

AUSTRALIAN Baha'i Report

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A newsletter of the Australian Bahá'í Community

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Australia speaks out on Bahá'í leaders in Iran

The Australian Government has spoken out about the treatment of seven wrongfully-imprisoned Bahá'í leaders in Iran.

"We are particularly concerned at the situation of seven leaders of the Bahá'í community who have been detained since 2008, whose trials began recently," Australia's Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations (Geneva), Miranda Brown, said on 15 February 2010.

Addressing the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review of Iran, Ms Brown said Australia was concerned by reports of the treatment of minority ethnic and religious communities in Iran, and particularly the treatment of Bahá'ís.

In its recommendations, the Australian Government called on Iran to "ensure the trials of seven Bahá'ís are fair and transparent and conducted in accordance with international standards, and that Iran amend all legislation which discriminates against minority groups".

Australia was one of many countries at the 15 February session of the UN Human Rights Council to call on Iran to respect the human rights of Bahá'ís and other oppressed people in Iran.

The seven Bahá'ís have been imprisoned since March and May 2008. Preliminary sessions of their trial, closed to independent observers and family members, were held before a Revolutionary Court on 12 January and 7 February 2010. Their lawyers have been advised that the next session will be on 10 April 2010.

The seven have strongly denied all charges which include espionage, propaganda activities against the Islamic order, acting against the security of the country, and spreading corruption on earth.

Australia's statement to the UN Human Rights Council was in line with its role in co-sponsoring the December 2009 UN General Assembly resolution on the human rights situation in Iran.

That resolution expressed concern over "attacks on Bahá'ís and their faith in State-sponsored media, increasing evidence of efforts by the State to identify, monitor and arbitrarily detain Bahá'ís, preventing

members of the Bahá'í Faith from attending university and from sustaining themselves economically".

Federal MP

On 11 February 2010 in the Main Committee of Australia's House of Representatives, prominent Government MP Maxine McKew spoke out against the treatment of the seven leaders.



Maxine McKew MP

"I condemn in the strongest terms the arbitrary nature of the arrest of these seven Bahá'í members in Iran," said Ms McKew, the member for Bennelong, and Parliamentary Secretary for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government.

"I call on the Islamic Republic of Iran to recognise international standards of human rights and take their place as a responsible member of the international community," Ms McKew said.

State Parliamentary motion

The Legislative Council of South Australia has passed a motion calling on Iran to release the seven imprisoned leaders without delay, and to respect rights to freedom of religion.

It follows a similar resolution by the Australian Federal Parliament last May.

The Government and Opposition parties supported the motion put forward by independent MP David Winderlich.

"It is time for the South Australian parliament to take a stand and call for the immediate release of the seven Bahá'í leaders in Iran," Mr Winderlich told the Legislative Council.

Government MP Ian Hunter and the Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council in South Australia, David Ridgway MP, spoke in support of the motion, which was passed on 3 December 2009.

Human rights an issue in ACT

Individuals need to take action to transform human rights from ideals into reality, a Bahá'í speaker, Anisa Naraqí, told a Human Rights Day function in Canberra.

"We need to see ourselves as agents of change in our society," said Ms Naraqí, a lawyer.



Guest speakers Roslyn Dundas, left, and Anisa Naraqí at the ACT Bahá'í Centre

"Human rights cannot be promoted by laws alone," she said.

"It is in our capacity as fathers, mothers, sons and daughters, as teachers, students, business owners and neighbours that we can make a difference in the world."

The theme of the gathering, organised by the ACT Bahá'í community and held at the Bahá'í Centre in Canberra on 12 December 2009, was "Embrace Diversity - End Discrimination".

Director of ACT Council of Social Services Roslyn Dundas told the gathering that in spite of the ACT being one of Australia's most

privileged communities, it has 16,000 households in the lowest income group in the nation.

"Canberra is the most privileged community in one of the wealthiest countries in the world," Ms Dundas said.

"If we can't confront and address disadvantage, who can?"

