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PRESS RELEASE

The Bahá'í International Community

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New Ploy by Iranian Government to Deprive Bahá'ís of Higher Education

Nearly 1,000 students told to enroll as Muslims or stay out of university

NEW YORK – In yet another clear violation of the human rights of the Bahá'ís of Iran, nearly 1,000 Bahá'í university-age students in Iran have been told they must accept identification as Muslims in order to enter university this year, the Bahá'í International Community has learned.

Representatives of the Bahá'í International Community heard yesterday about the action, which involves pre-printing the word “Islam” in a slot listing a prospective student’s religious affiliation on national college entrance examination results, which were distributed to students recently.

The move comes after Bahá'í students were led to believe, through Government pronouncements in the news media and private assurances, that their religion would not be an issue on university entrance forms this year in Iran.

“The Iranian Government is, in effect, attempting to force Bahá'í youth to recant their faith if they want to go to university,” said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations.

“This action goes against all the assurances that Iran has been giving the international community about its desire to respect religious freedom, and, indeed, against international covenants on human rights to which Iran is a party,” said Ms. Dugal.

For more than 20 years, Bahá'ís have been banned from institutions of higher education solely because of their religious beliefs – a violation that has been condemned in numerous international human rights forums.

The Government's move effectively extends this ban, inasmuch as Bahá'ís, as a matter of principle, do not deny their Faith.

In the past, entrance forms required that applicants list themselves as followers of one of the only four religions that enjoy official recognition in Iran – Islam, Christianity, Judaism or Zoroastrianism. These being the only choices given them, Bahá'ís, who refused to lie about their affiliation, were excluded from university.

This year examination forms had no such slot for religious affiliation. Instead, university applicants were merely asked to designate which of four approved religious subject examinations – on Islam, Christianity, Judaism or Zoroastrianism – they chose to take as part of overall university entrance examinations.

Representatives of the Bahá'í community were assured that by selecting Islam as the subject for examination there would be no implication that the students were members of that Faith.

However, according to reports from Iran, now that Bahá'í students have taken the exam, officials are saying that their action amounts to a *de facto* declaration of faith in Islam.

In that light, Bahá'í students in Iran are unable to enter university, since it would amount to a renunciation of their faith, and would be used by the authorities as evidence of such renunciation.

“For more than a year, the Government has held out the promise that Bahá'ís would, for the first time in some 20 years, be allowed to attend national institutions of higher education,” said Ms. Dugal. “Now, in what amounts to a devious ‘Catch-22’, the Government is saying ‘You can come, but you must pretend you are a Muslim.’ But that is something Bahá'ís cannot do. And the Government knows that.”

The Bahá'í community of Iran, with some 350,000 members, is Iran's largest religious minority. Since 1979, when the Islamic Republic was established, more than 200 Bahá'ís have been killed, hundreds have been imprisoned, and thousands have been denied education, employment and other rights in an on-going episode of systematic religious persecution.

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