

AUSTRALIAN Baha'i Report

Volume 15, Issue 1 - February 2011

A newsletter of the Australian Bahá'í Community

New Web site takes updated approach

The new Web site of the Australian Bahá'í Community invites members of the public to join with Bahá'ís in service to their neighbourhoods.

The site at www.bahai.org.au has a different design, range of illustrations and emphasis to its predecessor produced in 2007, said spokesperson Natalie Mobini.

Dr Mobini said the site emphasises how Bahá'ís are working alongside other Australians and learning together.

"We want to help society develop in a positive manner, and so we offer what we think will be useful to others," Dr Mobini-Kesheh said.

"For example, in the section of the site called 'Participate', we describe how everyone can join us in activities designed to build a vibrant community life in neighbourhoods across the country," she said.

"The site now links with Facebook, Twitter and Flickr in recognition of the new and diverse

ways people are communicating on-line," Dr Mobini said.

"News stories are given prominence and we encourage people to subscribe to the news service," she said.

A new feature of the site is a guest blog, which will be updated regularly, she said.

Dr Mobini said the site employs new photos and videos in ways that convey the diversity and vitality of the Australian Bahá'í community.

"An historical video has images dating from the arrival of the Faith in Australia in 1920 to current times, and other videos and profiles tell personal stories of individual Bahá'ís," she said.

There are pages devoted to each State of Australia and a "community look-up facility" to find contact details of Bahá'ís in local areas. There are also links to Web sites of national Bahá'í communities worldwide.

The site has a more secure technical foundation than its forerunner.

Home page of the new Web site of the Australian Bahá'í Community

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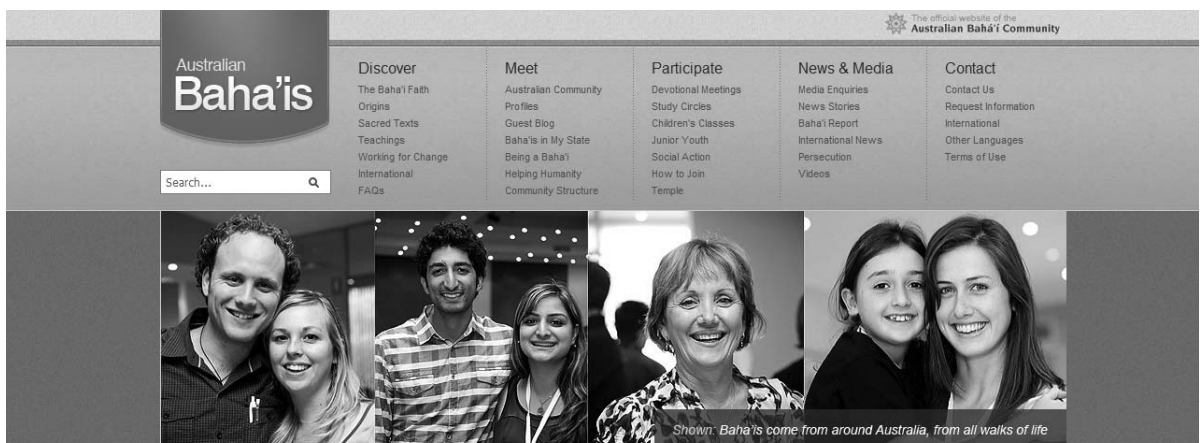
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The Baha'i Faith is an independent world religion that was founded in 1844 and has been present in Australia since 1920. The Faith's central theme is that humanity is one family and the time has come for its unification into a peaceful global society.

- Meet a Baha'i
- Attend a Baha'i event
- Read a Baha'i prayer
- Visit the Baha'i Temple
- Request an information pack
- Contact Baha'is in your area
- Subscribe to news stories
- Join with us in our activities



Devotional Meetings



Children's Classes

Latest News



Baha'is assist with flood clean-up

BRISBANE, 22 JAN 2011
Baha'i institutions and individuals have sprung into action after devastating floods hit Queensland and Victoria.



