

# AUSTRALIAN Bahá'í Report

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A newsletter  
of the  
Australian  
Bahá'í  
community

## INSIDE

Slavery in Australia  
**3**



Brisbane youth  
**7**



Service for  
disaster victims  
**7**



## International Bahá'ís to address Parliament

Bahá'ís in Australia and overseas are preparing to participate in the Parliament of the World's Religions to be held in Melbourne from 3-9 December 2009.

Held every five years in a different city, the Parliament is the world's biggest inter-faith event. Up to 8000 people are expected to attend this year's Parliament, which is being held in Australia for the first time.

Among the prominent speakers at the Parliament will be Lucretia "Lally" Warren, the chairperson of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Botswana.

A former member of the Bahá'í Continental Board of Counsellors for Africa, Mrs Warren has a particular interest in women's issues. She was a Bahá'í representative at the previous two Parliaments, held in Cape Town in 1999 and Barcelona in 2004. At the Barcelona Parliament she chaired a session on "Strategies for Mainstreaming Gender into Peace Building and Inter-Faith Programs."

### Spectacular

Native American Bahá'í Kevin Locke will present a spectacular session titled "There are no back row seats in the Hoop of Life". Mr Locke is described



Lucretia Warren

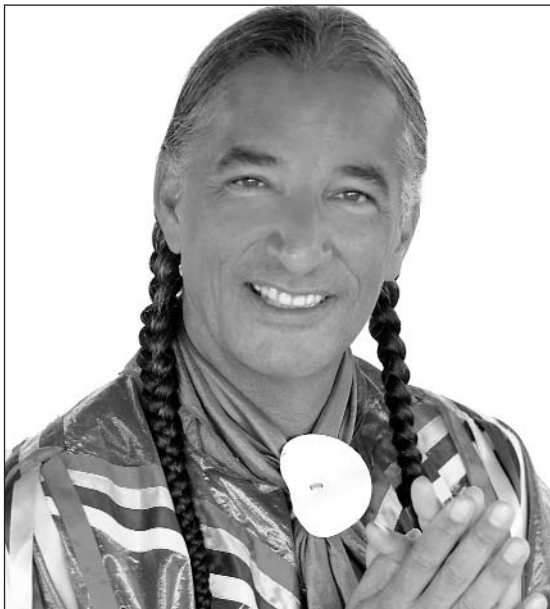
as the world's leading performer of the complex and acrobatic Lakota Hoop Dance. He is also a traditional storyteller, cultural ambassador and educator.

International human rights law specialist and Bahá'í Brian Lepard will also travel to Australia to speak at the Parliament.

Professor Lepard, who teaches law at the University of Nebraska, will examine from a Bahá'í perspective the concept of a human right to development.

Bahá'í authors Moojan and Wendi Momen, who are based in the United Kingdom, will present a panel discussion on "Building Peace in the Pursuit of Justice: A Bahá'í Approach." Philip Obah, a Wadja man from central Queensland, will join the panel. Mr Obah is a former member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia.

Prominent among the Australian Bahá'í speakers will be Arini Beaumaris, the national secretary of the Australian Bahá'í Community. Ms Beaumaris has been invited to speak at the Parliament in the light of her pioneering role as a female leader in the field of education, as well as her leadership role in the Australian Bahá'í Community.



Kevin Locke

Brisbane Bahá'ís Shadi and Shidan Tolou-Wallace will perform in the Sacred Music Concert to be held at the Parliament on Sunday evening 6 December. The concert will showcase the beauty of the world's sacred music and movement. The performers will be musicians and dancers from many religious and spiritual traditions.

Western Australian Bahá'í Marjorie Tidman and her family will use various art forms including music, story-telling and visual arts to explore *The Seven Valleys*, a mystical Bahá'í text that describes the journey of the soul through seven stages.

John Davidson, secretary of the Bahá'í Council for Tasmania, will speak about the recently-opened Bahá'í Centre of Learning in Hobart. His presentation will focus on the Centre's environmentally-friendly design and the educational programs held there.

Stuart Hall, the principal architect of the

Tasmanian Centre of Learning, will join Melbourne Bahá'í Amy Kean in running a workshop for youth on climate change following the youth session titled "Mother Nature doesn't do bailouts".

National Bahá'í public information officer Natalie Mobini-Kesheh will present a session on the continuing persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran. Sydney Bahá'í Narcis Jafari will be a member of an international panel calling for the full engagement of women in local inter-faith and institutional work.

### Tranquil environment

The Victorian Bahá'í Community will host a spiritual observance open to all participants at the Parliament, providing a tranquil environment featuring live music, audio-visual pieces and readings from the Bahá'í Writings and other sacred texts.

The Bahá'í community of Victoria will also welcome visiting Parliamentary participants at its "Communities Night" event to be held on the evening of Friday 4 December at the Melbourne Recital Centre. Celebrating the oneness of humanity through arts, music, drama and dance, it will display the talents of national and international Bahá'í performers.

For information about the Parliament, visit [www.parliamentofreligions.org](http://www.parliamentofreligions.org).



## Bahá'ís participate in Sydney inter-faith event

In the lead-up to the Parliament of the World's Religions, members of the Australian Bahá'í community participated in an inter-faith event in Sydney where the main focus was on the environment, indigenous Australia and youth.

Held at Old Government House in Parramatta and attended by the Premier of New South Wales, Nathan Rees, the day-long gathering had the theme of "Hearing Each Other, Healing the Earth".

As well as Bahá'ís, participants included Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs and Zoroastrians. The gathering was an official pre-Parliament event.

A Bahá'í, Vincent Takizadeh, 25, was a member of a panel of young people from seven religions who discussed social cohesion and the search for inner peace. The discussion was chaired by

Radio National personality Rachael Kohn.

The program began with an inter-faith forum chaired by Radio National's Steven Crittenden on "Fasting and Feasting: Food, Faith and the Environment".

A noon-time concert featured performers from Sydney's diverse communities including didgeridoo star Turtle Tamwoy, the Gazi Husref Beg Bosnian choir, opera singer Helena Sindelar, Israeli singer Dahlia Dior, an African Gospel a capella group, and Sikh musicians.

Keynote speakers in the afternoon were Rev Dirk Ficca, the executive director of the Parliament of the World's Religions, and Indigenous Person of the Year, Professor Larissa Behrendt.

Two Bahá'ís from Parramatta add their signatures to a flag of the Parliament of the World's Religions at the Sydney pre-Parliament event



## 'Slavery active in Australia': legal expert

Australia has become a destination for people traffickers who are the modern-day version of slave traders, according to Pam Stewart, a senior law lecturer from the University of Technology, Sydney.

Ms Stewart is a member of the Anti-Slavery Project, which was established at the university in 2003. The project provides direct assistance to victims of enslavement and human trafficking as well as advocating for legal and policy reform.

People trafficking is a human rights issue, said Ms Stewart, who was speaking at a reception at the Bahá'í National Centre on 20 September 2009 to mark the International Day of Peace.

"This is about human rights abuses happening in Australia today," she said.

People trafficked to Australia are forced to work by their slave-owner/employer, often in the sex industry or as forced labourers, Ms Stewart said.

"They are commodified, dehumanised, imprisoned, and denied their own identity by having their documents taken away," she said.

Ms Stewart said that people traffickers rely on their victims' fear of authorities.

"They are frightened - frightened of being sent back, frightened of giving evidence, frightened for the welfare of their families at home," she said.

"People need to know what their rights are. In many cases, they don't even know they have rights."

People trafficking is one of the world's most lucrative crimes, Ms Stewart said.

It is estimated that traffickers have reaped some \$42.5 billion a year worldwide in the past decade, she said.

Although the exact scale of the problem in Australia is unknown, the Australian Federal Police has undertaken more than 270 investigations of people trafficking related offences since 2004, leading to 34 people being charged and nine convictions.

