

AUSTRALIAN Baha'i Report

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A newsletter of the Australian Bahá'í community

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Australia's biggest ever Bahá'í conference

The biggest Bahá'í conference ever held in Australia took place on 24-25 January 2009 when 5500 Bahá'ís gathered at the Sydney Convention Centre at Darling Harbour.

Two days were set aside for Australian Bahá'ís to "celebrate, deliberate and plan".

The conference was one of 41 being held around the world from last October to March this year in response to a call by the Universal House of Justice, the Faith's international governing body based in Haifa, Israel.

It was the biggest Bahá'í conference ever held in the Southern Hemisphere.

A bouquet of red roses on the stage throughout the conference was a reminder of the courage and sufferings of the persecuted Bahá'ís in Iran, many of whom have relatives in Australia.

Call to action

Standing ovations greeted the representatives of the Universal House of Justice, Mrs Zenaída Ramirez and Mr Stephen Hall.

Mrs Ramirez called for renewed action in providing activities for the benefit of the general public as well as for the Bahá'ís.

"Friends, we are living in unprecedented times and this requires an unprecedented level of response to the call to get involved," Mrs Ramirez said.

Mr Hall said participation in training institute courses empowers Bahá'ís to fulfil their potential as servants of humanity.

"Those involved are engaged in a vision of social action and are being empowered to perform sacred acts," Mr Hall said.

There were short presentations by Bahá'ís who had been asked to speak about their experiences in their home communities.

One man said that holding Bahá'í children's classes in a park in inner-city Sydney had helped create a sense of community in the neighbourhood.

"We all live in neighbourhoods, we can all



Stephen Hall addresses the conference

contribute to the quest for spiritual and social progress there," he said.

A young woman from Western Sydney described how effective training releases energy and action.

"Building a new civilisation happens at the level of the neighbourhood," she said.

A cultural program on Saturday evening included indigenous dance and music as well as humour and music from the Pacific, skits, children's presentations and community singing.

The two-day conference was followed on 26 January by a youth day, with 1300 Bahá'ís between the ages of 15 and 30 attending.



Zenaída Ramirez speaks at the opening session

75th anniversary of National Assembly



Members of the first National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia and New Zealand in 1934

The Australian Bahá'í community will be celebrating a major anniversary in 2009.

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia, the Faith's national governing body, will mark its 75th anniversary at the Bahá'í national convention to be held in Sydney from 24-26 April 2009.

A public devotional service and open day will also be held at the Bahá'í House of Worship in Mona Vale, Sydney, on Sunday 26 April to celebrate the anniversary.

The anniversary celebrations will include a special program at the Sydney Bahá'í Centre on the evening of 25 April, where Dr Peter Khan will give the keynote address.

A former member of the National Spiritual Assembly, Dr Khan has served as a member of the Faith's international governing body, the Universal House of Justice, since 1987.

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia and New Zealand was first elected in 1934.

In 1957, the New Zealand Bahá'í community had gained enough members to enable it to form a separate National Assembly.

There were five women among the nine members of the first National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia and New Zealand, reflecting a level of gender equality unusual among religious institutions of the time.

Among the members was John Henry Hyde Dunn who, together with his wife Clara, first brought the Bahá'í Faith to Australia in 1920.

Oswald Whitaker, the first Australian to become a Bahá'í, was also a member of the first National Spiritual Assembly.

The current National Spiritual Assembly, which was elected at the Bahá'í national convention in April 2008, also comprises five women and four men.

Further information about the 75th anniversary celebrations will be available on the national Bahá'í Web site, www.bahai.org.au

Education of girls emphasised by pupils

L to R: Tessa Scrine, Sharon Bessell, Kali Druzca, Nyankiir Deng, Stephen Passingham



Two school pupils spoke to an audience of 100 people at an Anti-Poverty Week event at the ACT Legislative Assembly building in Canberra.

Kali Druzca, 11, and Nyankiir Deng, 7, spoke about the importance of the education of girls. Their audience included government officials, academics, staff from non-governmental organisations and the public.

The purpose of the event was to bring attention to the value of educating girls in the context of

poverty eradication on a global scale, said Bahá'í representative Maryam Bell, who was one of the organisers of the event.

"We felt strongly about the inclusion of the girls as presenters because we believed them to be good advocates in their own right," Ms Bell said.

Two expert speakers also led a discussion on the topic of gender disparity in education.

They were Dr Sharon Bessell, Senior Public Policy Lecturer at the Australian National University, and Mr Stephen Passingham, Principal Education Advisor at AusAID.