Australian Baha'is welcome UN vote on Iran

SYDNEY, 22 DEC 2010



'Warfare is heading for defeat': expert

SYDNEY, 15 DEC 2010



International youth serve at Temple and beyond

SYDNEY, 01 DEC 2010

Australian Bahá'ís appointed to international board



*Australian Counsellors:
(from left) Dinesh Kumar-Mills,
Sohayla Asari and Tessa Scrine*

Three Australian Bahá'ís have been appointed to a board of advisers to the Bahá'í communities of Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific.

The Bahá'í international governing body, the Universal House of Justice, announced in November 2010 that Sohayla Asari, Dinesh Kumar-Mills and Tessa Scrine would join the 11-member Continental Board of Counsellors for Australasia for a five year term.

Ms Asari and Mr Kumar-Mills previously served as auxiliaries to the Board, and Ms Scrine was a member of the national governing body of the Australian Bahá'í Community, the National Spiritual Assembly. All relinquished those positions to take up the role of Counsellor, an unpaid post.

In December 2010, the three Australians joined their counterparts from around the globe in a conference at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa,

Israel, to discuss the future development of the worldwide Bahá'í community.

Ms Asari is an education consultant in Melbourne, Mr Kumar-Mills is a business analyst in Brisbane, and Ms Scrine is the director of the Australian Bahá'í Community's Office of External Affairs, based in Canberra.

There is no clergy in the Bahá'í Faith. Authority rests with elected institutions. However, Counsellors are highly respected as learned and experienced Bahá'ís, and play a vital role in Bahá'í administration.

The Counsellors advise and work with the elected, nine-member National Spiritual Assemblies. They also have the duty to stimulate the Bahá'í community's efforts to advance global civilisation and to promote the spiritual, intellectual, and social aspects of Bahá'í life.

The Universal House of Justice said outgoing Counsellors worldwide who have completed their terms of service have earned its "abiding gratitude for their self-sacrificing contributions".

They included the previous Australian-based Counsellors, Dr David Chittleborough of Adelaide, Dr Eric Kingston of Melbourne, and Dr Manijeh Reyhani of Perth.

Summer of learning for Australian Bahá'ís



*Children at the national Bahá'í
summer school review their film*

Many members of the Australian Bahá'í community and their friends attended residential summer schools held throughout Australia from November 2010 to January 2011.

The national Bahá'í summer school was held at the Yerrinbool Bahá'í Centre of

Learning, near Mittagong, from 31 December to 5 January, continuing a tradition that began there in the 1930s. The theme was "Building a new world, one neighbourhood at a time".

The program featured presentations and workshops conducted by facilitators from different parts of the country.

Special attention was paid to programs for children and junior youth.

At the national summer school, children wrote, performed and filmed plays with sock puppets they had made. The films, based on the theme of neighbourhoods, were shown to all participants on the final night of the summer school.

Regional summer schools were held in South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia. The programs provided a balance between intellectual, creative and service oriented learning and social activities.

National award for horticulturist at Sydney Temple

An emphasis on native flora was a key element in a planting plan that led to a national award for the landscape supervisor at the Sydney Bahá'í Temple, Shervin Ali.

Mr Ali, 29, was named young horticulturist of the year for 2010 by the Horticulture Industry Association after submitting his plans for the Temple grounds.

The plan involves protecting the native bushland around the Temple and creating a beautiful Australian native garden symbolising the Bahá'í Faith by having harmony and unity in diversity as the main themes.

"The ongoing management of native bushland and the protection of endangered species within the site are top priority," said Mr Ali.

"We are endeavoring to enhance local landscape values in line with Pittwater Council policies and State and Federal environmental legislation."

Mr Ali said his plan for the gardens emphasises the cultural and spiritual value of the plants.

Gardens in sacred places have a long tradition, he said.

"Beautiful gardens in conjunction with sacred areas can be found in nearly every culture," he said.

Mr Ali, who has worked at the Temple as landscape supervisor and grounds team leader since 2006, supervises international and local volunteers who work in the gardens.

Born in Tehran, Mr Ali grew up in a family with an agricultural background. His grandparents were farmers and orchardists.

After high school, he studied agriculture at the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education, which was founded in 1987 in response to the Iranian government's barring of Iranian Bahá'ís from higher education.

In 2004, together with his family, Mr Ali emigrated to Australia where he has studied landscape and construction, as well as land management and conservation at Ryde TAFE College.