"These cases are only the tip of the iceberg," Ms Stewart said.



Senior law lecturer Pam Stewart (left) with Arini Beaumaris, National Secretary for the Australian Bahá'í Community

## Peace gatherings attract diverse participants

An East Timorese nurse studying in Western Australia under a peace scholarship was a guest speaker at a devotional meeting held at the Bahá'í Centre of Learning in Perth to mark the International Day of Peace.

Giving her first speech in English since arriving in Australia this year, Ms Ermelinda da Costa Monteiro spoke about her life experiences and asked participants to pray for the people of East Timor as they work towards a lasting peace.

Among the guests at the event, held on 10 October 2009, were representatives of faith communities as well as Melissa Parke, Federal Member of Parliament for Fremantle, Tricia Phelan, deputy mayor of the City of Melville, and Anne Banks-McAllister of UNIFEM Australia.

Ms Banks-McAllister, who outlined the scholarship program which brought Ms da Costa Monteiro to Australia, told the gathering that UNIFEM works to educate and empower women from the Pacific, East and South-East Asia and Afghanistan to enable them to contribute to peace building upon their return home.

Speaking on behalf of the Bahá'í Council for Western Australia, Padma Wong provided an overview of the Bahá'í vision for achieving peace, calling upon all those present to develop their spiritual qualities to serve humanity.

### Paper Cranes

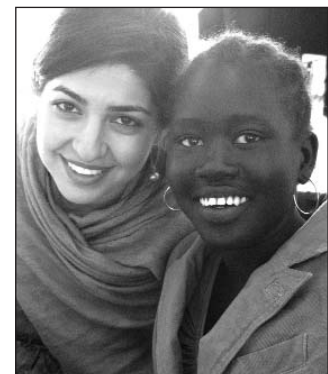
People of all ages folded one thousand origami cranes at an International Day of Peace celebration held at the Bahá'í Centre in Canberra on 26 September 2009.

"The purpose was to encourage everyone, especially children and young people, to think about and work for peace," said Maryam Bell, a member of the ACT Bahá'í Community, who organised the event on behalf of the United Nations Association of Australia (ACT).

The International Day of Peace is a global call for ceasefire and non-violence. This year nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation were the focus for the day.

The paper cranes made in Canberra were sent to the Children's Peace Monument in Hiroshima, Japan.

Fariba Aghili (left) and Akon Goi at the International Day of Peace celebration in Canberra



## 'Ordinary people' convey gender concerns

Bahá'í women throughout Australia have recently hosted discussions for friends, neighbours and colleagues about gender equality and the situation of women.

The purpose of the discussions, known as "Caravans", was to enable ordinary people who might not normally take part in the discourse to contribute their views and experience of women's progress.

Their thoughts and recommendations will be contributed to the 15 year review of the Beijing Plan of Action, a landmark agreement made by governments at the 1995 United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing. The review will be undertaken by the UN Commission on the Status of Women in 2010.

The Caravans were the result of collaboration between Justice Equality Rights Access International, the Australian Bahá'í Community and other non-government organisations working to advance the equality of men and women.

The Caravans were hosted by Bahá'ís in cities and towns such as Sydney, Brisbane, Gold Coast, Ipswich, Kiama and Albany.

In Melbourne, the Australian Bahá'í Community's Victorian Office organised a special Caravan to enable girls and women between the ages of 15 and 30 years to have their say.

One 15-year-old participant said: "I would like to see more of these kinds of initiatives in the future. I think they are really great and especially for someone from the younger generation, they are very educational and it feels good to voice my ideas and opinions on the topic."

Many participants at the Caravans expressed concern about violence against women.

Some identified a culture where violence is

tacitly accepted, while others highlighted the role of alcohol, drugs and the media in contributing towards violence.

The report from one Caravan called on sporting clubs to send a message of "no tolerance" about violence. Many called for greater education, including school-based education programs, to address the problem of violence.

"Women still believe it is their fault when they are violently attacked by men," a report from one Caravan said.

There was also widespread concern at the sexualisation of females by the media, especially sexualisation of young girls and teenagers.

"The media puts importance on women's image rather than their intellect and talent," a report from one Caravan said. Many participants recommended that offending media should be boycotted.

### Discrimination

The participants at several Caravans said that the role of women as mothers was not valued enough, and that women with children were often discriminated against in the workplace.

"Australia should join with the rest of the world in providing child care and 12 months paid maternity leave," a report from one Caravan said.

"In many cases, working women have a double or triple load - they work full-time, go home and do another full-time load," said a report from another Caravan.

The special needs of indigenous women and refugee women were repeatedly highlighted.

One Caravan report said that indigenous women must be involved in the solution of social problems rather than having solutions imposed upon them.

Another Caravan recommended funding for "more activities at the neighbourhood level where migrant or refugee women can socialise with their female neighbours, attempt to cross cultural barriers and form friendships".

Participants considered refugee women less likely to be aware of their rights and to be able to access support services. This was due to language and other barriers.



Participants at the Melbourne Caravan



Participants at the Caravan held in Logan, Queensland

# Eradicate poverty by educating girls

The Australian Bahá'í Community has joined with many organisations in Australia to promote the importance of educating girls in order to eradicate poverty.

To mark United Nations International Day for Eradication of Poverty on 17 October 2009, the Australian Bahá'í Community and UNIFEM Australia led a move in which more than 20 organisations signed a statement affirming that girls must be valued by their families and by society.

Those participating ranged from faith communities to women's professional organisations to academic, health, justice and human rights organisations.

Investing in girls' education is an investment in a better future for us all, said a spokesperson for the Australian Bahá'í Community, Tessa Scrine.

"Educating girls not only benefits the individuals but also their families, communities, nations and the world as a whole," Ms Scrine said.

"In fact, Bahá'ís believe that education of girls is so important that if a lack of resources forces a choice between educating a son or daughter, parents should choose the daughter," she said.

UNIFEM Australia Director Julie McKay said that unless the world acted to ensure girls' rights during childhood, it could not achieve gender equality and the real empowerment of women that would eradicate poverty.

"When all the benefits are taken into account, educating girls yields a higher rate of return than any other investment that can be made in the developing world," Ms McKay said.

"From reductions in infant mortality, fertility, and the incidence of AIDS to improvements in the environment, it has been demonstrated that the mother's education makes the difference."

Ms McKay said that positive effects increase with every additional year a girl stays in school.

"For every year beyond fourth grade that girls go to school, family size drops 20 percent and wages rise 20 percent," she said.



*Australian Bahá'í  
Community representative  
Tessa Scrine*

# Faith groups plan to empower women

Leading members of faith and development organisations came together in Melbourne in September to discuss how they can promote gender equality, empower women, and improve maternal health.

The forum, held at St Paul's Cathedral on 29 September 2009, explored the role of religions in achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

Azita Sobhani, secretary of the Bahá'í Council for Victoria, was one of the keynote speakers.

Ms Sobhani said that faith communities could bring a spiritual perspective to the discussion on development.

"We need to acknowledge the spiritual dimension of human nature," she said.

"Acknowledging the inseparable connection between the practical and the spiritual in life gives rise to a different notion of development - one in which the moral, emotional, and physical development of the individual is a

central priority."

Other keynote speakers were Jack de Groot, CEO of Caritas Australia, Di Hirsh, immediate past president of the National Council of Jewish Women of Australia, Rev Rob Kilpatrick, head of spiritual engagement at World Vision Australia, and Rev Dirk Ficca, executive director of the Parliament of the World's Religions.

The forum was held in the lead-up to Asia Pacific Breakthrough: The Women, Faith and Development Summit to End Global Poverty, which will be held at Federation Square in Melbourne on 2-3 December 2009.

The Breakthrough Summit aims to highlight the most urgent areas of need for women of the Asia Pacific and for indigenous and refugee women in Australia.