The event, held on 16 October 2008, was chaired by Tessa Scrine, Executive Officer-Government Relations for the Australian Bahá'í Community.

"Educating girls yields a higher rate of return than any other investment that can be made in the developing world," Ms Scrine said.

The event was co-sponsored by the Australian Bahá'í Community, UNIFEM and AusAID.

Bahá'ís recognized on Australia Day

Two members of the Australian Bahá'í Community received awards for community service on Australia Day, 26 January 2009.

A Queensland Bahá'í, Farvardin Daliri, who was once imprisoned for his faith in Iran, received the Order of Australia Medal.

A Bahá'í in Victoria, Florence Gibbs, was named "Kingston Citizen of the Year" by the Kingston City Council.

Farvardin Daliri

Dr Farvardin Daliri, who settled in Australia in 1984, received the Order of Australia Medal "for service to the community of North Queensland".

It was not the first time that Dr Daliri's service to the indigenous and multicultural communities has been recognised.

In 2003 he received the Australia Day award for promoting multiculturalism and reconciliation and also the Centenary of Federation Medal for serving the community.

Dr Daliri is the Director of the Townsville Intercultural Centre, a migrant resource organisation. Born in Iran, he was subject to religious persecution and was imprisoned for his faith in Tehran.

Since 1995, he has been the organiser and promoter of Townsville's 'Cultural Fest', the biggest annual festival in North Queensland. It celebrates Australia's unity in diversity.

Last year he convened an international "Unity in Diversity" conference in Townsville.

A prolific artist, Dr Daliri's sculptures -- often created in cooperation with Aboriginal communities -- are displayed in many locations throughout Queensland.

Florence Gibbs

Mrs Gibbs was honoured for her work in psychology, counselling, human rights and guiding.

She established the counselling service at Central Bayside Community Health Centre, working there as a volunteer up to four days a week. Mrs Gibbs also assisted with a program for those bereaved through suicide.

Mrs Gibbs helped establish a program for women who were victims of domestic violence and abuse, and was involved in the Southern Region Domestic Violence Network. She worked as a volunteer and also served on the management committee of a Women's Refuge.

Mrs Gibbs also worked with a no-fee counselling service for the Anglican Church in Mentone, where she served as a volunteer psychologist for eight years.

She has served as a Girl Guide Commissioner and President of the Probus Club, and was the founder and driving force behind Kingston for Human Rights.

Speaking at the award ceremony, Kingston Mayor Arthur Athanasopoulos said: "Her dedication to helping other people is a shining example to us all".



Farvardin Daliri (centre) with performers at the 2008 Cultural Fest



Florence Gibbs (right) with Carolyn Milton, a fellow member of the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Kingston

Religions come together in Darwin

Leaders and members of five different religious communities joined together at a multi-faith service held in Darwin on 18 January 2009 to celebrate World Religion Day.

Hosted by the Bahá'í Community of the Top End and held at the Casuarina Baptist Church, the service has become an annual event on the interfaith calendar in the Northern Territory.

Larrakia Elder Dorothy Fox gave a Welcome to Country.

Speakers at the service included Dr Andre Wattiaux (Bahá'í Council for the Northern Territory), Mr Sumesh Dhir (Hindu Society of

the Northern Territory), Rev. Neil Forgie (Anglican Diocese of the Northern Territory), Mr Adama Konda (Muslim Imam of Darwin), and Rev. Steve Orme (Northern Synod of the Uniting Church).

Senator Trish Crossin also spoke at the service.

One of the organisers of the event, local Bahá'í Ron Mitchell, said that its purpose was to strengthen community harmony.

"The religions have a lot more in common than what is perceived as different," he said.

The African Gospel Singers entertained the audience.

Human rights specialists attend celebrations



L to R: Angela Chaney, Melissa Parke, Neville Collard, Fred Chaney AO and Audrey Aumua at the Human Rights Day gathering in Perth

Bahá'ís throughout Australia celebrated the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by organising events attended by prominent human rights specialists.

Perth

Social justice campaigner Fred Chaney AO was the keynote speaker at a well-attended gathering held at the Bahá'í Centre of Learning in Perth on 10 December 2008.

A former Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, Mr Chaney is currently a board member of Reconciliation Australia.

The theme of the evening was the ongoing relevance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the need for vigilance to ensure its provisions were implemented.

Spokesperson for the Bahá'í Council for WA, Wendy Wisniewski, said the aim of the event was to raise awareness of the Declaration and its ongoing relevance to people around the world.

"Bahá'ís have long played an active role in promoting the Declaration and made submissions at the time of its drafting in 1947," Mrs Wisniewski said.

Sydney

Several hundred people marked the anniversary with a service in the Bahá'í House of Worship in Sydney on 7 December 2008.

Before the service, guest speaker Conrad

Gershevitch spoke about the significance of the Declaration, with particular reference to the right to freedom of religion and belief.

Since 2001, the role of religion has been increasingly apparent at the centre of global issues, said Mr Gershevitch, director of the education and partnerships section of the Race Discrimination Unit at the Australian Human Rights Commission.

Noting the deep moral conflict in balancing the right to security with individual rights, Mr Gershevitch called for pursuit of "civil paths to peace".

Human rights lawyer and author Jacquie Everitt was the keynote speaker at a celebration of the anniversary hosted by the Bahá'í community of Parramatta.

Ms Everitt is the author of *The Bitter Shore*, an account of a refugee family's struggle to gain Australian residency.

She spoke of recent events in Australia and overseas that showed how easily rights and freedoms can be abused.

"The Universal Declaration of Human Rights might be described as aspirational, but it is possible that with our help it may one day become reality for all the people of the world," she said.

The Sydney Universal Musical Society Choir and local cultural groups provided entertainment at the function, which was held at Parramatta Town Hall on 10 December.

Canberra

At the Bahá'í Centre in Canberra on 4 December 2008, the Australian Bahá'í Community hosted a lunch and roundtable to celebrate the anniversary.

One of the keynote speakers was Richard Towle, the official representative of the UN Secretary-General in Australia and the South Pacific and the regional representative of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

"Honouring human rights can provide predictability, order and peace in the way humans relate to each other," Mr Towle said.

Among the other speakers was Professor James Anaya, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental



Conrad Gershevitch (right) with Bahá'í National Secretary, John Walker, in the grounds of the Bahá'í House of Worship

The Sydney University Musical Society Choir performs at Parramatta Town Hall



freedoms of indigenous people.

The guests included 30 participants in the Diplomacy Training Program's annual human rights and people's diplomacy training for human rights defenders. They came from 29 countries in the Asia-Pacific region and indigenous Australia.

On 7 December, the Bahá'í Community of the ACT hosted a second event at the Bahá'í Centre to mark the anniversary. The keynote speakers were the president of Australian Lawyers for Human Rights, Susan Harris Rimmer, and, from the local Bahá'í community, lawyer Michael Curtotti.

Dr Harris Rimmer said that human rights workers are "torn between hope for the future of the discipline, and despair at the fragility of what has been built over the last 60 years."

Support for regional human rights mechanism

The Australian Bahá'í Community has expressed support for a regional inter-governmental human rights mechanism for the Asia-Pacific.

"As a matter of principle, we support mechanisms which assist states to cooperate with each other, to transcend considerations of national sovereignty and to focus on the needs of humanity as a whole," the Australian Bahá'í Community said.

The Community expressed its views in a submission to the inquiry into international and regional human rights mechanisms being conducted by the Human Rights Subcommittee of the federal Parliament.

Any regional human rights mechanism should uphold the universal human rights standards and framework established by the United Nations, the Australian Bahá'í Community said.

Women

"It is essential that awareness of the human rights of women forms an integral part of any effort to address human rights in the Asia-Pacific region," the Australian Bahá'í Community said.

"The next 60 years will be about embedding human rights into strong domestic institutions and into the machinery of governance and decision-making at all levels," she said.

Brisbane

On 10 December, more than 100 people attended a celebration of the anniversary at the Brisbane Bahá'í Centre of Learning.

The event included a quiz on the Declaration followed by an address about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

A birthday cake was cut to mark the occasion.

Bahá'ís in other parts of Australia and around the world also hosted events to mark the anniversary.



L to R: Jane Boardman, Susan Harris Rimmer and Michael Curtotti at the ACT Bahá'í Centre

Women are disproportionately represented among the poor in the Asia-Pacific, their rights are systematically violated, and the systems which have traditionally oppressed them remain largely intact, the Community said.

"This injustice undermines the success of all other efforts in human rights and development."

The right to freedom of religion and belief should also receive special attention, particularly given the great religious diversity of the region, it said.

Systematic programs of human rights education are also indispensable to the realisation of human rights in the Asia-Pacific region, it said.

"All citizens need not only to learn about their own rights but to develop respect for the rights of humanity in general."

The Australian Bahá'í Community also called for an increase in the resources allocated to the promotion and protection of human rights at the international level.

"Without sufficient resources the work of United Nations human rights mechanisms will continue to be hampered," it said.



Dancers perform the "Racism Dance" for the Human Rights Day celebration at the Bahá'í Centre in Canberra

Parliament Speaker addresses banquet

Over 130 guests attended a banquet held by the Bahá'í community of Whittlesea, Melbourne, to celebrate the Birthday of Bahá'u'lláh.

One of the highlights was a speech by the Hon. Harry Jenkins MP which endorsed principles of the Bahá'í Faith including the equality of women and men, the need to eradicate prejudice, and the oneness of humanity.

Mr Jenkins, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, also expressed concern at the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran.

Community leaders and members of a wide variety of religious, community and ethnic organisations attended the function, which was held in November 2008.



The Hon. Harry Jenkins MP (6th from left) with guests at the Whittlesea function

'Global institutions vital to tackle crisis': leading commentator

Effective and credible global institutions are needed to tackle the global financial crisis, a leading Australian commentator told a seminar at the University of South Australia that focused on solutions to the world financial crisis.

Professor Fariborz Moshirian was speaking at a public seminar organised by the Bahá'í Council for South Australia.

Professor Moshirian said the crisis has its root causes in issues more fundamental than simply sub-prime credit problems.

"Globalisation has created a highly interdependent global economy but most global financial issues are dealt with by national regulators and institutions," said Professor Moshirian, who holds the chair of International Finance in the Australian School of Business at the University of New South Wales.

Implications

"National regulators are not focused mainly on the global implications of their operations," Professor Moshirian said.

"There have been significant oversights on the part of both national regulators and national authorities who have acted based mainly on

national interests without considering the global implications of their actions or lack of action," he said.

"At the same time, the behaviour of financial traders and other players have contributed to the current global crisis.

"The lack of high individual standards and social values has contributed to a myopic and self-centred approach to the market and its forces."

Coordination

An editor of the *Journal of Banking and Finance*, a leading international finance journal, Professor Moshirian said a global approach and framework to tackle the crisis does not mean more regulation but rather better global and national coordination.

"For instance, when the 15 European countries accepted the adoption of a single European currency, there were fewer national regulations and intervention within those countries - the European Central Bank took over this responsibility.

"The overall outcome was less regulation, better coordination and more efficiency in the financial markets within these countries."



Fariborz Moshirian

Early Bahá'í lived with 'dignity and grace'

Ron Cover occupied a special place in the history of the Bahá'í Faith in Australia because he embraced the religion after meeting the couple who introduced it to this country.

Mr Cover, who died in Melbourne aged 92 on 15 December 2008, first heard of the Bahá'í Faith from the late John Henry Hyde Dunn and Clara Dunn, respected figures within the Australian and world Bahá'í community.

The Dunns had travelled from the United States to Australia in 1920 for the purpose of spreading the word about the new religion.

Mr Cover's father, William, gave Mr Dunn a job as a travelling salesman, and that provided the newcomer with the opportunity to spend his free time holding introductory meetings about the Faith in different parts of the country.

Among those who attended and then declared themselves believers were mother and son, Irene and Ron Cover.

According to a eulogy delivered at his funeral by Helen Perkins, Mr Cover spent many hours reading and studying the Bahá'í Writings.

"This study and reflection were to become the foundation of his everyday life and he lived it with quiet dignity and grace," Mrs Perkins said.

His Bahá'í prayer book was precious to him and a vital part of his life, she said.

Celebrations continue despite tidal wave

A member of the Australian Bahá'í community was a keynote speaker at an historic Bahá'í event in Papua New Guinea.

Rodney Hancock of the Redlands Bahá'í community in Queensland spoke at the 50th anniversary celebrations of the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Madina in New Ireland, Papua New Guinea.

With an Australian Bahá'í, the late Violet Hoehnke, Mr Hancock introduced the Bahá'í Faith to Papua New Guinea in 1954. He was present at the formation of the Local Spiritual Assembly of Madina in 1958.

In his address, Mr Hancock spoke about some of the historic events and accomplishments associated with the local Bahá'í community.

Mrs Perkins said Mr Cover was a man of great courage.

"I say this because to take up this newly emerging faith back in 1941, when anything that was not mainstream religion would have been frowned upon, was a step of courage indeed," she said.

Ron's moral fibre was legendary, she said.