Musicians and dancers, including a Chilean dance troupe, entertained the guests at the function.

Children performed a play based on "The Story of Rosie Redbird," a children's book by Canberra author Jennifer Lemon, which explores the theme of inclusiveness in neighbourhoods.

"The purpose of the annual Human Rights Day commemoration is to raise awareness, educate and inspire the community about human rights achievements and challenges," said one of the organisers of the event, Fariba Aghili.

"We were pleased to bring together people from a diverse cross-section of the ACT community in support of human rights," Ms Aghili said.

Brisbane Bahá'ís active in interfaith events

Brisbane Bahá'ís participated in an interfaith prayer gathering organised by the Queensland Government for Australia Day and attended by Premier Anna Bligh.

A reading from the Bahá'í scriptures by Susan Handley was among contributions presented by representatives of Bahá'í, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Taoist communities.

The event at Suncorp Plaza was attended by other members of the faith groups as well as the

general public.

Premier Bligh addressed the gathering about the importance of the contributions faith groups make to the community.

On 17 January 2010, members of various religions joined with Bahá'ís in celebrating World Religion Day at the Brisbane Bahá'í Centre of Learning.

Those attending included representatives from Queensland Churches Together, Believing Women for a Culture of Peace, Uniting Church of Australia, interfaith groups, and the Bahá'í Faith.

Scott Emerson, a Queensland State MP from Indooroopilly, was also present.

The program included readings from seven of the world's religions, a musical recital and an audio-visual presentation by Shidan Toloui-Wallace, a Bahá'í who participated in the Parliament of the World's Religions held in Melbourne in December 2009.

Bahá'í representative Susan Handley, far right, with other faith representatives at the Australia Day event in Brisbane



Jurist, faith leaders, relatives unite for imprisoned Bahá'ís

International pressure should be brought to bear on Iran for the release of seven wrongfully-imprisoned Bahá'í leaders, the eminent jurist John Dowd AO QC told an inter-faith gathering at the NSW Parliament on 9 February 2010.

"This is not a trial -- it is a persecution," said Mr Dowd, the president of the International Commission of Jurists Australia.

Among 130 people attending the gathering were MPs Rob Stokes and Anthony Roberts, Community Relations Commission chairman Stepan Kerkyasharian, leaders and members of faith communities and NGO representatives.

Grave charges have been levelled against the seven leaders in closed court sessions held on 12 January and 7 February 2010. All seven have denied the accusations, which include espionage, propaganda activities against the Islamic order, acting against the security of the country, and spreading corruption on earth. The next session is to be held on 10 April 2010.

Rhetoric of hatred

Mr Dowd said that just as the Nazis built up a rhetoric of hatred and ridicule against the Jews prior to World War II, Iran is doing the same with Bahá'ís.

"It sets up religious courts to try breaches of religious laws and persecutes people as in Nazi Germany because having someone to blame is a very unifying factor among a suppressed people," he said.

The seven leaders are effectively being charged with breach of Islamic beliefs, even though the constitution guarantees freedom of belief, he said.

Visibly moved

Relatives of three of the seven Bahá'ís addressed the audience, many of whom were visibly moved by the sentiments expressed.

Roya Kamalabadi of Melbourne, a sister of one of the imprisoned leaders, said: "The very thought of my dear sister, Fariba facing possible execution for the love of humanity that she so cherishes in her heart is devastating to me and my family."

Amin Tavakoli of Adelaide said his imprisoned brother, Behrouz, was in jail because of his belief in the oneness of religion and the oneness of humanity.

"If I could have one wish, it would be to see him one more time," Mr Tavakoli said.

"I would hug him and put my ear to his chest and listen to the melody of his heart, a heart that plays the melody of love - love of God, love of humanity," Mr Tavakoli said.

Ghodsieh Samimi of Sydney said that when her niece, Mahvash Sabet, was arrested almost two years ago, her family was not informed of her whereabouts for almost three months.

"The family did not even know whether she was alive or not," Mrs Samimi said.

