

AUSTRALIAN Baha'i Report

Volume 10, Issue 1 - February 2006

A newsletter of the Australian Bahá'í community

INSIDE

New National Assembly member

2



Darwin memorial service

3



Universal Children's Day

6



Death in custody in Iran

A Bahá'í who was wrongly jailed in Iran for 10 years died in his prison cell of unknown causes on 15 December 2005.

Mr Dhabihu'llah Mahrami, 59, was held in a government prison in Yazd under harsh physical conditions at the time of his death.

His death comes amid ominous signs that a new wave of persecutions of Bahá'ís has begun. At least 59 Bahá'ís have been arrested, detained or imprisoned in Iran this year, a figure up sharply from the last several years.

Arrested in 1995 in Yazd on charges of apostasy, Mr Mahrami was initially sentenced to death. His sentence was later commuted to life imprisonment following an international outcry and widespread media attention.

"We deeply mourn the passing of Mr Mahrami, who was unjustly held for a decade on charges that violated his right to freedom of religion and belief," said Natalie Mobini, spokesperson for the 13,000-strong Australian Bahá'í Community.

"While the cause of his death is not known, Mr Mahrami had no known health concerns.

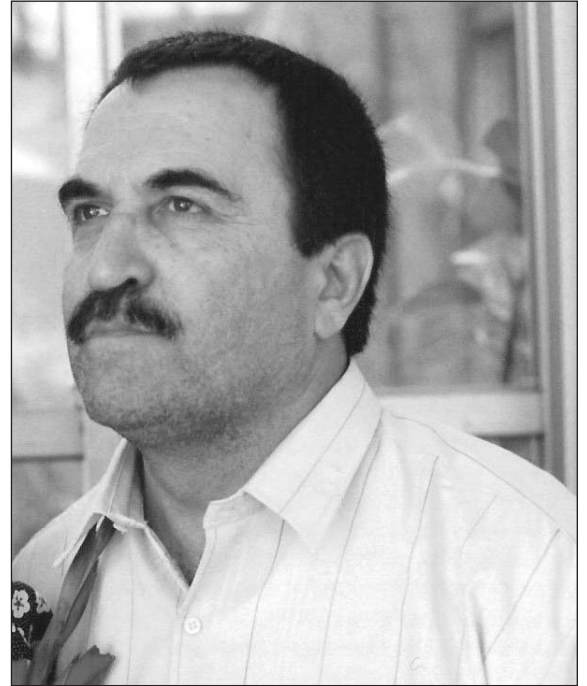
"We also know that Mr Mahrami was forced to perform arduous physical labour and that he had received death threats on a number of occasions.

"The Iranian authorities bear responsibility for the death of this innocent man, whose only crime was his belief in the Bahá'í Faith," concluded Dr Mobini.

Born in 1946, Mr Mahrami served in the civil service but at the time of his arrest was making a living installing venetian blinds, having been summarily fired from his job like thousands of other Bahá'ís in the years following the 1979 Iranian revolution.

Although Iranian officials have asserted that Mr Mahrami was guilty of spying for Israel, court records clearly indicate that he was tried and sentenced solely on charge of being an "apostate", or convert from Islam.

Mr Mahrami was sentenced to death by the



Dhabihu'llah Mahrami

Revolutionary Court in January 1996, a conviction that was later upheld by the Iranian Supreme Court. The death sentence stirred an international outcry, including objections registered by the Australian Government. In 1999 the Iranian authorities commuted his sentence to life imprisonment.

Since 1978, more than 200 Iranian Bahá'ís have been killed, hundreds more have been imprisoned, and thousands have been deprived of jobs and pensions as part of a widespread and systemic religious persecution by the government of the country's largest non-Islamic minority. Bahá'ís continue to be barred from higher education.

Mr Mahrami's funeral was held on 16 December 2005, the same day that the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution expressing "serious concern" over the human rights situation in Iran, making specific mention of the ongoing persecution of the Bahá'í community there. Australia co-sponsored and voted in support of the resolution.

New member elected



Newly elected National Assembly member, Tessa Scrine

Canberra resident Tessa Scrine, who works as the Officer for Government Relations for the Australian Bahá'í Community, has been elected as a new member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia.

Her election to the national governing body of the Bahá'í Faith fills a vacancy created by the departure of Dr Eric Kingston, who has been appointed as a member of the Continental Board of Counsellors for Australasia. With her election, the balance of membership on the nine-member National Assembly shifts to a majority of women.

