

The Universal House of Justice

Department of the Secretariat

7 December 1983

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

In recent months the Universal House of Justice has received comments from individual American believers expressing their distress over the continuing persecution of their beloved co-workers in Iran, and proposing such ways of registering their protest as public demonstrations and the wearing of armbands and ribbons. Consideration of these comments has prompted the instruction of the House of Justice that we write you thus.

It is indeed difficult, given the heartbreaking disabilities imposed upon the Iranian Bahá'í Community and the seeming impotence of the American Community directly to effect a positive change, for the friends to be at ease. But that the situation in Iran, grave as it is, should lead to feelings of depression and alienation on the part of the American believers, as has been reported, or that it should be allowed to hamper their success in teaching on the home front, suggests the need for a proper perspective. You will sense in the comments and appeals of the beloved Guardian addressed to the American Community during 1955–56 a striking resemblance between the reactions and attitudes of the friends towards the crisis then and now. A rereading of his letter of 20 August 1955 describing the situation then and the opportunities it created for the proclamation of the Faith, and his cables of 5 January, 2 February and 22 June 1956 (*Citadel of Faith*, pages 133–42) urging action is most instructive. The American Community has displayed in the past a tendency towards periodic immobility, a condition the Guardian commented upon from time to time and that was the main concern of his last letter to the America dated 21 September 1957 (*Citadel of Faith*, pages 151–58). While the House of Justice does not now have the impression that the American believers as a whole are depressed, it feels it might be helpful to all concerned to make the following comments on the basis of that assumption, as conveyed in the correspondence received.

The American Bahá'í Community has for many years been in the forefront of defending the weak and oppressed. Its distinction in this respect won the repeated praise of the beloved Guardian, as, for example, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, his celebrated letter of 25 December 1938, affirms. Against an enumeration of afflictions that at that time threatened to force the majority of the existing Bahá'í communities into the shadows of retreat, he described the Bahá'í Community in North America as the “one chief remaining citadel, the mighty arm which still raises aloft the standard of an unconquerable Faith.” The many instances during the subsequent years in which that Community came to the aid of other defenseless communities are a testimony to the effectiveness of the American responses in times of need and trouble. But the situation in the world and in the Bahá'í community has changed. Consequently, the accustomed reactions to American interventions have also changed. While this change does not nullify the preeminent role destined for America in the eventual efflorescence of Bahá'u'lláh's system in the world, it does require the American believers to obtain a deeper understanding of their situation in relation to the changed circumstances.

The friends' response to the Iranian situation should neither be solely pragmatic nor solely spiritual, but a combination of both; moreover, it must not only meet the test of the immediate crisis, it must also match the challenge of the historic moment. In both these respects a fair appraisal of the results thus far should steel their resolve, not induce depression. Even though when viewed from the truculent reactions of the powers in Iran, the petitions and protests of the American Community in particular, the Bahá'í communities in general, appear to have been ineffective in stemming the persecutions of our brethren, there is strong reason to believe that had

the Bahá'ís around the world not taken these actions, the plight of the Iranian friends would be far more tragic. And while there is a vast array of direct action that could be, or could have been, contemplated, not every proposed action is fitting or timely. Actions perceived to be appropriate within the framework of American society can be counterproductive when viewed in the broader framework of a world community. The Bahá'í world, in its complex diversity, has been guided to act according to the assessment by the House of Justice of the immediate circumstances and the resource at hand, and in consideration of the opinions and judgments of the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran, which until its recent disbanding, functioned with heroic verve in defending the rights of those under its charge. Since the Bahá'í Community must operate as a cohesive entity, it is not conducive to its success for any single unit of that world-embracing organism to go off at a tangent in its reactions to the situation, as well-intentioned as that unit might be.

The House of Justice suggests that the American friends look at the great contrast between the relatively low profile the Faith kept before the crisis and the obvious prominence it has achieved since then; that they consider the remarkable impression that the national Bahá'í communities throughout the world have made upon their national governments and international organizations; that they contemplate the extraordinary breakthroughs for the Faith in the media of the world compared to the media's reticence toward the Cause a few years ago; and, finally, that they think of the implications of all these new advantages for the teaching work and determine dispassionately whether, in fact, the opportunities for the progress of the Faith are greater or lesser than before.