Prayers

Representatives of six major religions in Australia offered prayers for the seven Bahá'í leaders.

"We, the leaders of our communities and representatives of Australia's faiths, join with the family of these seven Bahá'í leaders," said Rabbi Jeremy Lawrence, who is Senior Rabbi at Sydney's Great Synagogue.

"We pray that they will be restored to their families; that they will be able to worship in freedom; that they will be able to celebrate their faith and inspire their fellows with the beauty and peaceful message of its teachings," Rabbi Lawrence said.

"Today we gather with our concern and prayers for the seven Bahá'í leaders who are imprisoned in Iran," said General Secretary of the National Council of Churches, Rev. Tara Curlewis.

"May the people of this world respect their neighbour no matter what their race or religious belief," Rev. Curlewis said.

Prayers were also said by Hindu Council of Australia representative, Vijai Singhal; Sikh representative, Mohinde Pal Singh; Buddhist monk Bhante Tejadhammo; and the National Secretary of the Australian Bahá'í Community, Arini Beaumaris.



John Dowd AO QC

Ghodsieh Samimi, left, Amin Tavakoli, centre, and Roya Kamalabadi spoke about the imprisonment and trial of their family members



Bahá'ís contribute to inter-faith Parliament



Natalie Mobini-Kesheh responds to a question at the Parliament

Australian Bahá'ís were active participants as speakers, performers and organisers at the Parliament of the World's Religions held in Melbourne from 3-9 December 2009.

More than 5000 people from 80 countries and 220 religious and spiritual traditions attended the Parliament, which is held every five years.

The public information officer of the Australian Bahá'í Community, Natalie Mobini-Kesheh, introduced her address on the persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran by referring to principles of the Parliament which advocate respecting the human rights of all.

Dr Mobini-Kesheh cited examples of religious leaders who have held respectful dialogue and collaborated with others in spite of theological differences.

"Shouldn't everyone seek to find within the particular framework of his or her beliefs how to set aside exclusionist claims in order to collaborate with followers of religions whose beliefs are different?" she asked.

Women's leadership

The wide participation of women was a hallmark of the Parliament, where 60 per cent of the participants and 40 per cent of the presenters were women.

The National Secretary of the Australian Bahá'í Community, Arini Beaumaris, spoke as a member of a panel addressing "spirituality and women's leadership".

"We believe we will not achieve the peace and tranquility of the world until we have equality of men and women," said Ms Beaumaris.

Addressing another theme of the Parliament, the earth's physical environment, Tasmanian Bahá'í Dr John Davidson screened photographs to show the unique environmental architecture of the recently built Bahá'í Centre of Learning in Hobart.

Youth

Australian Bahá'ís were active in the youth segment of the program.

Amy Kean and Kat Eghdadian ran an interactive youth workshop looking at the nature of the world's environmental problems and using climate change as a model to explore



Bahá'í speakers Arini Beaumaris, left, Moojan Momen, centre, and Wendi Momen

the need for a global solution.

The youth community organiser for the Parliament, Gemma McDonald, also a member of the Australian Bahá'í community, co-chaired a youth session on interfaith youth organisations that carry out service projects in Africa, the United States and Australia.

Performance and prayer

Australian Bahá'ís participated in the opening ceremony of the Parliament. Sydney-based performer Gary Sterling sang a Bahá'í prayer with backing from a massed choir. Dr Marjorie Tidman from Western Australia read excerpts from the Bahá'í writings as a "Bahá'í blessing" for the event.

Brisbane singers Shadi Toloui-Wallace and her mother, Shidan, performed at a sacred music concert during the Parliament.

Shadi Toloui-Wallace also sang at other concerts held during the event.

International Bahá'ís

In addition to the Australians, there were Bahá'í speakers from four other continents.

In a joint session, academics Brian Lepard and

Brian Lepard, left, confers with A. K. Merchant



Gary Sterling performs at the opening ceremony



Shadi Toloui-Wallace sings at the sacred music concert



A. K. Merchant, from the USA and India respectively, provided a Bahá'í perspective on the right to development.

Professor Lepard identified nine key Bahá'í ethical principles necessary to meet the challenge of ensuring a right to development. These included a spiritual basis for development activities, elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty, gender equality, open-minded consultation, and freedom of thought and religion.

