

AUSTRALIAN Baha'i Report

Volume 12, Issue 3 - October 2008

A newsletter of the Australian Bahá'í community

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Youth will 'lead us to a global society'

Today's youth will take the world beyond nationhood to greater models of unity and global cooperation, a former principal of a Bahá'í-inspired international school told an International Day of Peace reception on 21 September.

"Parents want their children to be like them, but I tell them not to have such low expectations," said Vivek Williams, who has recently returned to Australia after six years as a teacher and principal of the Townshend International School in the Czech Republic.

"We shouldn't strive to make our children just like us, because the world has evolved and needs new capacities that only our youth can offer," said Mr Williams, who was speaking at the National Bahá'í Centre in Sydney.

"Today's young people will take the world forward and we should have faith and confidence in them," he said.

Sixty countries

Mr Williams said Townshend has attracted students from more than 60 countries from Europe through to the Pacific.

Its philosophy is based on the Bahá'í view that the role of education is to release the potentialities latent in every human being, he said.

The school did not separate academic education from the development of good character.

"Someone who attains academic excellence but has no moral values can cause much harm in the world," he said.

"But if you have both, the result is light upon light."

Learning to serve

Mr Williams said that the school instils the value of serving others through the expectation that students participate in some form of community service every week.

This could involve mentoring younger students, assisting the disabled, or volunteering at an old people's home.



Lisa and Vivek Williams at the Bahá'í House of Worship

"If you enable young people to serve others, it resonates with their spiritual core and enables them to develop and transform," he said.

Examples

Lisa Williams, who taught at Townshend for six years alongside her husband, spoke about some of the students she had taught.

One was a 14-year-old Roma girl who entered the school without any knowledge of English, its main language of instruction.

She has now graduated with honours and is studying law so that she can help her people, who face discrimination and prejudice in many parts of Europe.

Another student arrived at the school from inner city London, where he had seldom attended school in the previous three years, Mrs Williams said.

Following his graduation, he served as a volunteer at an orphanage in Honduras, and raised funds to enable two of the orphans to study at Townshend.

"He is now studying media in England, and his main interest is serving others," said Mrs Williams.

The presentation by Mr and Mrs Williams was followed by a service in the Bahá'í House of Worship to mark the International Day of Peace.

Menu of inspiration provides food for the soul



Nima Ferdowsi (left) and Monib Mahdavi are the organisers of Soul Food in Melbourne

A winning recipe for tranquillity and spiritual upliftment has put a multi-faith devotional event on the weekend menu for Melbournians from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds.

Live music, inspiring readings and audio-visual presentations on spiritual themes are the essential ingredients of Soul Food, a Bahá'í-organised event held monthly at the State Library of Victoria.

Media recognition of the appeal of Soul Food came quickly. It soared to number 10 in the list of "20 things to do in Melbourne", published by The Age newspaper's "Good Weekend" magazine, and its popularity has continued.

Now in its fourth year, Soul Food is also held in Adelaide (where it began) and has even been exported to Canada and the United States.

Opportunities

Many people in the community are seeking opportunities to explore their spiritual development, said Monib Mahdavi who, with Nima Ferdowsi, started the event in Melbourne.

"It provides Melbournians with a place to unwind and reflect once a month," said Mr Mahdavi, who estimates the average attendance at between 120 and 140.

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

The program for the event held on 7 September is an example of a typical Soul Food program.

Playing live at the event was the winner of the inaugural jazz award as Australia's best keyboardist, Bob Sedergreen.

The theme of the morning was "Prison of Self" and the readings, complemented by a corresponding video or photograph projected on a screen, came from a wide range of sources: Confucius, Albert Einstein, Kahlil Gibran, James Joyce, Saint Teresa of Avila, Vincent Van Gogh and Oscar Wilde.

There were also inspiring spiritual readings taken from the words of an indigenous American elder, the Bahá'í Writings, the Hindu scriptures, Islam, the Bible, and Zen Buddhism.

Socialising with light refreshments completed the morning.

Participant

Asked to describe her experience of Soul Food, a regular participant, Monica Subai, who is not a member of the Bahá'í community, said the event was, as the title suggested, food for the soul and the heart.