The Bahá'í Faith has no priesthood. Instead, the affairs of the community are tended by elected institutions at the local, regional, national and international levels. All adult Bahá'ís in

Australia are eligible for election to the National Assembly

In her role as Officer for Government Relations, Ms Scrine works with government and non-government organisations to advance peace, human rights and the equality of women and men. She is presently serving on the national board of UNIFEM Australia and the coordinating committee for the Australian Forum of Human Rights Organisations.

Ms Scrine has previously worked in the Australian and ACT government services. A mother of three daughters, she has been involved in the work of the Bahá'í community in various parts of Australia since her teenage years

Achiever of the year



Dellaram Jamali

Young Bahá'í Dellaram Jamali has been named the VCE Achiever of the Year for 2005.

Presented by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, the award recognises the efforts of students in the final year of high school in promoting community involvement in their local school and the wider community.

Ms Jamali, whose parents migrated to Australia as refugees in the early 1980s to escape persecution in Iran, was awarded for her work with the Ballarat Regional Multicultural Council in organising such events as the Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation International Music Concert, Ballarat Multicultural Day and Harmony Days. She is also an active public speaker.

As a member of the Bahá'í community, she has also helped to organise holy celebrations, Bahá'í classes and youth forums.

"A lot of people my age would see being involved in their religious community as not cool, but it is something I am proud of", she said.

"Through my faith I honestly believe that world peace is achievable. I think that if everyone made an effort to contribute to their community, the world would be a better place".

The principal of Sebastapol College in regional Victoria, Garry Taylor, has described Ms Jamali as "an inspirational student who involved herself in her leadership role at the college". Ms Jamali was College Captain in 2005.

Ms Jamali, who was presented with an IBM laptop computer and a trophy, has been accepted to study journalism at Deakin University in Geelong this year.

Centre receives access award

The Sydney Bahá'í Centre has received a 2005 Auburn Community Access Award from the Auburn City Council. The award recognises excellence in the provision of disabled access.

Officially opened in 2003 by the Governor of NSW, Professor Marie Bashir, the Centre has become a hub for Bahá'í educational and community activities in western Sydney.



Men stand up against violence

A group of young Bahá'í men came together to support the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (White Ribbon Day) in Canberra on 25 November 2005.

Responding to the call to "Be a man ... do the right thing", they helped to distribute hundreds of white ribbons at a major shopping centre, engaging many of the men they approached in conversation about the issue of domestic violence. The event was held by the Domestic Violence Prevention Council and the ACT Office for Women.

Earlier in the day, the Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Pru Goward, said "We cannot go further in addressing violence against women without the support of men ... It is men who are in a strong position to call other men to account for their actions ... We need men who will take ownership of this issue. We need men who will stand up on behalf of all men who abhor violence and speak out."

Ms Goward was speaking at a White Ribbon Day event jointly hosted by Amnesty International Australia, ACT Council of Churches, UNIFEM, YWCA and the Australian Bahá'í Community.

The Bahá'í teachings strongly condemn all forms of violence, and the Bahá'í community has been an active supporter of White Ribbon Day.

White ribbons are handed out in Canberra



Earthquake victims remembered in Darwin

The Bahá'í and Islamic communities of Darwin jointly hosted an inter-faith function to share their grief and express solidarity with the victims of the massive earthquake that struck northern Pakistan, India and Afghanistan in October 2005.

Organised and compered by Aiden Mitchell, a 16-year-old Baha'i youth, the program combined prayers, speeches, messages of support and a fundraising function.

Guest speakers included Andrea Lee, from the Australian Red Cross, who spoke of the humanitarian and relief effort, and Dr Waqar Ahmad, President of the Islamic Society of the Northern Territory, who had recently witnessed the devastation in Pakistan at first hand.

The Administrator of the Northern Territory, Ted Egan AO, was in attendance, accompanied by his wife Nerys Evans.

Messages of support were also read from Rev Steve Orme, Moderator of the Northern Synod of the Uniting Church, and Annette Burke, the Mayor of Palmerston.

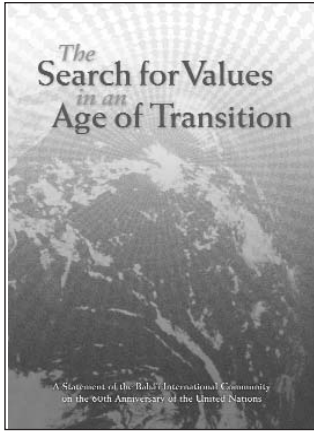
"There was a clear message of hope for peace and unity in our shared future and common destiny in our region", said Mr Mitchell.

"Those attending resolved to express, through our thoughts, words, prayers and deeds, the community's support for our friends and fellow global citizens".