More information is available at [www.breakthrough2009.com.au](http://www.breakthrough2009.com.au)



*Victorian Bahá'í Council  
secretary Azita Sobhani*



Stepan Kerkyasharian

## Refugees 'a wonderful asset'

Refugees are an asset and they should be welcomed into the Australian community, a prominent community worker told a reception held at the Bahá'í National Centre to mark National Refugee Week in June 2009.

"Refugees have enormous pride and determination to succeed - that's a wonderful asset to any community," said Stepan Kerkyasharian, the chairperson of the Community Relations Commission for a Multicultural NSW.

"Refugees come with a vision to succeed and build a new life for themselves and their family," Dr Kerkyasharian said.

"We must welcome refugees and make them feel at home and help them work towards their future," he said.

Dr Kerkyasharian, who is also the President of the Anti-Discrimination Board of NSW, said his parents were refugees who survived atrocities that resulted in the deaths of their parents.

"It's important for all of us to be vigilant about human rights in our community," he said.

Following the reception, a public service was held in the Bahá'í Temple. The program included readings from the sacred Scriptures of the world's religions and singing by the Bahá'í Temple choir.

## Debut album produced by international artist

An album of sacred music recorded by a young Queensland musician and produced by an internationally renowned artist was launched in September 2009 in Brisbane.

*Leather Bound Book* is the debut album for Shadi Toloui-Wallace, 20, who has included three of her own songs with a collection of Bahá'í prayers set to her music.

After Ms Toloui-Wallace returned in 2008 from a year as a volunteer at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel, she sought advice about a possible album from Louie Shelton, a prominent musician who has a recording studio on the Gold Coast in Queensland.

Mr Shelton, who has previously provided his production skills to artists such as Seals and Croft, Michael Jackson, Lionel Richie, John Lennon, Ella Fitzgerald and Boz Scaggs, agreed to arrange her music and produce her album.

At the launch of the CD to a capacity crowd, Ms Toloui-Wallace performed songs from the album with the additional accompaniment of Mr Shelton and three support vocalists from her own family: her sister, Hoda, brother, Josh, and mother, Shidan.

Ms Toloui-Wallace said the motivation for the album came after she saw the need for more contemporary forms of sacred music.

"As a child I memorised Bahá'í prayers through catchy melodies so I decided to see how I could merge my love of those prayers with my own compositions," she said.

With vocals accompanied by guitar and other instruments, the album combines a mixture of styles: spiritual, jazz, acoustic, folk and world music.

In January 2009, Ms Toloui-Wallace performed before more than 5500 people at a Bahá'í International Conference in the Sydney Convention Centre.

On 6 December 2009, she will perform in the Sacred Music Concert at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Melbourne.



Shadi Toloui-Wallace

# Event shows how Brisbane youth contribute to social change

More than 400 people attended a Brisbane "junior youth showcase" that demonstrated how local young people are serving their community and contributing to social change.

Upon entering the venue at the Marymac Community Centre, the audience passed through a "transformation tunnel" designed to help them look at the world through the eyes of youth between the ages of 11 and 15 years.

The audience viewed performances, games and audio-visual displays which showed what more than 100 "junior youth" have learned through an empowerment project conducted in 16 groups throughout Brisbane.

Junior youth not only performed at the event, held on 13 September 2009, but also took care of the ushering, waiting on tables, backstage management, and cleaning up.

The Bahá'í-inspired junior youth project in Brisbane is open to followers of all faiths and backgrounds. It works on developing the participants' moral capabilities, talents and capacities for service.

The program assists the participants to improve their abilities to communicate their views on important concepts via the spoken and written word and through the arts.

The junior youth groups in Brisbane



*The Westlake Bahá'í junior youth group*

communicate with and learn from equivalent groups throughout Australia and overseas.

Spokesperson Saphira Rameshfar said that by expanding their perspective to an international scale, the junior youth explore the lives of people their own age around the world and learn about their challenges.

"They learn that change in the world starts at the grass roots," Miss Rameshfar said.

"They put what they are learning into action and contribute service projects to their communities," she said.