From Britain, Moojan and Wendi Momen presented a session on the structures the Bahá'í Faith sees as necessary to build peace, social cohesion and justice.

Native American Bahá'í Kevin Locke performed the spectacular Lakota Hoop dance. He also entertained an audience with a mixture of flute music, jokes, and prayers in sign language.

A Bahá'í speaker from Botswana, Lucretia

Emily pedals for peace

Although many participants travelled from overseas to attend the Parliament of the World's Religions, few made a journey that took as long as the one undertaken by Lismore Bahá'í Emily Alexander and her travelling companions.

Together with members of three other religions, Ms Alexander spent nine days cycling 1050 kilometres from Sydney to Melbourne as part of the "Pedalling for Peace" initiative.

The other cyclists were Mohamad Asoum (Muslim), Evian Gutman (Jewish) and Colin Lee (Christian).

Along the journey, the participants conducted workshops attended by 500 school students which aimed to break down negative stereotypes and motivate students to work actively in their school or community to help bring about a more peaceful world.

They also held interfaith discussion panels and enjoyed the hospitality of faith communities in Kiama, Ulladulla, Narooma, Bega, Merimbula and other towns along the route.

Ms Alexander, 18, said one of the highlights

Warren, who had addressed two previous Parliaments, was a member of a panel discussion on "Interfaith and the future of Africa".

Indigenous tribute

Many of the sessions at the Parliament began with the speakers paying their respects to the Aboriginal traditional owners of the land where the Parliament was being held.

At the closing ceremony indigenous elders from around the world were introduced by Aboriginal elder Professor Joy Wandin Murphy.

At that ceremony, the Dalai Lama told the audience that all religious traditions carry the same message and have the same goal: "to bring inner peace".

The Dalai Lama urged the Parliament and religious people in general to take a more active role to help solve world and personal crises.

Photographs by Rachael Dere



Botswanan Bahá'í Lucretia Warren participates in a panel discussion

was the relationship that developed among the cyclists themselves.

"We connected as a group and it really opened our eyes to how it is possible to learn to embrace differences of belief and live in an environment of unity and trust," she said.

After arriving in Melbourne, Ms Alexander told Rachael Kohn from ABC Radio National's "The Spirit of Things" that she hoped to impart the spirit of the journey into her local activities in Lismore.

"When I go home I want to do something with some of the junior youth groups I run, like a dance for peace, or a concert for peace, or something that I can do within my community," she said.

"But if there's another big annual project for peace, I would definitely be on board."

"Pedalling for Peace" was filmed for a proposed documentary about the riders' experiences.

Further information is available at www.pedallingforpeace.com.



Emily Alexander

Building community in neighbourhoods

Plans to help build a greater sense of community in local neighbourhoods were high on the agenda of a national meeting of Bahá'ís from all States and Territories.

Some 250 Bahá'ís from throughout Australia met at the Sydney Bahá'í Centre on 23-24 January 2010 to exchange experiences and learning about this evolving direction of the national Bahá'í community.

A significant trend in recent years has been the active engagement of people from the wider community in the main activities of the Bahá'í community: spiritual study circles, devotional gatherings, children's classes and junior youth activities at the neighbourhood level.

In his keynote speeches, former national secretary Stephen Hall, now a member of an international Bahá'í advisory body, emphasised the expansion of this inclusive thinking into helping build a greater sense of community in neighbourhoods where Bahá'ís live.

"This has a twofold purpose (for those involved) - to contribute to the spiritual and social transformation of society and to transform themselves," Mr Hall said.

John Walker, a member of the National Spiritual Assembly, the Faith's elected national governing body, encouraged participants to study the precise needs of the local neighbourhood so that Bahá'ís can work with their neighbours to assist in meeting these needs.