"I feel blissful when sitting in the room, listening to the music and the quotations and watching the always appropriately selected pictures," she said.

"I am always amazed how carefully and lovingly the program is put together. It is very powerful with its message about world peace, humanity and everything else that is offered to the audience.

"The live music is really a treat. The musicians are such an integral part of the program—they enhance and blend into the readings."

Event dates, more details and programs for downloading can be found at www.soulfood.com.au.

Guitarist Anthony Field performs at a Soul Food event



Innovative centre hosts first meetings

The first general meeting of the Tasmanian Bahá'í community at the new Bahá'í Centre of Learning building in Hobart was held on 27 September 2008.

Some 150 people gathered in the main auditorium under the domed ceiling for prayers and to hear an address by a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia, Bijan Samali.

Professor Samali said the centre is intended not only for the Bahá'í community but also for benefit of the people of Tasmania.

On 1 October, Tourism Tasmania, the peak tourist body in Tasmania, became the first corporate group to meet at the centre.

Community groups, individuals, business, professional and corporate organisations are already making bookings.

Endowed to the Bahá'í community by the Naveed Foundation, the Centre is dedicated to the memory of Hobart Bahá'ís Soheila Mirkazemi and her son Naveed, who perished in a car accident in the city in 2000.

Tasmanian Bahá'í architect Stuart McKenzie Hall designed the building in collaboration with another local architect, Kelvin Dennis, and participated throughout the project as builder of the dome and supervising architect.

Sohale Aflatooni, an architect and developer who is now the manager of the Centre, also provided input to the design and was the overall project manager.

The four Naveed Foundation founders, Nick and Manizheh Martin, and Aram and Lailani Mirkazemi, played key roles in the general oversight of the project and the finalisation of the construction and preliminary landscaping.

The Centre has been designed to meet high standards of environmental sustainability

A uniquely designed and constructed dome covers the 300-seat auditorium of the Centre, part of a complex that includes multiple meeting rooms, a reading room, and the seat of the Bahá'í Council for Tasmania.

Secretary of the Bahá'í Council for Tasmania, John Davidson, said: "We hope the Centre will contribute to the spiritual, intellectual and social development of the people of Tasmania."

Bahá'í Centre of Learning buildings can also be found in Brisbane, Sydney, Adelaide and Perth.

The Tranquillity Room in the new Bahá'í Centre of Learning building in Hobart



'Unity vital for sustainable society': economist

Global sustainable development has ethical and moral dimensions, according to an Australian agricultural economist who attended the UN Commission on Sustainable Development in New York.

A sustainable global society can only be established on a foundation of genuine unity and understanding among the peoples of the world, said Dr Amir Abadi, a member of the Bahá'í International Community delegation to the Commission earlier this year.

"The task of sustainable development is not merely a technical one but an ethical and moral one," said Dr Abadi, an economist with the WA Department of Agriculture.

"Furthermore, development policy must reflect the fact that agriculture constitutes

the fundamental basis of economic and community life for a majority of the people around the world," he said.

Dr Abadi said the full emancipation and involvement of women is a prerequisite for sustainable rural development.

It is vital that education be designed to build the capabilities of rural people, he said.

Delegates from 192 governments as well as representatives from Non-Governmental Organisations addressed the Commission.

The UN Commission was established by the UN General Assembly in 1992 to ensure effective follow-up of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, also known as the Earth Summit.



Dr Amir Abadi

Award winner grateful for upbringing



Helen Vahdat (right) receives her award from Queensland Minister for Women, Margaret Keech

After Helen Vahdat accepted a Queensland Government award for her outstanding efforts in information and technology, she praised her parents for raising her to believe in the equality of women and men.

"As Bahá'ís we learn these social values at such a young age and go about our daily lives as if this is the norm," said Ms Vahdat, 27, a member of the Redlands Bahá'í community near Brisbane.

The Queensland University of Technology student received her prize at a ceremony on 2 September 2008 for winners of the annual Smart Women-Smart State Awards attended by the

Premier, Anna Bligh.

The awards recognise those who achieve results in non-traditional areas for women such as science, engineering and information communication technology.

Queensland Minister for Women, Margaret Keech, presented Ms Vahdat with the award, and the sponsor CorpTech presented Ms Vahdat with the accompanying cheque.

