

Authorized Translation

26 August 2011

The Honorable Kamran Daneshjoo
Minister of Science, Research, and Technology
Islamic Republic of Iran

Sir:

On 6 June 2011, the Iranian Student News Agency announced that the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology had declared the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) to be illegal. This declaration was made some days after raids by government agents on the homes of around thirty Bahá'ís associated with BIHE and the imprisonment of a number of these individuals.

As you are aware, immediately following the Islamic revolution, in contravention of the laws in force at the time, Bahá'í students were expelled from your nation's universities and Bahá'í professors and lecturers dismissed from their positions. The government was insistent upon the enforcement of this injustice. Efforts to explore possible solutions with officials proved futile. By the late 1980s, it became clear that Bahá'ís could not enroll in university without denying their faith and that the government would not rectify this situation. Under these conditions, it was clearly impossible to establish a formal university for Bahá'ís; to seek a permit to do so in the face of overt government hostility would have been a fruitless, if not reckless, provocation. Consequently, the community made informal arrangements to use the volunteer services of dismissed professors to teach Bahá'í youth.

As with any other program that benefits from organization and coordination, this undertaking was gradually systematized. It was later referred to as the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education. While the Bahá'í community did not publicize this initiative at that time, nonetheless over the years others in Iran and abroad learned about this endeavor and volunteered to assist with it. Because the community was determined to meet the needs of every young person, arrangements became somewhat elaborate. However, the initiative remained an internal activity of the community. Its pursuits were limited to youth within the Bahá'í community, and it was not involved in educating the members of the general public. Most often, classes were held in Bahá'í homes. Participation was voluntary and the benefit to the students was limited. They did not expect to receive an official degree, nor was anyone promised any other benefit, such as enhanced prospects of employment. The aim was to nurture the intellectual faculties of youth so as to prepare them for service to their society. This activity of the Bahá'í community is comparable to home education or private tutoring arranged by

parents when children are unable to attend public schools. Were not such efforts well known in the past among Iranians who have always cherished and valued learning?

Since the inception of this initiative, the Islamic Republic has made repeated attempts to hinder its progress and harass its participants. Homes of Bahá'ís have been summarily searched. In these raids, computers, books, and other educational tools that had been obtained through sacrifice and hardship were confiscated. Many of those involved in the endeavor were arrested and asked to sign a commitment to eschew association with it. The 1998 raid against 500 homes of Bahá'ís throughout Iran is an example of such attacks and serves to underscore the private and domestic nature of this undertaking.

Such actions, as you know, have been conducted as a matter of official government policy and as part of a systematic campaign to eliminate the Bahá'í community as a viable entity in your country. A confidential memorandum on "The Bahá'í Question", issued in 1991 by the Iranian Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council and approved by the Supreme Leader, stated clearly the position of the Islamic Republic toward the Bahá'í community. The memorandum specifies that Iran's Bahá'ís should be treated in such a way "that their progress and development are blocked". A copy of the document is enclosed. You are, no doubt, very familiar with the stipulation, under the heading of "educational and cultural status", that Bahá'ís "must be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Bahá'ís."

Experience over the years that ensued has amply demonstrated that the policy to exclude Bahá'ís from your country's institutions of higher learning remains in full effect. In 2006, as a result of extensive protests over the continued exclusion of Bahá'ís from your nation's universities, representatives of your government told the international community on several occasions that the reference to religion that was included on the university forms did not identify applicants by their religion but only specified the religious subject on which they were to be examined. The Bahá'í community, in good faith, accepted the explanation offered. Since then, Bahá'ís have attempted to sit for the annual national entrance examination, although the difficulties they have encountered have caused their number to diminish from year to year. Nonetheless, most of those who have taken the examination have successfully passed it, some with the highest marks possible.

Months after their participation in the 2006 examinations, it transpired that—in the same year when you were publicly stating that your forms did not require Bahá'ís to deny their faith to be eligible to attend university—the Central Security Office of your own Ministry issued a letter to eighty-one universities throughout Iran, instructing them that "if Bahá'í individuals, at the time of enrollment at university or in the course of their studies, are identified as Bahá'ís, they must be expelled from university. Therefore, it is necessary to take measures to prevent the further studies of the aforementioned [individuals] and forward a follow-up report to this Office." A copy of this document is also enclosed.

Thus, Bahá'í youth are blocked from access to higher education in one way or another. They sit for the university entrance examination, only to discover that they have been disqualified on the wholly specious claim that their applications were "incomplete". Universities refuse to enroll many of those who pass the examination. A small number who are able to enroll because their religion is overlooked at the time of registration are later expelled. In some particularly cruel instances, these expulsions have been effected just weeks or days prior to the completion of their courses of study. A fair measure of whether the Bahá'ís have

access to higher education is not how many of them you permit to enter universities but how many of them were allowed to complete their studies. To any careful observer, it is evident that the only reason a few Bahá'í youth have been admitted into your universities is that such actions permit your government's officials to deny that you prohibit Bahá'ís from gaining access to higher education—a claim that is blatantly duplicitous.

