity through the expanding inter-faith movement.

"It is religion that brings us together and unites us in that shared belief that there is more to life than the material," Dr Mobini said.

"The more we interact with each other, the more we are brought face-to-face with the common humanity and the spark of the divine lying just beneath the surface of our imagined differences."

The Birth of Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, is celebrated on 12 November each year. His birth is celebrated as one of nine holy days in the Bahá'í year.

# Protection urged against religious discrimination

All Australians should be protected under a new consolidated anti-discrimination act from discrimination on the basis of their religion or beliefs, according to a submission made by the Australian Bahá'í Community in January 2012.

The absence of any federal law providing protection from discrimination on the basis of religion and belief is a significant gap in existing Commonwealth legislation and falls short of Australia's international obligations in that area, the submission said.

The current anti-discrimination law consolidation project, which aims to bring existing Commonwealth anti-discrimination legislation into a single comprehensive law, provides a timely opportunity to overcome this gap, it said.

The submission also supported the recommendation of the Equality Rights Alliance and other groups that survivors of domestic and family violence should be protected by the new law from discrimination.

## Freedom of religion

The right to freedom of religion and belief should be protected under Australian law, and conduct in accordance with the inherent laws and teachings of a religion should not be

considered unlawful discrimination, the submission said.

Religious doctrines and practices that violate international human rights standards should, however, be subject to examination and scrutiny, it said.

Special measures that discriminate in favour of disadvantaged groups should also be permitted under the new legislation, the submission said.

"The Bahá'í Community supports, and strives to uphold in its own practices, the principle that if any discrimination is to be tolerated, it should be discrimination in favour of, not against, the disadvantaged," it said.

"For example, in the process of electing members to our administrative institutions, tied votes are resolved in favour of a person who belongs to a minority."

## Oneness of humanity

The submission recommended that the oneness of humanity form a guiding principle for the consolidation project.

The new law should acknowledge the oneness and equality of all people in its statement of purpose, it said.

Although legal measures are vital, they will not be sufficient to eliminate discrimination.

"Prejudice and inequality is stubbornly surviving legal reforms.

"In the final analysis, individuals are respected - or discriminated against - by other individuals, even if they are acting in an official capacity.

"Accordingly, it is essential to put in place, and provide adequate resources for, education programs that touch the hearts, and elevate the behaviour, of all members of the community.

"Neighbours, educators, health workers, employers, politicians, religious leaders, police, media professionals - all share responsibility for the promotion of equality and the prevention of discrimination."



*Ten-year-old Nava Revalk represented the Australian Bahá'í Community at an Australia Day multi-faith service in Adelaide in January 2012. She was the only child alongside a group of religious leaders including the Anglican Archbishop of Adelaide.*

*Nava (centre) met the Governor of South Australia, His Excellency Rear Admiral Kevin Scarce (left), and presented a posy to the Governor's wife, Mrs Liz Scarce (right).*

# Speakers address Human Rights Day events

Events marking Human Rights Day were held by Bahá'í communities throughout Australia, including in Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne.

## Sydney

Two prominent speakers addressed different aspects of human rights at a public reception following a service at the Bahá'í Temple on 11 December 2011.

The immediate past president of the Law Society of NSW Young Lawyers, Daniel Petrushnko, described how community participation and consultation are key tenets of human rights and are crucial tools for bringing about positive change.

Mr Petrushnko was a member of the Australian Child Rights NGO delegation which reported to the United Nations Child Rights Committee in Geneva last year.

"One outstanding learning from this process has been the need for grass roots consultation and education on human rights issues - this is something which should be provided to children at schools from a young age," Mr Petrushnko said.

Professor Didar Zowghi of the University of Technology Sydney outlined her involvement with the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education, an online university for Bahá'í students in Iran, who are banned from university because of their religion.

Professor Zowghi described how academics internationally had supported the right to education for the Bahá'ís in Iran and Iran's responsibility to uphold this right as signatories to the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*.

## Canberra

A keynote speaker at the event held at the Canberra Bahá'í Centre was Dr Helen Watchirs, the ACT Human Rights and Discrimination Commissioner.

Dr Watchirs stressed the importance of the fundamental right to freedom of religion, in particular noting the significance of a UN resolution condemning human rights abuses of people in Iran, including the Bahá'ís.



Attendees at Human Rights Day event in Canberra

Dr Watchirs also spoke about the recent developments and achievements in human rights in the ACT.

Representing the ACT Bahá'í community, James Ghaeni, a lawyer, spoke on the importance of the teachings of the founders of the world's great religions as a crucial source to draw upon to expand human rights law and to establish further safeguards against systemic forms of injustice.