"Helen's success shows that in information and communication technology careers, any woman can succeed if they are passionate about what they do," Ms Keech said.

Ms Vahdat received her award for innovation and leadership in a project that involved a feasibility study and preliminary designs for a Web-based assessment portal which allows individuals to increase their income by having their skills measured in a fast, streamlined system.

She said that winning the award had encouraged her to keep pursuing her career, which will involve further developing the Web-based system.

"I think it is amazing our beautiful State and country recognise and value the role of women in predominantly male industries," she said.

"I would encourage any woman to give it a go and follow their dreams."

Education of girls key to eradication of poverty

Two school students were among those invited to speak at an Anti-Poverty Week event co-sponsored by the Australian Bahá'í Community in the Legislative Assembly building in Canberra on 16 October 2008.

The topic for Kali Druzca, 11, and Nyankkir Deng, 7, was the importance of the education of girls.

Expert speakers were invited to lead a panel discussion on the topic of gender disparity in education.

They included Dr Sharon Bessell, Senior Public Policy Lecturer at the Australian National University, Ali Gillies, Gender Coordinator for

AusAID, and Margaret O'Callaghan, formerly of the United Nations Population Fund.

The event was also sponsored by UNIFEM and AusAID.

Anti-Poverty Week is an extension of the observance of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty.

The purpose of the International Day, held annually on 17 October, is to acknowledge the struggle of people living in poverty, to allow the poor to make their concerns heard and to promote awareness of the need to eradicate poverty and destitution in all countries.



Tending the tree of harmony

A depiction of the Australian continent as a tree tended by Australians of all backgrounds won first prize in the visual section of this year's "Advancing Australia Fairly" competition.

The competition is co-organised by the Australian Bahá'í Community, the Alfred Dreyfus Unit of B'nai B'rith, and the Australian Law Students Association. It is supported by a wide range of community organisations committed to the ideal of harmony.

Ceremony

At a ceremony held in NSW Parliament House on 23 September, the NSW Minister for Citizenship, Virginia Judge, presented the prize to Damien Dry, an engineering student from the University of Tasmania, whose work addressed the competition theme, "Growing Together in Harmony: My Proposal."

Cameron Burns, an undergraduate student at Curtin University of Technology, won first prize in the essay section for his entry which called for change in the way Australians treat people from other cultures.

Mr Burns said he was inspired to enter the competition by his positive experience of working together with students of diverse backgrounds at university.

His experience was a contrast to the violence and prejudice towards minority groups reported in the media, he said.

NSW Shadow Minister for Citizenship, Gladys Berejiklian, presented Mr Burns with his prize.

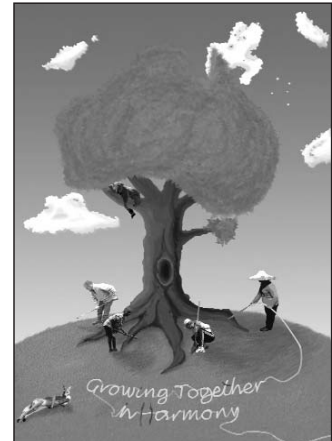
Both winners received a cheque for \$4000. Nine runners-up from NSW, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia each received a prize of \$1000.

Family Court Justice Peter Rose, one of the competition judges, said: "It is inspiring to find that there are students across the breadth of Australia who have idealism, hope for the future, and excellent proposals for a multicultural society which can join hands with goodwill".

Further information about the competition can be found on its Web site at www.movingforwardtogether.com.au



Damien Dry receives his certificate from New South Wales Minister for Citizenship, Virginia Judge



Damien Dry's winning entry

Bahá'ís join in multi-faith events for World Youth Day

Representatives of the Bahá'í Council for NSW and the Australian Capital Territory joined members of other religions in a multi-faith meeting in Sydney to mark the World Youth Day celebrations.

Martha Gouniai and Ariana Brdarevic offered prayers alongside representatives of the Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, Sikh and Zoroastrian faiths as well as pilgrims attending the Catholic World Youth Day.

Organised by the Community Relations Commission of the NSW Government, the event was held in MacLaurin Hall at the University of Sydney on 16 July 2008.