Landscape supervisor Shervin Ali with his award at the Sydney Temple

Indigenous youth win prize for film

A group of Year 9 students in the indigenous community of Woorabinda in Central Queensland have won an award for the film they produced during a Bahá'í empowerment program for junior youth.

The film, which tells stories from their lives, picked up the "most original concept" award at the Harmony Film Festival in Sydney in December 2010. In addition, two members of the group have been invited to attend a film-making workshop in Sydney.

Two years ago a local Bahá'í in Woorabinda, a small town on the banks of the Mimosa river, approached a Wadja Wadja high school teacher and suggested that consideration be given to hosting a junior youth spiritual empowerment program.

The idea was accepted and the program led into the film project.

With the assistance of director, Mojgan Khadem, whose film "Serenades" won much

acclaim, the youth made the film and called it "Living On the Banks of the Mimosa". Their life stories as portrayed in the film include a look at the conditions of their community and their hopes for the future.

The 13 members of the group invited the elders and the local community to a special screening recently, said Shirley Perkins, who initiated the project.

"The elders expressed their admiration at the effort of the young people, many of whom had previously been labeled as troublemakers," said Ms Perkins.

"Now they are seen as having a more positive future."



The young film makers at Woorabinda, Central Queensland

Climate change impact discussed in Logan

A climate change forum sponsored by the Bahá'í Community of Logan, a suburb of Brisbane, focussed on the example of the Pacific nation of Kiribati, which is threatened by rising sea levels.

The meeting, held in October 2010, was organised to help people involved in engaging others to address climate change to better articulate their cause.

Among those attending were Kiribati nursing students from the Logan campus of Griffith University, who performed Kiribati dances during the program.

The first speaker was Wendy Flannery, a Catholic nun and climate change activist, who presented the audience with an overview of the issue socially, economically, and scientifically.

The second speaker was Wanita Limpus, a climate change activist and co-founder with her husband, Len, of the Kiribati Australia Association. She spoke on how climate change was having an impact on her homeland of Kiribati.

Ms Limpus provided vivid descriptions of the effect of rising sea levels, including the need to shift her grandfather's grave in 2004. She told of coconut trees that had died due to salt water seeping into the ground water.

She also raised human rights concerns about the absence of national and international laws granting refugee status to people whose homelands were to be destroyed by climate change.

A member of the Logan Bahá'í community, Ms Limpus has received awards for her work for the people of Kiribati from the nation's president, Anote Tong, and from the Queensland branch of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

The final speaker was Aaron Blomeley, a hydrologist, who has worked with the Bahá'í Office of the Environment in Taiwan.

Mr Blomeley said that sufficient scientific proof for the phenomenon of climate change had already been presented, but that alone was not influencing people enough.

He referred to the successful campaign that has led to the protection of whales. He said whale watching had led many people across all strata of society to feel a "love" bond with whales, which in turn increased motivation and awareness and gave rise to action by government to protect the animals.

Similarly, it is necessary to appeal to the hearts as well as the minds of people with regard to climate change, he said.

New centre to be a resource for Wollongong

A new Bahá'í Centre of Learning in Wollongong is already serving as a venue for events and public meetings.

Distinguished guests from Wollongong joined with representatives of national and State Bahá'í governing bodies at the official opening on 12 November, 2010.

Keynote speaker Vic Chapman, a prominent educationalist and Aboriginal elder, spoke about the value of education and the importance of the example set by parents.

Regional Scouting commissioner Ron Critcher gave an historical background to the building, which was previously a Scout Hall.

Other guests included the General Manager of the Wollongong City Council, David Farmer,

and members of the Illawarra Women's Interfaith Network.

The centre, located in Bellambi Lane, Russell Vale, was built through community contributions in the early 1970s. It has been reshaped in working bees by the local Bahá'í community.

Wollongong Bahá'ís are using the centre for a wide range of activities including devotional meetings, study circles, education programs for children, a junior youth spiritual empowerment program, and community gatherings.

The centre also provides a meeting room for the elected local Bahá'í administrative body, the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the City of Greater Wollongong.



Top: Wanita Limpus spoke about the impact of climate change on Kiribati

Bottom: Nursing students from Kiribati performed traditional dances



Wollongong Bahá'ís Michael Ward and Annette Hodgins outside the new Bahá'í Centre of Learning

'Warfare is heading for defeat': expert

War is gradually being eliminated, foreign affairs commentator Dr Keith Suter told a capacity audience at a Human Rights Day event held in the Visitors Centre at the Bahá'í Temple in Sydney on 12 December 2010.

"You won't hear it in the media because people want to hear about conflict," said Dr Suter, the foreign affairs commentator on Channel Seven's "Sunrise" program.

"But there's less violence in the world today than ever before," Dr Suter said.

"The number of wars and the number of people killed in war are declining, and we are gradually seeing the eradication of war worldwide."

Dr Suter said the media don't show the big picture of gradual improvement because important stories are obscured by the latest updates in today's 24-hour news cycle.

Human rights

Substantial progress has also been made in human rights during the past 60 years, said Dr Suter, whose presentation followed the annual Bahá'í Temple service marking Human Rights Day.

The service included readings from the scriptures of major religions on the theme of human rights.

Dr Suter described the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, as a radical and visionary document that articulates a common set of values for all humanity.

"We are now seeing a convergence of thinking around the world around these common values," he said.

Dr Suter said that this is true even in countries that did not vote for the Declaration in 1948, such as South Africa and the former USSR.

"But there is always more to be done," he said.

Dr Suter recalled that the first time he spoke at the Temple was in the early 1980s, at the height of the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran, when a Temple service dedicated to them was broadcast nationwide.

"Cases like the Bahá'ís in Iran, who are still persecuted today, show that we have to keep struggling for human rights," he said.

Responding to a suggestion that the Declaration is culturally specific, Dr Suter questioned

whether apparent differences in values are really fundamental.

"There are basic principles that apply to all humans - for example, the experience of pain is standard across the world," he said.

Dr Suter also said there was considerable commonality across religious texts.

"The basic core values of the Scriptures are more similar than their subsequent application by human beings would suggest," he said.

"I believe we are evolving to a common end point, although we may be at different stages on a common pathway."

Brain research

Dr Suter said modern brain research demonstrates the fundamental equality of all people.

"Treating everyone equally is not only the right thing to do, it is also the sensible thing to do," he said.

"We know that brain power is distributed equally, but until now we have run world affairs predominantly on white, male, middle class brains.

"If we can liberate and make use of the power of 6.5 billion brains around the world, imagine what we can create."

Human Rights Day

Human Rights Day marks the anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the UN General Assembly on 10 December, 1948.

The theme of Human Rights Day in 2010 was "human rights defenders who act to end discrimination."

Bahá'ís in Australia and across the world marked Human Rights Day with devotional gatherings and other special events.

In Bangkok, Thailand, representatives of the Bahá'í Community and delegates from other major international NGOs attended a gathering of UN ambassadors to provide input into the UN Human Rights Council review process.

The review is evaluating the work and functioning of the Council, five years after its establishment.



Top: Dr Keith Suter
Bottom: Audience members

VIPs attend holy day celebrations in Perth

Dignitaries from all levels of government and non-government organisations attended a celebration in Western Australia marking the anniversary of the birth of the founder of the Bahá'í Faith.

The commemoration of the birth of Bahá'u'lláh (1817-92) attracted a capacity attendance at the Hale School auditorium in Perth on 12 November 2010, a Bahá'í holy day.

Keynote speaker, Murdoch University Professor Duane Varan, invited all present to consider the application in society of such teachings of Bahá'u'lláh as the oneness of religion and the need to eliminate all forms of prejudice.

A member of the WA Bahá'í community, Professor Varan urged the audience to develop qualities of heart and spirit, and to strive for unity in our communities.

Other elements of the program were a welcome to country by Nyoongar elder Mr Neville Collard and a message from WA Premier, Colin Barnett, which was delivered by Member of the Legislative Council, Liz Behjat.

Other guests included the United States Consul General to Perth, Aleisha Woodward, Federal MP for Cowan Luke Simpkins, WA State MP Paul Miles, Claremont Mayor Jock Barker and Mrs Janet Barker, and other local body representatives.

A centrepiece of the celebrations was a performance by the multicultural New Era Bahá'í choir, known for its inspiring singing at events to mark Australia Day, ANZAC Day and other official occasions.

Composer, singer and conductor Greg Parker led the choir in a performance that was greeted at its conclusion by a standing ovation.



Top: US Consul General Aleisha Woodward (left) with her guest, Aaron Martin, and WA Bahá'í Council member Mona Bayly

Bottom: The New Era Choir performs at the function

Hero lived a life of service to others

A war hero who dedicated his life to building the spiritual foundations of world peace received tributes from national and international Bahá'í institutions after his recent death in Australia.

A widely loved figure, Arnold Sochindronath (Satto) Williams served the Bahá'í Faith and the wider community in the Darling Downs, Thursday Island and Bamaga in Northern Queensland, and in Fiji.

Mr Williams was a bomber pilot in the Indian Air Force when he joined the Bahá'í Faith. In accordance with the guidance of his new religion, he applied for dispensation from combatant duties.

Not only was this granted, but Mr Williams was placed in charge of helicopter rescue and relief operations in northern India.

During the 1962 hostilities between India and China, Mr Williams carried out dangerous rescue operations in the high reaches of the Himalayas, including one mission when he was wounded and his helicopter damaged by enemy fire.

In recognition of his bravery, Mr Williams received the Vir Chakra, one of the highest awards for gallantry in the Indian armed services, equivalent

to the Victoria Cross.

In 1964 Mr Williams was chosen to fly the aircraft from which the ashes of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, were scattered over the Himalayas. He later became a Boeing 747 captain with Air India.

Moving to Australia in 1978, Mr Williams and his wife Ira settled in Toowoomba. His character and abilities were soon recognised, and Mr Williams was given senior duties within the Bahá'í community.

Out of a desire to assist the indigenous peoples of Australia, Mr and Mrs Williams moved in 1991 to Thursday Island and Bamaga. After years of service there, in 2000 the couple moved to Fiji to help develop its Bahá'í community.

Upon his passing in Queensland on 25 October 2010 at the age of 83, the international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith, the Universal House of Justice, described him as stalwart, devoted and steadfast. The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia expressed deep sadness at the loss of Mr Williams.

Mr Williams is survived by his wife, two sons and five grandchildren.



Top: Satto Williams with his wife, Ira

Bottom: Satto Williams (left) receives the Vir Chakra

Bahá'ís assist with flood clean-up

Bahá'í institutions and individuals took immediate action after devastating floods hit Queensland and Victoria in January 2011.

Bahá'ís played their part in the massive clean-up operations by delivering help to their neighbours and friends, and other people in need.

Service-Connect initiative

In Brisbane, the Bahá'í local governing body, the Local Spiritual Assembly, began quickly by assigning its members to check with Bahá'ís in areas possibly hit by the floods to ask if any help was required.

On 13 January, the Spiritual Assembly with the support of the Bahá'í Council for Queensland set up a "Service-Connect" initiative, which sent out a call for volunteers to help with the clean-up of flood affected properties.

Volunteers advised the areas and times of their availability and the Service-Connect team, comprising Bizhan and Tina Vahdat and Robin Míhrshahi, put them in touch with the appropriate people in need.

Among Bahá'ís in Brisbane, the floods swamped at least 16 homes and a commercial business premises, fully stocked with electrical equipment. Home businesses were also affected.

About 100 Bahá'ís fanned out across the city to help with the clean-up. Many provided vital equipment such as generators, pressure washers, cars, wheelbarrows, and shovels.

Others provided accommodation to those whose homes had been flooded, distributed food and drink to the clean up crews, washed flood-soaked clothes, and helped in the city's relief centre.

Service-Connect also distributed a list of Bahá'í tradespeople who had offered to assist those affected by the flood, and handed out details of government and other agencies helping flood victims.

More than two weeks after the initial flooding, flood victims were still receiving some assistance via the Service-Connect project.

"People are offering household items and furniture," Dr Míhrshahi said.

"From the feedback received, people have been very appreciative of the efforts of the Bahá'í institutions and volunteers," he said.

"And we, as a community and as institutions, have gained a lot of valuable experience in dealing with disasters of this kind."