"Examples include junior youth beautifying their neighbourhoods, sharing skills and running free artistic workshops for their communities and visiting the elderly."

## Service for victims of natural disasters

A special public service was held at the Bahá'í House of Worship in Sydney to remember the victims of the recent natural disasters in the Asia-Pacific region.

The service, held on 10 October 2009, included prayers, readings from the scriptures of the Bahá'í Faith and other world religions, and sacred music.

Among those attending were people who have family and friends in Samoa, Indonesia, and other countries that have suffered as a consequence of the natural disasters.

A similar service was held at the Bahá'í Centre of Learning in Brisbane on 9 October 2009.

Addressing those who attended that service

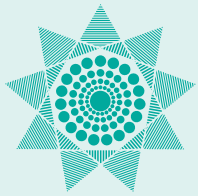
was Colin Myers, medical team leader for the Samoan emergency and director of the Department of Emergency Medicine at Prince Charles Hospital, Brisbane. Dr Myers is a member of the Bahá'í community of Moreton Bay, near Brisbane.

The national governing body of Bahá'ís in Australia, the National Spiritual Assembly, has expressed its condolences to those who have lost family members and friends and those who have lost their properties, homes and livelihoods in the recent disasters.

The National Spiritual Assembly has made a financial contribution to assist material relief in Samoa.

*Dr Colin Myers, left, gave comforting news to Brisbane-based Samoan Bahá'í Taumese Muauulu Saili*





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**INTERNATIONAL NEWS**

## Call for bail as trial delayed

The trial of seven Bahá'í leaders in Iran set for 18 October 2009 has been postponed without any new date given.

Australian Bahá'í Community spokesperson Tessa Scrine said the failure by the authorities to set a new date for the trial or to properly notify lawyers is a violation of Iran's own legal procedures and a breach of due process rules under international law.

"These Bahá'ís, who have been imprisoned in poor conditions for more than 17 months, are clearly innocent of any crime and should be released immediately on bail," Ms Scrine said.

"It is contrary to the accepted norms of justice that there have been trial dates seemingly set and then postponed and now no new date set at all," she said.

Three of the accused have close family members in Australia, where the Government and the Federal Parliament have publicly called for the release of the seven leaders and expressed their serious concerns about the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran.

The seven Bahá'í leaders have been held at Tehran's notorious Evin prison without formal charges since March and May 2008.

Official Iranian news accounts have said the seven are to be accused of "espionage for Israel, insulting religious sanctities and propaganda against the Islamic republic."

The Bahá'í International Community categorically rejects all charges against the

seven, stating that they are held solely because of religious persecution.

### UN Secretary General report

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has expressed strong criticism of Iran's human rights record.

In a 19-page report to the UN General Assembly about human rights in Iran, Mr Ban voiced concern about the use of excessive force after Iran's presidential election, the harassment of women's rights activists, the ongoing execution of juveniles, and the continued persecution of minorities, including Bahá'ís.

The report, issued in September 2009, made specific mention of the imprisoned Bahá'í leaders.

It noted that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has written to Iran "on numerous occasions to express concern and seek clarification" about the status of the seven.



*The seven Bahá'í prisoners, photographed several months before their arrest in 2008*

## Appeal to consider climate ethics

The Bahá'í International Community has drafted an appeal calling on the governments of the world to "consider deeply" the ethical and moral questions at the root of the climate change crisis.

Launched in September 2009 to coincide with the UN Summit on Climate Change, the appeal has been signed by 25 non-government organisations, religious groups and policy institutes including Oxfam International and the International Peace Research Association.

The appeal urges world leaders to show "courage and moral leadership" in the lead-up to

the United Nations Climate Change Conference to be held in Copenhagen in December 2009.

It asks them to consider "questions of justice and equity that will determine the survival of cultures, ecosystems, and present as well as future generations."

"We call on the gathered leaders to summon the same spirit and sense of urgency that led to the creation of the United Nations, to forge a climate change agreement worthy of the trust of humankind," it says.