Commission chairman Stepan Kerkyasharian said participants joined "to unite as Australians with diverse religious beliefs yet having a deep understanding of the need for all creation to co-exist in peace and to live in harmony with each other".

Three days earlier, two Bahá'í representatives read from the Bahá'í sacred Writings at an

Interfaith Youth Pilgrimage held in Melbourne in the lead-up to World Youth Day.

The Bahá'í group, with participants from as far away as Geelong and Kilmore, carried a Bahá'í banner on a walk from the central city to Federation Square.

There they joined with Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Indigenous, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh youth for a peace ceremony, which was chaired by young Muslim and Hindu representatives.

The ceremony included prayers from different faiths and an address by a Catholic clergyman followed by followers of different religions reading an "intention to peace, unity, reconciliation".

Two Bahá'í readers, Amelia Ghofrany and Kylie Payman, read from the Bahá'í Writings for the "intention to unity" section.



Ariana Brdarevic (left) and Martha Gouniai offer a prayer at the multi-faith meeting in Sydney for World Youth Day



The Shrine of the Báb on Mount Carmel, Haifa, Israel, is set among formal gardens and terraces.

Photo: Bahá'í International Community

World Heritage listing celebrated

The recent selection of Bahá'í holy places in Israel as World Heritage sites recognises that they hold "outstanding universal value", a reception in Canberra heard on 22 September.

The Australian Bahá'í Community organised the reception to celebrate the inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List of the Shrines that mark the graves of the Founders of the Bahá'í Faith.

Among those attending the reception were diplomats, government officials, NGO members, faith representatives, the media, and members of the Bahá'í community.

The decision by the World Heritage committee this year means that the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh near Acre and the Shrine of the Báb in Haifa join a list of 878 sites such as the Vatican and the old city of Jerusalem, the Great Wall of China, the Pyramids, and the Great Barrier Reef.

Dr Greg Terrill, who headed the Australian delegation to the committee meeting that

decided to list the Bahá'í sites, said the decision recognised that the Bahá'í Holy Places in Israel not only have significance for the Bahá'í Community but hold "outstanding universal value".

Beautiful setting

The Minister-Counsellor of the Embassy of Israel, Mr Eliahu Yerushalmi, then spoke of his personal appreciation for the Bahá'í holy places, and particularly the beautiful setting of the Shrine of the Báb and terraced gardens on Mount Carmel in Haifa.

Mr Yerushalmi urged Australians to come to Israel to see the holy places now listed as World Heritage sites.

An audio-visual presentation on the Bahá'í Holy Places, prepared by Naysan Naraqí and Farida Ciotti Naraqí, depicted the beauty of the buildings and gardens. Violinist Courtney Pelkowitz performed at the reception.

Library honours memory of top professional

A library was established on 20 September 2008 to honor the memory of prominent chiropractor and stalwart Bahá'í Mary Ann Chance.

On the same day as a memorial service was held for Dr Chance, members of the Wagga Bahá'í community opened the library, which contains the extensive collection of Dr Chance and other members of her family.

A leading member of the chiropractic profession in Australia, Dr Chance, 70, passed away suddenly on 12 June 2008.

Peace worker

Dr Chance was a long time worker for world peace. In a speech to a Rotary Club just before her death, she said that as a small child she had vowed to work for world peace and understanding, and it had remained her passion for more than 60 years.

"I truly believe that if good people everywhere earnestly strive to build the foundations of understanding, good will and a cooperative spirit amongst their fellows ... world peace is not only possible, but inevitable," she said.

Funeral

Among the 200 mourners at her funeral were leaders of the chiropractic profession, including Dennis Richards, national president of the Australian Chiropractors' Association.

In an obituary published on the front page of "The Australian Chiropractor", Dr Richards said Dr Chance advanced the profession in Australia with "energy, intelligence and charm".

For her "multi-faceted" service, which included terms as federal executive secretary of the Australian Chiropractors' Association and as editor of its journal, Dr Chance was recognised at home and abroad, Dr Richards said.