Participants at the earthquake memorial service: (l to r) Waqar Ahmad, His Honour Ted Egan, Aiden Mitchell, Nerys Evans, Jillur Rahman (Islamic community), Jenny Medwell (President of the Multicultural Council of the NT), Hassan Bajhau (Islamic community)



Search for common values paramount



We can no longer be content with a passive tolerance of each other's worldviews; what is required is an active search for ... common values and moral principles

An active search for common human values is essential in order to address the global challenges facing the world community today.

This is the view put forward in a statement published by the Bahá'í International Community in October 2005 to mark the 60th anniversary of the United Nations.

Titled "The Search for Values in an Age of Transition", the statement identifies a number of positive developments in international affairs in recent years. These include the establishment of the World Trade Organization, the International Criminal Court, the African Union, and the articulation of the Millennium Development Goals - "an unprecedented global development framework aimed at the eradication of poverty worldwide".

Despite these grounds for optimism, however, it is undeniable that the world remains "deeply divided against itself". Failings include the advancement of men and boys at the expense of women and girls, neglect of cultural and religious minorities, unbridled nationalism, weak states, and narrow economic agendas exalting material prosperity over more spiritual goals.

The resulting crises have "laid bare the limits of traditional approaches to governance", giving rise to what the statement describes as "the inescapable question of values: which values are capable of guiding the nations and peoples of the world out of the chaos of competing interests and ideologies towards a world community capable of inculcating the principles of justice and equity at all levels of human society?"

Effective action will need to be based on a search for shared values, the statement concludes. This needs to go beyond mere tolerance of diversity to an active building of a common vision: "we can no longer be content with a passive tolerance of each other's worldviews; what is required is an active search for those common values and moral principles which will lift up the condition of every woman, man, and child, regardless of race, class, religion or political opinion".

The statement offers the principle of the oneness of humankind as one such value that can provide a practical way forward.

Recommendations for UN reform

The statement goes on to offer a number of recommendations towards a more just and effective United Nations system, ranging over the UN human rights machinery, development, collective security, and democracy within the UN itself as well as its member states.

It calls for the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights to be "bolstered by the requisite moral, intellectual, and material resources" to "become the standard-bearer in the field of human rights and an effective tool in alleviating the suffering of individuals and groups whose rights are denied".

In the field of development, the statement recommends that priority be given to education, particularly of girls and women, and that "the United Nations should consider that ... the education of girls may well yield the highest return of all investments available in developing countries".

It further urges the United Nations to take the necessary steps to increase participation of women in all facets of governance, conflict resolution and peace processes.

The recommendations state that the United Nations must "address the democratic deficits in its own agencies and deliberations". In particular, in order to increase democratic functioning and to address its "relentless politicisation", the statement recommends moving towards the eventual elimination of permanent membership and veto power in the Security Council.

But in addition to procedural reforms, it notes, there is a need for a "critical change in the attitude and conduct" of member states. States need to recognise that "in holding seats on the Security Council and as signatories to the Charter of the United Nations, they have a solemn moral and legal obligation to act as trustees for the entire community of nations, not as advocates of their national interests".

The full text of "The Search for Values in an Age of Transition" can be found in the statement library of the Bahá'í International Community on the web at <http://www.bic-un.bahai.org>

Contributions to multiculturalism recognised

Bahá'ís from around Australia have been honoured for their contributions to multiculturalism by the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia (FECCA).

Designed to recognise those who have worked hard to provide quality services for Australians from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the awards were given as part of FECCA's 25th anniversary celebrations.

Among the recipients of Level One awards were Heshmat Eshraghian, of Port Adelaide, for service to the Persian community of South Australia; Ali Jaber, from Wagga Wagga, for his work on the Ethnic Communities Council of Wagga Wagga; and Pym Trueman, of Kingborough, for her efforts promoting harmony in Tasmania through a wide range of organisations.

Level 2 awards were made to:

- Dianne Curran, Devonport TAS, for her work assisting with the settlement of refugees and migrants in the north-west of Tasmania;
- Farvardin Daliri, Townsville QLD, for a wide range of activities in his capacity as director of the Townsville Migrant Resource Centre;

- Les Endrei, Golden Plains VIC, for working in the fields of reconciliation, multiculturalism and interfaith in Geelong;
- Vahideh Hosseini, Lismore NSW, for her work with refugees and for the Red Cross;
- Agnes Kean, Dandenong VIC, for work with the Interfaith Network of Greater Dandenong;
- Mojgan Khadem, Adelaide SA, for active promotion of multiculturalism and support for asylum seekers;
- Nahid Meshgin, Melville WA, for involvement in a range of multicultural projects in Western Australia;
- Fattaneh Scott, West Tamar TAS, for work with refugee survivors of torture and trauma; and
- Fahimeh Walker, Hawkesbury NSW, for her work as a multicultural community development worker.