"Research indicates that strong and cohesive neighbourhoods lead to decreased crime, better physical and mental health and defence against adversity," Mr Walker said.

National secretary Arini Beaumaris said Bahá'ís can actively help in the reconstruction of neighbourhoods.

"We are challenging young people to be part of that service," Ms Beaumaris said.



Kent and Donna Perkins travelled from Rockhampton to attend the meeting

Summit launches alliance to empower women

Members of the Australian Bahá'í Community were among more than 300 delegates from the Asia Pacific region who attended Asia Pacific Breakthrough: The Women, Faith and Development Summit to End Global Poverty, held in Melbourne from 2-3 December 2009.

The summit focussed attention on the need to support and empower women and girls, the majority of the world's poorest people.

It saw the launch of an Asia Pacific Women, Faith and Development Alliance that aims to unite women's organisations, faith groups and development agencies in the common goal of ending poverty by empowering women.

Tessa Scrine, a representative of the Australian Bahá'í Community on the summit steering committee, said the coming together of women's, faith and development organisations is an important step in allowing an effective approach to development to emerge.

"The Alliance can harness positive moral and spiritual influences to create the enduring changes in both individual and collective behaviour necessary for genuine social development," Ms Scrine said.

The secretary of the Bahá'í Council for Victoria, Azita Sobhani, co-facilitated a session in which participants considered practical steps to use the strengths of faith and faith communities to help eliminate poverty and achieve gender equality, empowerment and well-being for women.

Executive director of the International Women's Development Agency, Jane Sloane, said the summit brought about \$1.2 billion in new and renewed commitments for programs to benefit women and girls in the Asia Pacific.

Delegates to the summit committed themselves and their organisations to the Asia Pacific Breakthrough Declaration.

"We know that women and girls must be at the centre of efforts to end global poverty," the declaration said.

"Together we commit ourselves and call upon individuals, organisations and governments everywhere to increase resources for the advancement of women and girls," it said.

"No longer will we deny the dreams and hopes of millions because they were born a girl."



Azita Sobhani, left, with co-facilitator Mary-Faeth Chenery, coordinator of the Global Peace Initiative of Women Australia

'Injustice a great barrier to peace': author

By telling the stories of women throughout the world who have been tortured, abused and wrongfully imprisoned, Melbourne Bahá'í Rosa Vasseghi aims to contribute to world peace.

"All this injustice is one of the greatest barriers to a peaceful world," Ms Vasseghi says.

"When injustice dominates, or is the ruling principle, the conscience of humanity is lost in darkness," she says.

In her book *Where is the Justice? Stories from behind Closed Doors*, Ms Vasseghi combines the true experiences of oppressed women and girls in a story told through three composite characters: two women and a man.

As a Bahá'í growing up in Iran, Ms Vasseghi had her own experience of persecution. And it was in Iran that she first witnessed the fate of women whose human rights had been violated. She visited them in prison and recorded their stories.

After she managed to leave Iran in the late 1990s, Ms Vasseghi eventually settled in Australia as a refugee in 1999.

She has travelled to some countries and communicated with people in others, gathering the stories of oppressed women of many faiths, nations and cultures. Their stories form the heart of her book.

Ms Vasseghi says she found similar social problems in almost every land.

"I found that the lack of equality between men and women has provoked violence and anger towards women, the price sometimes being women's lives," she says.

"This has roused my sense of justice and compassion for the suffering of others, especially innocent women and girls.

"People must find out what is happening to women around the world and maybe together we can bring peace to this world."

Ms Vasseghi was encouraged to write the book by Mardi Stow of the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, which is located at Foundation House in Brunswick, Melbourne.

Her book can be obtained from the Foundation: www.foundationhouse.org.au



Rosa Vasseghi, right,
with Mardi Stow

Multicultural service prompts award

Melbourne Bahá'í Farzaneh Dehghan has received a Victorian Multicultural Award for Excellence for her outstanding voluntary contribution to the multicultural community.

Ms Dehghan received her award from Victorian State Governor David de Kretser at a Government House ceremony on 26 November 2009.