There is no gainsaying the insight set forth in the Teachings that opposition to the Faith creates opportunities for its progress. By their radiant submission to this insight, the Iranian Bahá'ís have surely demonstrated their conviction as to its potency. Motivated by their understanding of it, a number of Bahá'í communities in different parts of the world have engaged in activities that are producing concrete results in the expansion and consolidation of the Faith. For the American believers to give true expression to the anguish they feel over the persecution of their brethren, they too must capture the value of this insight and act upon it. The vision, the admonitions, the encouragement which *The Advent of Divine Justice* conveyed so many years ago, and which the Guardian elaborated in so many of his subsequent messages, are as appropriate, perhaps even more so, to the current situation as when they were first given. The responses he attempted long ago to evoke are no less desirable and necessary now; a deeper spiritual awareness, a deeper spiritual maturity are called for if the American community must pursue successfully its destined course. It should not be forgotten that the beloved Master promised, as the Guardian recalled in his early letters to America, to send intellectual, rather than physical, tests to the friends there in order to purify and better prepare them for their divinely appointed destiny. Nor should the prerequisites of success the Guardian outlined for the American Bahá'í Community be overlooked. It is in the framework of these prerequisites that the success or failure of the American Community must ultimately be measured, not from the standpoint of any frustration in effecting a desired change in the Iranian situation, which, despite its admitted distress for the community, has done more to proclaim the Cause abroad than any other experience in this century.

In a society whose people are as protestant and demonstrative as the Americans, such public displays and symbolic gestures as street demonstrations and the wearing of armbands and ribbons may have a certain appeal to public attention and may even prove to be effective in the proper context and under the proper circumstances. But the evocative power of such activities is difficult to sustain over a long period. Particularly is this so in your country where the public demonstrations of a myriad groups constantly compete for attention. The House of Justice feels that while these ephemeral activities might relieve the immediate anxieties of some of the friends, they would have no measurable effect on the course of events in Iran. Our human resources are so limited, they must be devoted to the most effective means of responding to the situation. Of infinitely more value are actions that reflect the spiritual profundity underlying these persecutions and that match the dignity, radiance and optimism for the Faith of the valorous

victims, who, as their published testimonies show, are quite clear about the reasons for their suffering and dying. Moreover, in the long view, it would not serve the best interests of the Faith for its members, at the very time of their emergence from obscurity, to impress themselves upon the consciousness of the public as a community identified with such symbols as armbands and ribbons.

An important point to bear in mind is that our activities in defense of the Iranian believers must be supported by those toward the accomplishment of our stated goals. Preoccupation with the Iranian crisis, at the expense of neglecting the Seven Year Plan, would divert the Bahá'í world community from achieving the very success necessary to the strengthening of the Faith and the confounding of its enemies. Such a neglect would be unworthy of the sufferings of the Iranian friends. Indeed, the ideal being constantly pursued is to defend them vigorously, while, at the same time, exploiting the opportunities created by their sacrifices to promote the Cause of God. The unprecedented publicity, the unremitting appeals to governments and international bodies, the increased contacts with leaders of thought and, above all, the redoubling of teaching activities and the deeper consolidation of the Bahá'í Community, as called for by the House of Justice, are ultimately the best means of defending and securing the relief of the beleaguered Iranian Community; besides, by these means will the world community of Bahá'ís be better prepared to meet the inevitable opposition yet to come elsewhere.

It is the fervent prayer of the House of Justice that the American friends will be sustained by the same unconquerable spirit that fortifies the resolute faith of their brothers and sisters in Iran, that they will be refreshed from the same fountain of hope inspired by Bahá'u'lláh's incontrovertible assurance to the loved ones of God in that land, whom He exhorts "to patience, to acquiescence, and to tranquillity," and addresses in these consoling words:

Whatever hath befallen you, hath been for the sake of God. This is the truth, and in this there is no doubt. You should, therefore, leave all your affairs in His Hands, place your trust in Him, and rely upon Him. He will assuredly not forsake you. In this, likewise, there is no doubt. No father will surrender his sons to devouring beasts; no shepherd will leave his flock to ravening wolves. He will most certainly do his utmost to protect his own.

If, however, for a few days, in compliance with God's all-encompassing wisdom, outward affairs should run their course contrary to one's cherished desire, this is of no consequence and should not matter. Our intent is that all the friends should fix their gaze on the Supreme Horizon, and cling to that which hath been revealed in the Tablets....

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat