

AUSTRALIAN Baha'i Report

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*A newsletter
of the
Australian
Bahá'í
community*

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Australians welcome calls for release of prisoners

The Australian Bahá'í Community has welcomed calls by the US State Department and Amnesty International for the release of three Bahá'í prisoners sentenced to four years imprisonment in Iran.

Haleh Rouhi, 29, Raha Sabet, 33, and Sasan Taqva, 32, have been incarcerated since 19 November 2007. They were among 54 Bahá'ís initially arrested in May 2006 as they took part in an effort to educate underprivileged children in Shiraz.

Those arrested were initially released after being detained for up to one month. They were notified in August 2007 that they were accused of "offenses relating to state security."

Ms Rouhi, Ms Sabet and Mr Taqva were subsequently sentenced to four years in prison, a sentence confirmed in late January by an Iranian official.

Gravely concerned

A spokesperson for the Australian Bahá'í Community, Natalie Mobini-Kesheh, said Australian Bahá'ís are gravely concerned for the welfare of the three prisoners.

"We hope the international appeals will end their unjust detention," Dr Mobini-Kesheh said.

She said charges against the three, rather than involving any legitimate concern over "state security", stem entirely from wrongful accusations in the court that they had been involved in "indirect teaching" of the Bahá'í Faith.

"In fact they were engaged in an effort to help underprivileged children in their city, through a program of training that emphasises moral virtues," she said.

"It is mind-boggling that the government of Iran would consider such efforts to be any type of threat, and it is wholly unwarranted that such activities should result in a lengthy prison sentence."

Call not to torture

A spokesman for the State Department, Sean McCormack, called on the Iranian Government to free the three Bahá'ís.

"We urge the regime to release all individuals held without due process and a fair trial, including the three young Bahá'í teachers being held in a Ministry of Intelligence detention center in Shiraz," Mr McCormack said.

Amnesty International has issued an "urgent action" appeal on behalf of the three prisoners. It calls for human rights activists around the world to write directly to Iranian government officials on behalf of the Bahá'í prisoners, asking why they have been detained and calling on authorities not to ill-treat or torture them.

Amnesty International Australia's National Director Claire Mallinson said: "The three Bahá'í teachers appear to be held unjustly without due process or a fair trial. They are considered by Amnesty International to be possible prisoners of conscience. They must be released."

Left to right: Bahá'í prisoners: Haleh Rouhi, Sasan Taqva and Raha Sabet



Climate change prompts global vision



Geoff Callaghan at the Bahá'í House of Worship

Climate change is prompting humanity to adopt a global vision, a keynote speaker told a Human Rights Day reception held in the information centre of Sydney's Bahá'í House of Worship on 9 December 2007.

"Through climate change we have come to realise our interdependence and our commonalities," said Geoff Callaghan, Faith Project Officer for the Climate Institute.

"The effects of climate change will not discriminate between race or religion," said Mr Callaghan, who is a member of the Maroubra Junction Uniting Church.

"It is a global problem that is helping us to realise we truly are one global community," Mr Callaghan said.

Faith communities can lead

Mr Callaghan said faith communities have great potential to show leadership on climate change, and to mobilise individuals to take action at the grass roots.

Common Belief, a compilation of statements on climate change by 16 Australian faith communities (including the Australian Bahá'í Community), has become the most-downloaded document on the Climate Institute's Web site, with 20,000 downloads to date, he said.

Building on this success, the Climate Institute is now setting up an interfaith network to address climate change, he said.

Optimist on climate change

Mr Callaghan said he remained an optimist on the climate change issue.

"Climate change is a simple problem with a simple solution," he said.

"The problem is that emissions from burning fossil fuels are heating up our atmosphere. So the solution is to stop burning fossil fuels and switch to clean sources of energy," he said.

Mr Callaghan said he was happy that Australia was ratifying the Kyoto Protocol and was working with other countries on the global response to climate change.

Human rights at risk

Mr Callaghan warned that climate change has the potential to compromise basic human rights, with the most vulnerable and poorest people most at risk.

He identified clean air, safe drinking water, and access to food and housing as basic resources that could be threatened by unchecked climate change.

Poorer communities would be unable to adopt expensive solutions, and the competition for dwindling resources could lead to increased conflict, he said.

"It's the rights of the voiceless generations to come that will be most compromised by climate change," Mr Callaghan said.

Following Mr Callaghan's talk, the annual Human Rights Day service was held in the Bahá'í House of Worship. The service included readings from the Scriptures of the world's great religions.

Oscar Eager, 8, travelled from Gosford to read a prayer at the Children's Day service.



Children conduct service

More than 800 people attended the annual Children's Day service at the Bahá'í House of Worship in Sydney.

The service is unique in that it is conducted entirely by children. Children read all of the scriptural readings and sang in a special children's choir.

After the service families enjoyed refreshments and free children's activities including face painting, crafts and entertainment.

The theme for the service, held on 28 October 2007, was "The attributes of world citizens."

This illustrated the teaching of Bahá'u'lláh that "the earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens."

Banners illustrating the theme, made by children attending Bahá'í education classes throughout Sydney, festooned the Temple grounds.

Support for Human Rights declaration

The Australian Bahá'í Community is joining with other non-governmental organisations in a year-long initiative to mark the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Adopted by the United Nations on 10 December 1948, the Universal Declaration was the first international recognition that all human beings have fundamental rights and freedoms. It is the most translated document in the world.

The theme for the anniversary campaign is "Dignity and justice for all of us."

Anniversary statement

In a statement to mark the anniversary, the Bahá'í International Community describes the Declaration as "one of the first collective expressions of an international community."

"With no dissenting votes, the fifty-six member states of the United Nations, from all regions, affirmed the inherent dignity of the human being, the rule of law over the rule of force, and placed the well-being of the individual at the centre of international law," the statement says.

It also expresses optimism that the economic, social and environment challenges facing humanity are helping to create a new consciousness of international responsibility.

"The maturing consciousness of a global community, the development of mechanisms for implementation and monitoring of human rights and the rise of a vibrant civil society in support of these rights holds promise that a global order capable of upholding the dignity and nobility of the individual will be realised," it says.

Dignity and justice for all of us



Freedom of belief is fundamental

The statement singles out the right to freedom of conscience, religion, or belief as fundamental to safeguarding the dignity of the human being, even though that right continues to be denied in many parts of the world.

It also highlights the active role Bahá'ís have played in educating others about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the many international treaties and conventions that the Declaration has inspired.

The statement says the worldwide Bahá'í community pledges "to continue and expand its efforts, and to join with others to eliminate all forms of prejudice, to reduce the extremes of wealth and poverty, to achieve full equality of men and women, to promote sustainable development and to foster understanding among the world's religions."

The full text of the statement can be found on the national Bahá'í Web site, www.bahai.org.au. Visit the "Social Action" section and select "Human Rights."

Further information about the anniversary can be obtained by contacting Tessa Scrine at the Bahá'í Office of Government Relations on (02) 6287 2019 or email tessa.scrine@bnc.bahai.org.au

Celebrating religion as a source of peace

Members of five religious traditions came together in Darwin in January to celebrate World Religion Day.

Based on the theme that religion and spirituality are a source of peace and harmony, the program featured presentations by Adama Konda, Muslim Imam of Darwin; Rector David Amery, Anglican Diocese of the NT; Venerable Medhankara Thero, International Buddhist Centre; Mr Sabaratnam Prathapan, Hindu Society of the NT; and Jane Baker-

Jones, representing the Top End Bahá'í community.

According to event organiser, Ron Mitchell, the aim of World Religion Day is to foster interfaith understanding and dialogue by embracing the shared purpose and ideals of the world's major religions.

The program closed with the reading of the "Unity Prayer" composed for the Parliament of the World's Religions in Cape Town in 1999.

Jasmine Jesberg read the "Unity Prayer" at Darwin's World Religion Day celebration





Michael Day

Journalist appointed as national media officer

The newly appointed national media officer of the Australian Bahá'í Community says his recent role overseas increased his appreciation of the strengths and abilities of Australian Bahá'ís.

From 2003-2006 Michael Day was based at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel where he was the editor of the Bahá'í World News Service, a Web-based newspaper which reports the activities of the international Bahá'í community.

"By observing and writing about my home community within the context of Bahá'í activities globally, I saw its energy and dynamism with new eyes," said Mr Day.

"We published stories about Australian Bahá'ís producing radio programs in the Torres Strait, holding study circles in the outback, and organizing major conferences, film festivals and teacher appreciation days in the big cities," he said.

"The Australian story that attracted the most attention worldwide was about the delivery of spiritual education in primary schools, the Bahá'í Education in State Schools program."