The Bahá'í communities of Dubbo, Top End and Baulkham Hills also received awards for their organisation of multicultural and inter-faith programs over an extended period.



Filmmaker Mojgan Khadem, an award recipient from Adelaide

Soul Food offers nourishment

A monthly devotional gathering hosted by the Bahá'í community at the Melbourne Royal Botanical Gardens grew in popularity during 2005, attracting up to 130 participants.

Based on a similar event held at the Art Gallery of South Australia, "Soul Food" combines readings from the scriptures of various faiths and other inspiring sources, interspersed with live and recorded music, photographic and video presentations, all set against a candle-lit background.

The food for the soul is followed by food for the body, as refreshments are served afterwards.

"We wanted to create a unique event which can inspire guests with readings, music and images of spirituality", explained Monib Mahdavi, a member of the organising team.

"It has been a great success, with participants coming from all backgrounds and walks of life, some even travelling from outside Melbourne to attend", he said.

The event's profile was raised further when it was featured in The Age Good Weekend magazine among the "10 things to do" in Melbourne on the weekend.

"One of the most rewarding outcomes of Soul Food has been the way everyone has taken on ownership and actively participates by helping with setup, readings, promotions and suggestions for improving the event", said Mr Mahdavi.

"It has clearly shown that there are many people in the community who share our vision and are seeking opportunities to explore their spiritual development".

In 2006, Soul Food will move to a new venue at the State Library in Melbourne. The first gathering will take place on 19 February at 10.30 am.

Further information about Soul Food programs in Melbourne and Adelaide can be found at www.soulfood.com.au.



Children conduct service

A devotional service conducted by children was held in the Bahá'í House of Worship in Mona Vale, Sydney, to celebrate Universal Children's Day.

The children, many of whom do not come from Bahá'í families, read from the scriptures of the Bahá'í Faith and other religions. An unaccompanied choir, with members aged between five and twelve years, provided the music.

All the children participating in the event regularly attend Bahá'í classes, conducted either in government schools as part of the religious education program, or outside school hours.

"We believe that it is important that children participate in the service as much as possible," said Pouneh Sedghi, one of the organisers.

"They feel honoured to be contributing in this way and practise for weeks leading up to the service. We believe that all children have wonderful qualities latent within them."

The annual service, now in its 16th year, was held on 23 October 2005. It attracted over 800 people, who filled the Temple to capacity. Visitors came from as far away as Bowral, the Blue Mountains and Gosford.

Top right: Some of the readers at the service, together with their parents outside the House of Worship

Chloe Maclean, a grade 3 student at Neutral Bay Public School, reads a prayer at the service



Positive comments came from many parents, including those who are not members of the Bahá'í community, such as Jack Smoot and Alan Dickinson.

"I thought it was fantastic", said Mr Smoot, the father of Morgan, a year four pupil who was one of the readers. "The focus on the children was excellent."

Mr Dickinson, the father of Daniel, one of Morgan's classmates, praised the inclusion of scriptures from all the world religions.

"I think probably the thing we need most in this world is religious tolerance," Mr Dickinson said.

"All religions are supported and honoured. I think that's the right way to go."

Asked what he liked most about the service, Daniel Dickinson said, "The choir singing". Referring to his reading, he explained, "It was about loving Creation".

Following the service, a variety of activities were held in the grounds of the National Bahá'í Centre adjacent to the House of Worship, including performances by dance and music groups, face painting, story telling, and a display of children's art on the theme of respect for the environment, and for people of different races, cultures, and religions.

"Children are the most precious treasures we have", said Mrs Sedghi.

"This day is an opportunity for children to show their capacity, and to feel the love and encouragement of the community around them," she said. "So we organised activities the entire family can enjoy."



Soccer star realises a dream

Any athlete selected in a national sporting team falls readily into the cliché, "it's a dream come true".

But for Sahand Mehrkhavari, this is more true than most.

Just three years after arriving in Australia as a refugee from Iran, the 22-year-old was selected in the national Australian Futsal (indoor soccer) team that competed last year in the AMF World Cup in Kabask, Russia.

"You're coming from a country where you can't even play first grade because you're a Bahá'í," he says.

"I always wished to play and when I came here I tried and tried."

Travelling to Seoul, South Korea and then Kabask with his fellow Australian team members last August, Mr Mehrkhavari reflected on his luck that his talent had been noticed and rewarded, just months after he switched to the indoor game from playing outdoor soccer.

"It was unbelievable, it is just a dream, amazing."