## Melbourne

The Bahá'í community of Victoria dedicated its meditative audio-visual event Soul Food in December to Human Rights Day.

The theme of the interfaith event held at the State Library of Victoria was "No Man is an Island". It involved a fusion of inspiring writings with live and recorded music, accompanied by visual images.



Professor Didar Zowghi and Mr Daniel Petrushnko



*The Australian Baha'i Report is a newsletter published by the Australian Bahá'í Community.*

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**Australia co-sponsors UN resolution on Iran**

The Australian Government co-sponsored a recent United Nations resolution which expressed "deep concern at serious ongoing and recurring human rights violations" in Iran.

Australian Bahá'í community spokesperson Natalie Mobini welcomed the government's support for the resolution, which was passed by the UN General Assembly on 19 December 2011 by the biggest margin in nearly two decades of votes on the human rights situation in Iran.

"We are pleased to see that the resolution condemns a wide range of abuses in such strong terms," she said.

"Those abuses include continuing discrimination against minorities, including members of the Bahá'í Faith, a dramatic increase in executions, the use of torture, the systematic targeting of human rights defenders, and pervasive violence against women."

The resolution reported "a significant increase in the number of Bahá'ís arrested and detained" and "renewed measures to deny Bahá'ís employment in the public and private sectors".

For a full report on the resolution, visit <http://news.bahai.org/story/803>

**Media hate campaign in Iran spawns violence**

Australian Bahá'ís have expressed grave fears that a state-sponsored media campaign to vilify Bahá'ís in Iran will continue to lead to violent attacks and possibly worse.

The wide-ranging campaign was exposed in a report released by the Bahá'í International Community in October 2011 titled "Inciting Hatred: Iran's Media Campaign to Demonize Bahá'ís".

The report analyses more than 400 anti-Bahá'í press, TV, radio and on-line media items published in Iran between late 2009 and early 2011.

A spokesperson for the Australian Bahá'í Community, Venus Khalessi, said the campaign, which aims to demonise and dehumanise the country's biggest religious minority, involves the dissemination of gross slanders in state-controlled and state-sanctioned media, as well as via the pulpit and on the web.

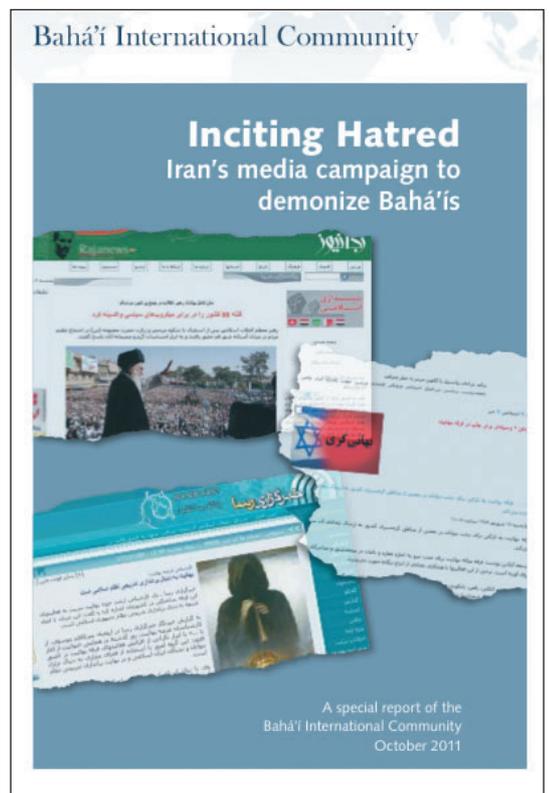
"The report shows how Bahá'ís are frequently branded as enemies of Islam, perpetrators of ludicrous conspiracies, morally corrupt and even Satanic," Ms Khalessi said.

"They are obsessively portrayed as the source of every conceivable evil.

"Such articles are often accompanied by images that wrongly portray Bahá'ís as fiendish ghouls or agents of Israel, in a manner clearly calculated to stir up antagonism among Iranian Shiite Muslims."

The incidence of hate propaganda has already been accompanied by a rise in incidents of violence by unknown individuals and groups against Bahá'ís and Bahá'í properties, according to the report.

"These attacks have come above and beyond an increase in arrests, detentions, imprisonments, and



*Report exposes Iran's media campaign to demonize Bahá'ís*

confiscations that were clearly undertaken by the government or its agents," the report said.

"Beyond assaults on individuals, recent years have witnessed a surge in attacks - principally arson and vandalism - on Bahá'í-owned businesses and properties," it said.

"These have occurred in virtually every part of the country, often under the cover of night."

To read a detailed report visit <http://news.bahai.org/story/861>