And now a fresh measure of tribulation has befallen the Bahá'ís, as they are subjected to harsh treatment in interrogations about their involvement with their informal efforts for the education of youth. Individuals who assist with the educational program are threatened with imprisonment. Parents who host classes are notified that their homes will be expropriated if the classes continue. And students are warned against attending their classes and are instructed that they will never obtain a higher education so long as they do not abandon their faith and declare themselves to be Muslims. Yet, when the representatives of your government are confronted with these facts in the international arena, they continue to maintain that no one is deprived of education in Iran on account of his or her religion. How regrettable that the representatives of the Islamic Republic repeatedly peddle such obvious falsehoods, further undermining your government's credibility. When will the officials in Iran bring to an end the entrenched practice of saying one thing to Bahá'ís while offering a range of conflicting reassurances on the global stage?

It is evident to the generality of the people of the world, especially promoters of social justice, academics, students, and indeed the majority of the people in Iran, that to actively deprive any youth of access to education is reprehensible and against all legal, religious, moral, and humanitarian standards. Many government officials to whom Bahá'ís appeal for redress, including staff in your own Ministry, sympathize with the Bahá'ís, telling them that their hands are tied because they have been ordered by their superiors to abide by the provisions of the 1991 memorandum of the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council. All the while your government exacerbates the plight of young members of the Bahá'í community.

How is it that a government would debar a population of young citizens from access to higher education and then, when their families, with the help of one another, make private arrangements that bring them together in their homes to study such subjects as physics and biology, pronounce such activity to be “illegal” by citing laws that are in fact intended to guide the operation of educational institutions that serve the general public? Why is the government so ruthless in the face of the earnestness of Bahá'í youth to obtain higher education? Are not the professors in your universities calling upon their own students to cultivate the same commitment to learning?

Even though the Bahá'í community's program of higher education has never been in a position to formally award degrees to its students who have studied in this educational endeavor, the academic accomplishments of scores of graduates of these classes and their eagerness to learn have led universities in many lands to accept their work as qualifying them for post-graduate studies. What has evoked the deep admiration of the professors and classmates of those who have gone abroad for such studies is the determination evinced by these students to return to Iran after the completion of their studies despite the numerous obstacles they face and their readiness to accept every manner of hardship in their longing to contribute to the advancement of their country. Why is such dedication to the betterment of the country unappreciated by the government of Iran?

One strains to cite another example of a government that has devoted itself so systematically to blocking the educational advancement of a minority community. For it is not merely that Bahá'ís face social and institutional obstacles to their progress, as do many minorities. Nor is it simply that government policies prevent Bahá'ís from obtaining higher education, as deplorable as such an official action is. You go further, with no acceptable reason or basis, declaring it illegal for some of your citizens to use their minds to acquire knowledge for themselves!

The government of Iran now threatens Bahá'ís with widespread arrest if they do not discontinue their involvement with the higher education of Bahá'í youth. The charges are, however, very vague. What is “illegal”? To study? To learn? To accompany others in their quest to acquire knowledge? Why debar Bahá'í youth from studying or gathering together to learn, or disallow a dismissed university professor from sharing his or her learning with young people who are deprived of access to education? Ultimately, which is illegal: a government policy that excludes its citizens from higher education on the basis of their religious affiliation or the efforts of a community to educate its own youth? It is all too apparent that declaring the current efforts of the Bahá'í community to educate its youth to be illegal is, alas, but one more ploy—a transparent attempt to misuse the Bahá'í principle of obedience to government in order to get the Bahá'ís themselves to become complicit in retarding the progress of their own community.

In the eyes of Bahá'ís, government as a system for maintaining the welfare and orderly progress of human society merits both respect and wholehearted support; indeed obedience to the government is a feature of Bahá'í beliefs. This obedience, however, is not absolute. They will not, for instance, accept the least compromise on matters of fundamental spiritual principle—the education of children and youth is one such principle.

Among the Bahá'í teachings is that God “has chosen the reality of man and has honored it with intellect and wisdom, the two most luminous lights in either world.” “Knowledge,” according to our Writings, “is as wings to man’s life, and a ladder for his ascent”; its acquisition is “incumbent upon everyone”. It is “a veritable treasure for man, and a source of glory, of bounty, of joy, of exaltation, of cheer and gladness unto him.” Further, it is stated, “The happiness and pride of a nation consist in this, that it should shine out like the sun in the high heaven of knowledge.” And parents are enjoined “to strive with all effort to train the daughter and the son” and “to rear them in the bosom of sciences and arts.”

Thus, Bahá'ís consider the acquisition of knowledge to be the duty of every individual ordained by the Almighty in order to develop the latent gems of human capability and contribute to the betterment of society. All should be accorded freedom to acquire it; no government should deny this fundamental and sacred right to its citizens. Nevertheless, in response to recent government actions, the Bahá'ís of Iran are engaged in a review of their activities over the past twenty years to provide higher education to their youth and, if necessary, will make changes so as to more explicitly emphasize the informal nature of their efforts. They do this to once again demonstrate their good will.

You are well aware that Bahá'ís cannot abandon their responsibility to ensure that their young people receive in Iran the best, the most useful education that can be provided to them, nor will they deny their faith to gain access to higher education. We call on you, as the Minister responsible for the higher education of your nation’s youth, to work to bring the unjust and

oppressive practices of the government of the Islamic Republic to an end not only for the Bahá'í youth but also for all other citizens.

Respectfully,

Bahá'í International Community

Enclosures

cc: Permanent Missions of the Islamic Republic
of Iran to the United Nations,
New York and Geneva