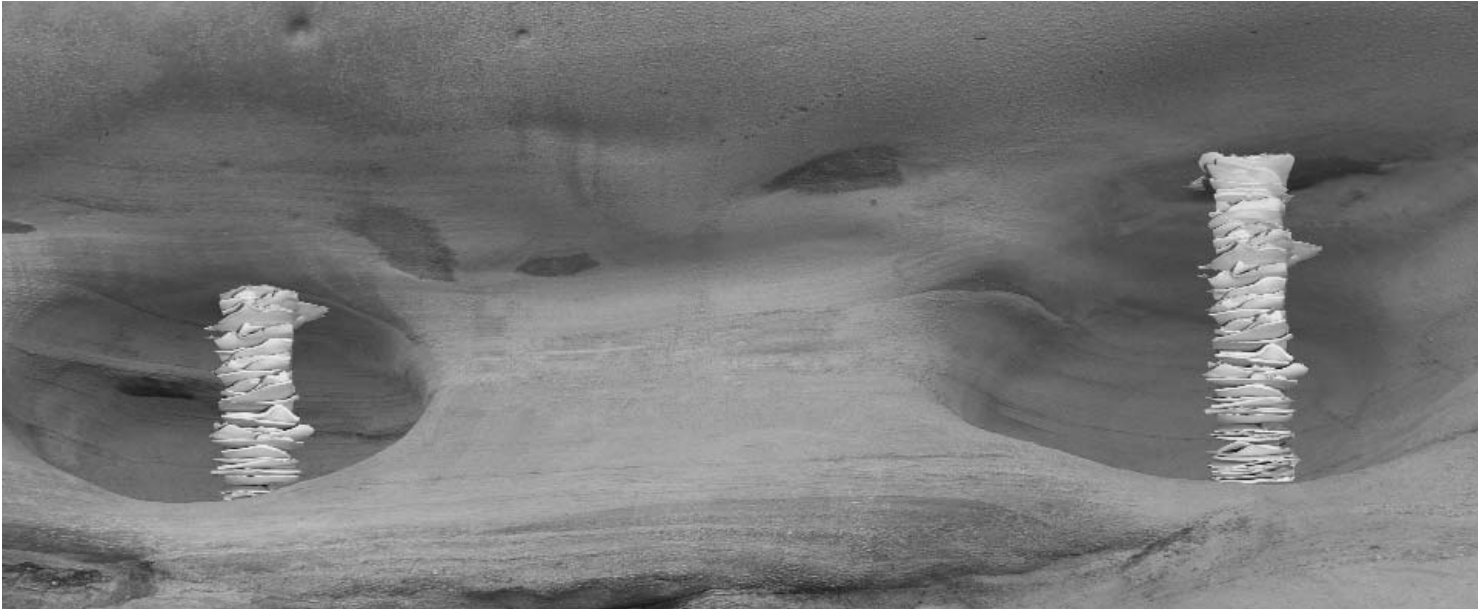
In an article headlined "Community grieves loss" in Wagga Wagga's newspaper "The Daily Advertiser", Dr Chance was described as a "well-respected member of the Wagga community".

Dr Chance is survived by her husband Dr Rolf Peters, three of her four children, three step-children and five grandchildren.



Dr Mary Ann Chance

Sculptor depicts strata of belief



Inspired by the Bahá'í belief that spiritual truths are revealed over time, sculptor Kath Podger created a work for the "Sculpture by the Sea" exhibition being held in Sydney from 16 October-2 November 2008.

Ms Podger's work was among 100 selected sculptures from 14 countries on display in the exhibition, which is staged along the two kilometre Bondi to Tamarama coastal walk in Sydney.

Viewers of Ms Podger's work first come across Revelation II-Transformation and Revelation II-Evolution (50cm and 60cm tall respectively), nestling in hollows in a sandstone cliff.

She describes these works as symbolising the awaiting of further revelation.

Further on in the walk, they encounter Revelation II-Strata, a two-metre tall work which is fully visible against a wind-eroded cliff face.

The works are created from a stack of hand-rolled, individual porcelain slivers which are threaded one upon another on a central rod that is not visible, forming a strata or spine.

Bedrock of inspiration

Describing the inspiration for her work, Ms Podger says that the bedrock underlying human civilisation is comprised of the cycles of religion that have been revealed over the ages.

"As time passes, religion's golden veins are made known, like the new layers of rock exposed after thousands of years," Ms Podger says.