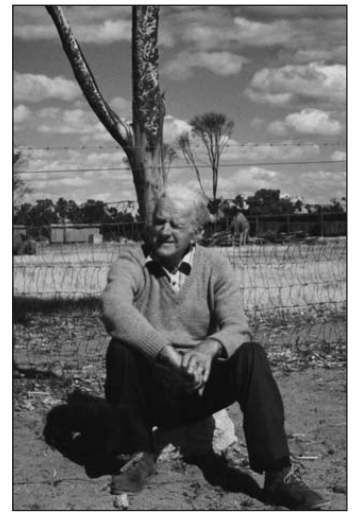
"He never spoke negatively about anyone else and was a river of encouragement to all of us. He was a great listener, always patient, caring, loving and dignified."

Mr Cover served for many years as a member and chairperson of the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Camberwell.

A cricket umpire and keen fan of the game, he could recall first-hand the precise details of the batting accomplishments of the Australian legend, Don Bradman.

Mr Cover, who worked as a teacher and in sales, was an active outdoorsman, gardener and environmentalist. He was an active member of Men of the Trees, and planted thousands of trees in Victoria.

Mr Cover is survived by four children, six grandchildren and five great grandchildren.



Ron Cover



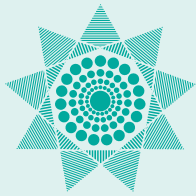
Rodney Hancock (left) with Bahá'ís of Madina in Papua New Guinea

Just days before the 50th anniversary celebrations on 17 December 2008, a tidal wave swept through the village of Madina.

Although homes were destroyed in the village and elsewhere in New Ireland Province, the Local Spiritual Assembly decided the anniversary event should be held on the date scheduled. It went ahead according to plan.

Two days after the anniversary celebrations, the Prime Minister, Sir Michael Somare, visited the Bahá'í Centre during an inspection tour of the damage caused by the tidal waves.

There are now more than 250 Local Spiritual Assemblies in Papua New Guinea.



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INTERNATIONAL NEWS

Arrests accelerate in Iran

The Australian Bahá'í Community is gravely concerned at the escalation of arrests and detentions of Bahá'ís in Iran in recent months.

"As of late January 2009, at least 40 Bahá'ís were in custody in various cities and towns in Iran, solely because of their religion," said Australian Bahá'í Community spokesperson, Tessa Scrine.

"Many other Bahá'ís have been detained but released after posting substantial bail or collateral for bail," Ms Scrine said.

"This is religious persecution of the most ominous kind," she said.

Six of the recent arrests occurred in Tehran on 14 January 2009 following early-morning raids on the homes of 12 Bahá'í families. One person was released after a few hours, but the other five were taken into custody.

One of the arrested is Jinous Sobhani, who worked in a human rights organisation, founded by Nobel Prize winner Shirin Ebadi, that was shut by Iranian authorities in December 2008.

The seven members of a national Bahá'í coordinating committee are still locked up in Tehran's Evin Prison, where they have been incarcerated since dawn raids conducted in May 2008. All five men are being held in one cell with no beds for sleeping.

No announcement has been made of formal charges or a possible trial, and they have been denied access to their lawyers.

International condemnation

"The recent arrests follow the strong condemnation by the UN General Assembly of the persecution of the Bahá'ís and other human rights violations in Iran," Ms Scrine said.

Australia was one of more than 40 countries that co-sponsored the General Assembly resolution on 19 December 2008 which condemned "increasing discrimination" by Iran against Bahá'ís, Christians, Jews, Sufis, Sunni Muslims, and other minorities, its use of torture, the high incidence of executions, and the "violent repression" of women.

Several of the Bahá'ís now in prison in Iran have close relatives in the Australian Bahá'í community.



The seven Bahá'í leaders still imprisoned in Iran

Destruction of cemeteries

The destruction of Bahá'í cemeteries and desecration of graves has also continued in recent months.

Bahá'í graves were destroyed by government agents in Khavaran cemetery in Tehran in January 2009.

At least 15 Bahá'ís were known to be buried in a section of the cemetery called by the authorities the "graveyard of the infidels." They included eight members of the national Bahá'í governing body, who were killed on 27 December 1981.

Human rights groups inside and outside Iran have registered protests at the destruction of the cemetery, which was used for the mass burial of hundreds killed in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution.

The Bahá'í cemetery of Ghaemshahr in Mazandaran province was also attacked in January, for the fourth time in eight months. This time it was virtually destroyed.

The Bahá'í cemetery in Darzikola, Mazandaran province, was also completely destroyed by a bulldozer and front-end loaders in October and November 2008.



Graves destroyed in the Bahá'í cemetery in Darzikola, Mazandaran province, Iran