Bahá'í Centre closed

The Bahá'í Centre of Learning in Milton, Brisbane, was closed during the height of the crisis when flooding led to electricity being shut off. The flood lapped the boundary of the property but did not damage the building, which was re-occupied on 18 January.

Brisbane city was not the only area affected. A Bahá'í-owned business in Ipswich was seriously flooded, and some Bahá'ís there had to leave their homes.

The Bahá'í Council for Queensland reported that in places north of Brisbane that were first hit by floods in January, most of the homes of Bahá'ís seem to have been spared, freeing up individuals to help in their communities. However, one family in the process of moving house lost most of their belongings when a commercial storage facility was flooded.

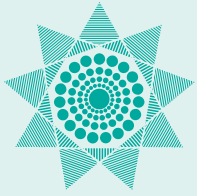
In Victoria a representative of the State's Bahá'í Council contacted Bahá'ís living in the flood affected areas of Loddon, Central Goldfields and Hepburn Shires.

One person whose home was badly flooded (for the second time in months) was being cared for by another family. The flooding crisis was ongoing at time of publication.

Around Australia, Bahá'ís held devotional gatherings to pray with friends and neighbours for the victims of the floods and the other natural disasters that occurred during summer.

Brisbane Bahá'í Paul Toloui-Wallace helps with the clean-up after the floods





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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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Open letter exposes harsh treatment of Bahá'í leaders

Australian Bahá'ís are drawing attention to an open letter to the head of Iran's judiciary which exposes the treatment of seven Bahá'í leaders in that country and calls for the human rights of all Iranians to be respected.

Written on behalf of the Bahá'ís of the world, the letter states that the injustices against Iran's Bahá'í citizens are a "reflection of the terrible oppression that has engulfed the nation".

Australian Bahá'í Community spokesperson Tessa Scrine said the letter to Ayatollah Mohammad Sadeq Larijani contrasts Iran's persecution of Bahá'ís with that government's call for Muslim minorities to be treated fairly in other countries.

"Everything Iran claims to seek on the world stage is contradicted by its treatment of its own people at home," Ms Scrine said.

Horrorific conditions

Ms Scrine said the letter describes the horrific prison conditions imposed upon the seven Bahá'í leaders who were sentenced recently to 10 years jail on charges widely regarded as spurious by the

international community.

"The seven leaders are being forced to endure appalling filth, exposure to disease, lack of facilities for basic personal hygiene and cells so cramped that it is hard for them to lie down," Ms Scrine said.

"Their health has worsened and they have no access to medical treatment," she said.

UN resolution

Two weeks after the issuing of the open letter, the General Assembly of the United Nations expressed "deep concern at serious ongoing and recurring human rights violations" in Iran.

The UN resolution, co-sponsored by the Australian Government and passed by one of the biggest percentages in more than two decades of such votes, condemned a range of human rights violations including discrimination against members of the Bahá'í Faith.

Ms Scrine said it was pleasing to see that the resolution condemned in such strong terms what is happening to human rights defenders, women and minorities in Iran.

Fire-bombers target Bahá'í businesses

A recent wave of fire-bomb attacks on Bahá'í-owned businesses in Rafsanjan, Iran, appears to be part of a campaign to fracture relationships between Bahá'ís and Muslims in the city, the Bahá'í World News Service reports.

After about a dozen attacks on shops since 25 October 2010, some 20 Bahá'í homes and businesses received an anonymous warning letter addressed to "members of the misguided Bahaist sect".

The letter demands that Bahá'ís sign an undertaking to "refrain from forming contacts or friendships with Muslims" and from "using or hiring Muslim trainees". The Bahá'ís are also

instructed not to tell anybody about the principles of their Faith, including on the Internet.

Should the conditions be accepted by the recipients, the letter states, "we will guarantee not to wage any attack on your life and properties".

The Bahá'í International Community representative to the United Nations in Geneva, Diane Ala'í, said that some Bahá'í businesses have been hit by arsonists more than once in the past two months.

"Now, in addition to their livelihoods, their very lives are being threatened unless they promise to isolate themselves from their friends and neighbours," she said.

"These attacks and threats are yet another, particularly vicious form of persecution against ordinary citizens who are simply trying to earn their living and practice their faith."



A Bahá'í-owned shop in Rafsanjan, Iran, after being attacked by arsonists