Ms Dehghan is a member of the Bahá'í community of Whittlesea, a northern suburb of Melbourne that boasts one of the State's most multicultural communities.

A community worker, she volunteers with a wide range of organisations including Whittlesea Multicultural Community Council, Whittlesea Interfaith Network, Red Cross, Victorian Multifaith COMMON, and the Victorian Refugee Women's Coalition.

Ms Dehghan told the Whittlesea Star newspaper that her Bahá'í beliefs inspired her community service.

"As a Bahá'í, I believe service to the community is service to God," she said.

Born in Iran, Ms Dehghan's experience of persecution drives her to help disenfranchised residents become valued members of the community.

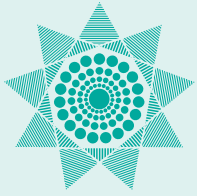
"I am very passionate about human rights issues, diversity and making a contribution towards a sustainable future for all with equal rights, especially equality between men and women," she said.

Ms Dehghan has also been a driving force behind the Whittlesea Bahá'í community's annual banquet celebration of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh, which is regularly attended by members of more than 30 different ethnic and religious groups.

Ms Dehghan was nominated for the award by Whittlesea Councillor Kris Pavlidis.



Farzaneh Dehghan receives her
award from Victorian
Governor David de Kretser



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Working with junior youth and children provides the best opportunity for young Bahá'ís to serve Australian society, the Faith's international governing body told participants at the national Bahá'í youth conference.

The Universal House of Justice said in a special message to the conference held in Wollongong from 7-10 January, 2010 that central to the role of the youth is "to give new vigour to the concept of service".

"Among the many opportunities now before you there are two which stand pre-eminent: acting as teachers of children's classes and as animators [leaders] of junior youth groups," the message said.

This service would ensure "the emerging generation is provided with the guidance necessary to establish a secure foundation for their

lives", it said.

More than 800 young Bahá'ís from throughout Australia attended the conference where they focussed on such topics as service, participating in the discourses of society, junior youth spiritual empowerment, and developing the arts.

"The conference helped me to raise my level of consciousness about the individual and society," said one of the participants, Negin Sedaghat of Sydney.

The presentations "challenged the youth to move beyond their frivolous pursuits," said another young woman.

"We are not just here to engage in idle talk but to put everything into practice," said a third.

Marriage of cultures in major art work

Queensland's Gallery of Modern Art hosted prominent New Zealand artist and Bahá'í, Robin White, from 16-20 January 2010.

In its Asia Pacific Triennial exhibition, which runs until 5 April 2010, the Gallery is displaying a major art work, Teitei Vou (A New Garden) created by Ms White in collaboration with Fijian artists Leba Toki and Bale Jione, who are also Bahá'ís.

The Queensland Art Gallery has purchased the work for its permanent collection.

The complex art work implies a potential spiritual transformation as seen through a Bahá'í perspective.

Ms White said there are Bahá'í, Buddhist, Christian and Muslim communities in Fiji.

"That makes it special and we wanted to get that idea across," she said.

The art work was created on masi (barkcloth also called tapa), which is traditionally used for weddings.

"The idea was of a marriage

of cultures - namely the indigenous and Indian cultures that constitute contemporary Fijian society - connected by bonds of love and respect," Ms White said.

Incorporated into their tapa is a vision of the Shrine of the Báb, a Bahá'í holy place in Israel, combined with images important to Fijians.

In Brisbane Ms White participated in the Gallery's Summer Spectacular Festival where she led an art workshop for children.

Ms White has been a member of the Bahá'í Continental Board of Counsellors, a senior international Bahá'í advisory body, since 1995. She is now based in Masterton in the Wairarapa region of New Zealand.

Ms White, 63, was invested as a Distinguished Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit at Government House in Wellington in 2003 for her services to painting and printing.

Much of her recent work depicts Kiribati where she lived from 1982 to 1999.



Robin White with her artwork on display at Queensland's Gallery of Modern Art