Offering solutions

Now based in Brisbane, Mr Day's new role will involve keeping journalists serving the major media organisations informed of newsworthy events and ideas that emerge in the Australian Bahá'í community.

"Now that more and more Australians are recognising the need for global solutions to such issues of the age as climate change, weapons control, and economic justice, there is increased interest in the solutions the Bahá'í community advances, all inspired by the pivotal belief in the oneness of humanity," he said.

Web-based news service

Mr Day will also continue his work on the newly designed national Bahá'í Web site www.bahai.org.au

"The site now has a news service, which will prove a useful resource to anyone interested in the contributions Australian Bahá'ís are making to our society," he said.

Before taking up his post in Haifa in 2003, Mr Day was a journalist for 10 years with *The West Australian* newspaper in Perth. He won a national award for education journalism and State awards for his reporting on events in Indonesia.

A former lawyer, Mr Day joined the Bahá'í Faith in 1978 and has visited Bahá'í communities throughout Australia and New Zealand, in the Indian Ocean region, Africa, the Caribbean, South America, and Eastern Europe.

Mr Day can be contacted on (07) 3832 6532 (Mobile: 0406 607 648) or email michael.day@bnc.bahai.org.au.

Experience leads to role in government relations

Shephalie Williams



The newly appointed Government Relations Officer for the Australian Bahá'í Community, Shephalie Williams, has the benefit of past experience to assist her in her new position.

As the Bahá'í National Settlement Officer, Mrs Williams liaised with government officials as she supported the re-settlement of Bahá'í refugees who had fled persecution in Iran.

Ms Williams will now broaden her work to assist the Australian Bahá'í Community's Office of Government Relations to advance principles of peace, global prosperity, human rights and the advancement of women.

She will be working alongside Tessa Scrine, who remains the Executive Officer-Government Relations for the Australian Bahá'í Community, a post she has held since 2003.

Ms Williams, who has a Masters degree in English Literature, will also continue in her part-time role as Practice Manager for a specialist medical practice. She previously held an academic post at the University of South Australia.

The Office of Government Relations is based at the Bahá'í Centre in Canberra. It can be contacted on (02) 6287 2019 or email ogr@bahai.org.au.

Blogs prove a force for good

A Sydney Bahá'í has devised and implemented a plan that is helping unite thousands of bloggers around the world, while winning the support of the United Nations and some major global corporations.

Together with his wife Cyan, Collis Ta'eed is the author of the internationally popular freelancing blog, freelanceswitch.com. He founded "Blog Action Day" as a means to inspire on-line writers around the world to focus on a single issue on one particular day.

For the inaugural Blog Action Day, Mr Ta'eed and his fellow organisers chose the environment as the issue to be discussed.

The United Nations Environment Program officially supported Blog Action Day, calling on bloggers around the world to join in. Google, eBay and Yahoo were among the companies that participated.

Unity in diversity

"We wanted to do something that would allow blogging to benefit the community," Mr Ta'eed said.

"As a Bahá'í, I believe in unity in diversity - that the very differences that separate us are our

greatest strength in a unified setting," he said.

"Blog Action Day is about harnessing the amazing diversity and passion of the blogging community. Having thousands of opinions and ideas focused together on a global issue allows us to examine it in many different dimensions."

More than 20,000 blogs participated in Blog Action Day on 15 October 2007, including 19 of Technorati's Top 100 blogs. Their collective readership ran into millions.

Mr Ta'eed said that he and other organisers hope Blog Action Day will become an annual event.

"The world doesn't change in huge leaps, it changes in small increments, and we hope that Blog Action Day will be one more drop in the tide of change," Mr Ta'eed said.

"It's easy to have doubts about what one person can do or what changes a group of bloggers could actually bring about.

"But Blog Action Day showed that we can help steer the global conversation, adding impetus to an already important issue and so help drive social change in the only way that really matters - by changing people's minds."



Collis Ta'eed

Planting seeds for the future

The humble seed was the symbolic centrepiece of a junior youth concert that attracted a full house to the Brisbane Bahá'í Centre on 2 December 2007.

The end-of-year concert was held to showcase what the seven Bahá'í junior youth groups in the city had been learning in 2007.

Combining spiritual education with artistic and sporting activities, junior youth groups cater for those between the ages of 12 and 15 years. They aim to empower young people to make independent moral choices in their daily lives. The groups are held throughout Australia and are open to anyone.