Australia played four games in the tournament against teams from Argentina, Russia, Spain and Peru: some of the world's best indoor teams and players. Mr Mehrkhavari was awarded Man of the Match in his first outing.

"That was my first game and it was just scary playing against Argentina. But I said I'm going to show them what I've got. You always have to



Sahand Mehrkhavari with Argentinian futsal champion, Luciano Verone Gonzales

push yourself that you're not going to give up and keep pushing."

Living in Australia for the past three years has been a challenging and rewarding adjustment from the conditions in his homeland. Off the sporting field, Mr Mehrkhavari has completed an Advanced Diploma in Civil Engineering at TAFE in Wollongong: another pursuit that was previously unthinkable, as Bahá'ís are barred from attending further education in Iran.

He is now hoping to be selected in the Australian team for this year's tournament in Spain in June. If determination counts for anything, he should be well on the path to success.

Ashfield Bahá'ís serve Loaves and Fishes

Members of the Bahá'í community of Ashfield, in inner-western Sydney, volunteer twice a year at the Exodus Foundation's Loaves and Fishes Restaurant.

A free restaurant housed in the Ashfield Uniting Church, Loaves and Fishes serves upwards of 300 meals a day to people who are homeless and in need. The Saturday lunch is provided by community groups from a wide range of spiritual traditions.

After coming into contact with Rev Bill Crews, who ministers the church, Ashfield Bahá'ís volunteered to cook and provide lunch on two weekends a year.

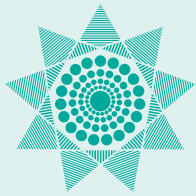
"There have been some hiccups", said volunteer Collis Ta'eed, "like melting our food processor ... and mistaking lime cordial for dishwashing liquid.

"But the meals have been a big success, and we look forward to working with Reverend Crews in the future".

The Bahá'í Writings strongly encourage service to the community. The prophet and founder of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh, writes: "The poor in your midst are My trust; guard ye My trust, and be not intent only on your own ease".



Madlen Khoshbin and Naomi Hall serve lunch



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International news

Tackling religious intolerance

Governments should tackle increased religious intolerance by promoting discussion both within and between religious groups, and by ensuring that women and political leaders are involved in the talks.

These were among the recommendations made by a panel of experts in freedom of religion and belief at a symposium organised by the Bahá'í International Community in New York on 25 October 2005.

The panel included Piet de Klerk, the Netherlands' Ambassador at Large for Human Rights; Asma Jahangir, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief; and Felice Gaer, Director of the Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights.

Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations, chaired the symposium titled "Freedom to Believe: Upholding the Standard of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

The Bahá'í International Community sponsored the event to stimulate discussion and thinking about the implementation and protection of the right to freedom of religion and belief.



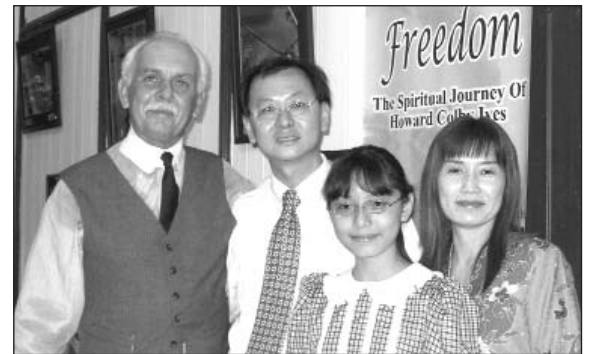
Show tours Singapore and Malaysia

Australian actor Phillip Hinton recently toured Singapore and Malaysia with his one-man play, "Portals to Freedom".

Based on the story of Howard Colby Ives, an American Unitarian Church Minister who became an early follower of the Bahá'í Faith, the play was adapted by Mr Hinton from a book by the same name.

It played to full houses in Singapore, Johore Bahru, Malacca, Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh and Penang. Over three weeks, the play was performed to about 2000 people. Performances were followed by lively question-and-answer sessions.

The tour also included a series of story-telling workshops, in which participants were led on a journey of discovery to the point where they became effective story-tellers themselves.



"By the end of a session our nervous participants were finding their creative selves - fairly bouncing off the walls!" said Mr Hinton, who conducted the workshops together with his wife, Ann.

One of Sydney's leading voice artists, Mr Hinton has performed on stage, in film and on radio, with credits in productions as diverse as Flipper, Caddie and Home and Away.



Three students from the Alice Springs Bahá'í Junior Youth Group pooled their creativity to produce the winning entry in the Year 8 category of the "Many Faiths, One People" poster competition run by the Multicultural Council of the Northern Territory.