"The age and appearance of rock differ yet essentially it is born of the same matter, part of one cycle, shaped by the forces of the environment," she says.

"Similarly humanity is in a continual state of evolution towards its Creator. As spiritual truths are progressively revealed, they breathe new life into civilisation.

"Slivers of strata document this spiritual evolution."

Artist and teacher

Kath Podger, who has worked as a visual arts secondary teacher in NSW, directed the Bahá'í Children's Arts Festival in Australia for seven years, focusing on developing character through creativity.

Ms Podger has also worked as an artist on community arts projects with children, youth and adults in Australia, the Pacific, Canada and Europe.

In 1992-93, she toured as stage manager and designer of Wildfire World Theatre throughout Europe.

Ms Podger is a member of the elected national governing body of the Bahá'í Faith in Australia, the National Spiritual Assembly.

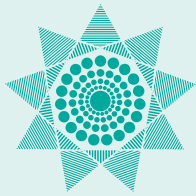
*Kath Podger's sculptures
Revelation II-Transformation
and Revelation II-Evolution*

Below: detail



Kath Podger in her studio





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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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INTERNATIONAL NEWS

University ban part of pervasive persecution

Bahá'í students in Iran have again been prevented from enrolling in universities at the start of the new academic year, said a spokesperson for the Australian Bahá'í Community, Tessa Scrine.

"The Iranian authorities continue to use devious methods to prevent young Bahá'ís from obtaining a university education, despite the Government's obligations under international human rights law," Ms Scrine said.

"The main method used to stop Bahá'ís from enrolling is blocking their examination results and declaring their files incomplete," she said.

Without complete files, enrolment in all public and most private universities in Iran is impossible, and the few Bahá'ís who are enrolled in universities are expelled when their religious beliefs become known, she said.

"We are grateful to the Australian university organisations and individual academics who have spoken up in defence of the right of all to access education, irrespective of their religion, and to the Australian Government for its support," she said.

"We urge other organisations and individuals who care about the right to education to join them."

Attacks

Attacks on the 300,000-strong Bahá'í community in Iran are pervasive and accelerating.

On 19 September, at a large enclosed outdoor area in Tehran set up for the Friday Islamic noontime prayer, an anti-Bahá'í petition was on prominent display for worshippers to sign.

The day was the third Friday of Ramadan, when huge crowds gather because it is one of the few times during the year that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei leads prayers and delivers a sermon.

Officials from the Ministry of Intelligence were on the spot to make sure that people signed the petition on their way in to prayers.

It has been announced that the same petition will be offered for signing in other cities.

Other examples of recent attacks on Bahá'ís include:

- Interrogations with high-intensity lights and physical mistreatment
- Searches of homes and businesses and confiscation of Bahá'í scripture
- Expulsions and harassment of school children
- Monitoring of bank accounts, travel, and activities
- Denial or confiscation of business licenses
- Physical assaults, and efforts to drive Bahá'ís out of towns and villages
- Desecration and destruction of Bahá'í cemeteries
- Incitement of hatred against Bahá'ís in official news media
- Evictions of Bahá'í doctors from their clinics
- Intimidation of Muslims who associate with Bahá'ís
- Attempts by authorities to compel Bahá'ís to spy on other Bahá'ís
- Threatening phone calls and letters

Imprisoned

Meanwhile all seven members of the Bahá'í national coordinating committee remain in Evin Prison in Tehran.

Their families were able to pay them a brief visit recently for the first time since their arrests but they have had no access to lawyers and no formal charges have been laid.

Those in jail are: Mrs Fariba Kamalabadi, Mr Jamaloddin Khanjani, Mr Afif Naeimi, Mr Saeid Rezaie, Mr Behrouz Tavakkoli, Mr Vahid Tizfahm, and Mrs Mahvash Sabet. The first six have been jailed since May, and Mrs Sabet since March 2008.

At least 22 Bahá'ís are currently imprisoned in Iran because of their religion.



The seven Bahá'í leaders imprisoned in Iran
Standing: Fariba Kamalabadi, Vahid Tizfahm, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, and Mahvash Sabet.
Seated: Behrouz Tavakkoli and Saeid Rezaie