As members of the audience entered the Brisbane concert, they each received a seed, the meaning of which soon became apparent.

During the devotional program which preceded the concert, the members of the junior youth groups rose from their seats and planted a seed

at the front of the stage.

Every junior youth is like a seed, explained one of the organisers, Saphira Rameshfar.

"With water and sunshine in the form of junior youth groups, these seeds will grow into mighty trees," Ms Rameshfar said.

At the end of the evening the seeds planted earlier had been transformed into vibrant flowers, and these were presented to the junior youth leaders, who are called "Animators".

Plans were announced to expand and develop junior youth activities in Brisbane in 2008.

Members of the Brisbane Youth Workshop, who performed at the concert



Appreciating school teachers



Winthrop Primary School teachers Jan Dunlop (left) and Vicky Wells (pictured with Ms Wells's husband David Thompson) received roses at the Teacher Appreciation awards in Melville, Perth

Hundreds of school teachers around the country were recognised and honoured in events organised by Bahá'í communities to mark World Teacher's Day in October 2007.

The work of teachers is highly valued in the Bahá'í Faith, which recognises education as the source of progress and social advancement for the individual as well as the community.

Many local Bahá'í communities have chosen World Teacher's Day as an occasion to express their appreciation for teachers, in events ranging from in-school morning teas to gala functions where the work of school teachers is publicly recognised, honoured and rewarded.

Teacher awards presented

In Melville, Western Australia, the Bahá'í community and the City Council joined forces to present awards to 22 teachers from nine local primary schools. Their students had nominated them for recognition. Children and their

parents came along to the awards night and cheered as their teachers were presented with certificates.

In West Torrens, South Australia, 180 people attended the fifth annual Teacher Appreciation event, including 60 school teachers and principals from seven schools. Teachers were presented with small gifts and roses on behalf of their students.

At a school assembly at Balwyn North Primary School in Victoria, students presented their teachers with roses, bookmarks and personal cards they had made in their Bahá'í Education Classes.

Veronica Necyporuk, Principal of East Hills Girls Technology High School in Panania, NSW, warmly welcomed members of the Bahá'í community of Bankstown when they arrived at the school to provide morning tea for its 80 teachers. Mrs Necyporuk said that the Bahá'í community was the only external organisation that came to the school to show appreciation for the work of teachers.

There are many references to education in the Bahá'í Writings, including: "The education and training of children is among the most meritorious acts of humankind and draweth down the grace and favour of the All-Merciful, for education is the indispensable foundation of all human excellence."

Bahá'ís place particular importance on the education of girls, as it enables them to participate fully in the affairs of the world as well as fulfilling their vital role as mothers and first educators of the next generation.

Nasser Sedghi with his wife Farzaneh and daughter Nava



Nasser Sedghi, a Bahá'í from Dubbo NSW, has received a Dubbo City Community Service Award in recognition of his significant contribution to the city.

Mr Sedghi has been closely involved with the city's annual multicultural festival since the mid-1990s.

Originally an initiative of the Dubbo Bahá'í community, the festival has grown to become a

major City Council event comprising a week of celebrations.

The local newspaper, the *Daily Liberal*, reported that as a Bahá'í, Mr Sedghi has made the promotion of the oneness of humanity a key aspect of his community activities.

"Nasser regards this friendship and partnership with all Australians as the key to a happy life in a country area," the *Daily Liberal* said.

Australian Bahá'ís to vote in unique international election

All nine members of the governing council of the Australian Bahá'í Community will visit Israel in April to participate in a unique international election.

The members of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia will join with their counterparts from more than 177 countries to vote for the Universal House of Justice, the nine-member international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith.

The election will be the highlight and main purpose of the Tenth International Bahá'í Convention to be held from 29 April to 2 May at the Haifa International Convention Centre.

Held once every five years, the election is the only one where the governing institution of a major independent world religion is elected directly by delegates chosen by their respective national communities.

The International Convention will also include plenary sessions where delegates consult on topics of common concern. Involving some 1600 delegates from almost every country on earth, organising the International Convention is a major logistical exercise.

Distinctive elections

The Bahá'í Faith, which has no clergy, is governed by democratically elected councils at the international, national, state and local levels.

Bahá'í elections are distinctive for taking place without nominations or campaigning.

Instead of being influenced by outside pressures, voters are guided by the Faith's teachings to choose "those who can best combine the necessary qualities of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognised ability and mature experience."

The Universal House of Justice, an institution called for by Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Faith, was first elected in 1963. It has its seat at the Bahá'í World Centre on Mt Carmel in Haifa, Israel.

Fifth time

For one of the Australian delegates, it will be the fifth time he has participated in the election of the Universal House of Justice.



Members of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia (John Walker, centre)

Queenslander John Walker, now serving in Sydney as the elected secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly, first voted for the Universal House of Justice in 1968. He subsequently attended the International Conventions held in 1973 and 1998.

Mr Walker also voted in the most recent election in 2003. It was conducted by a worldwide postal ballot when prevailing world conditions led to the cancellation of the International Convention.

Mr Walker said voting for the Universal House of Justice was an awe-inspiring experience.

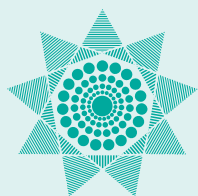
"I had an overwhelming feeling of certitude and confidence that everything was happening at a high level of integrity," he said.

"It is also wonderful to meet and talk with National Spiritual Assembly members from other countries - there is a lot of cross fertilisation of ideas."

The other Australians voting this year will be: Mrs Fiona McDonald (East Fremantle, WA), Professor Fariborz Moshirian (Ku-ring-gai, Sydney), Dr Golshah Naghdy (Wollongong), Ms Kath Podger (Leichhardt, Sydney), Dr Vahid Saberi (Ballina, NSW), Professor Bijan Samali (Baulkham Hills, Sydney), Ms Tessa Scrine (Canberra), and Dr Marjorie Tidman (York, WA).



Nineteen Bahá'ís travelled to Israel from around the world to act as tellers for the 2003 election of the Universal House of Justice



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For more information on the stories in this newsletter, or any aspect of the Australian Bahá'í community and its activities, please contact:

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Decision of Egyptian court welcomed

A courtroom decision in Egypt opens the door to the restoration of full rights of citizenship for members of the Bahá'í Faith there, a spokesperson for the Australian Bahá'í community, Natalie Mobini-Kesheh, said.

The Court of Administrative Justice in Cairo ruled in January 2008 that Bahá'ís could fill out vital official documents without being required to falsely declare membership of one of three state-accepted religions, Islam, Christianity or Judaism.

"We urge the Egyptian government to quickly implement the court's decision and allow Bahá'ís once again to enjoy the full rights of citizenship to which they are entitled," Dr Mobini-Kesheh said.

"This decision is a victory for religious freedom," she said.

"The previous policy was obviously at odds with international law and common sense."

"We will be watching closely to see how the decision is implemented," said Dr Mobini-Kesheh.

Members of the Bahá'í Faith had recently not

been permitted to leave the religious affiliation field blank on official documents, including the application form for the all-important national ID card.

The only option given the Bahá'ís was to lie about their religious affiliation, itself a punishable offence in Egypt and something that Bahá'ís will not do.

Without national identify cards, Bahá'ís are deprived of a wide range of citizenship rights, such as access to employment, education, medical and financial services, and marriage and birth certificates.

Lawyers representing Bahá'ís in cases seeking a change to the policy said their clients were willing to settle for cards or documents on which the religious affiliation field is left blank or filled in, perhaps, as "other."

This solution, accepted this week by the Court of Administrative Justice, distinguishes these two cases from a lawsuit rejected by the Supreme Administrative Court of Egypt last year.

That court overruled a decision by a lower court that upheld the right of Bahá'ís to have their religion identified as Bahá'í on government documents.

PNG school expands

A Bahá'í-run preschool in the remote village of Bunisi in Milne Bay Province has recently added two new classrooms.

The expansion of the Bunisi Elementary School has spared children in Grades One and Two from the two-hour trek they used to undertake every morning and evening, walking up and down the mountain to the next closest school, Ikara Primary School.

Operated by the Bahá'í community of Bunisi, the school now serves students from pre-school to Grade Two from nearly a dozen nearby villages. It has three teachers and an enrolment of some 75 students, who come from all religious backgrounds.

Plans are for the school to expand further in the future, adding a grade each year.

"The people are happy that the Bahá'ís have helped build a school to provide education for the boys and girls of the area," said a member of the Bahá'í Continental Board of Counsellors for Australasia, Kessia Ruh, who travelled from Rabaul to attend the official opening.



Kessia Ruh travelled by helicopter from Rabaul to attend the inauguration of the new classrooms