

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

Riḍván 153

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

Our hearts overflowing with gratitude to the Blessed Beauty, we acknowledge the abundant manifestations of His grace during the Three Year Plan, which has run its course with the advent of this Riḍván Festival. The animating spirit of the Holy Year, which lent impetus to the launching of the Plan at Riḍván 1993, pervaded this period of concentrated endeavor, rendering our world community more consolidated, more resilient, more mature, and more confident than before. At the same time, the community's prestige attained new heights. While this Plan has not ended on a note of dramatic, numerical expansion, even though significant growth of membership occurred in various countries, it has nonetheless resulted in a qualitatively enriched community—one prepared to exploit the immediate prospects for the advancement of the Faith.

The magnificent progress of the projects on Mount Carmel is preeminent among the measurable achievements of this period. Indeed, despite numerous difficulties, the stage of accomplishment anticipated in our message announcing the Three Year Plan is entirely evident. All phases of construction have been initiated. The structural framework of the Center for the Study of the Texts and the Extension to the International Archives Building has been raised up and the work on these buildings has advanced towards initiation of the exterior and interior finishing work. The erection of the permanent seat of the International Teaching Centre, the third structure currently being built on the Arc, is progressing rapidly. Seven terraces below the Shrine of the Báb are now completed, foreshowing the unfolding splendor from the foot to the ridge of God's Holy Mountain. A watchful public is awed at the tapestry of beauty spreading over the mountainside.

The physical reality of the progress thus far so marvelously realized is proof of an even more profound achievement, namely, the unity of purpose effected throughout our global community in the pursuit of this gigantic, collective enterprise. The intensity of the interest and support it has evoked has expressed itself in an unprecedented outpouring of contributions, reflecting a level of sacrifice that bespeaks the quality of faith and generosity of heart of Bahá'u'lláh's lovers throughout the planet. That contributions towards the Mount Carmel Projects have met the three-year goal of seventy-four million dollars marks yet another measurable and exceptional achievement, inspiring confidence that the necessary financial support for these projects will continue until their completion by the end of the century.

The signs of progress during the past three years were evident in a wide and varied field. The remarkable efforts to expand and consolidate the community, the increased ventures in social and economic development, and the unprecedented thrust of the external affairs work combine to portray a community endowed with new capacities.

In the arena of teaching, there was a general increase of activity as indicated by the formation of twelve new National Spiritual Assemblies during the course of the Plan and by the surge of pioneering and travel-teaching. Believers in many countries were galvanized by the fresh approach suggested in the pioneer call released during the Plan. The number of pioneers from and to various countries was high, and there was a veritable flood of traveling teachers operating both at home and abroad. Systematic approaches to collective teaching activities and well-focused long-term teaching projects were fruitful and were more evident than ever before in a number of countries.

The energy and creativity attendant to the various developments in expansion and consolidation owed much to the spirit of enterprise shown by the International Teaching Centre. Its constant direction and encouragement of the Continental Boards of Counselors; its recommendation of new methods for the deployment of pioneers, as endorsed by the Universal House of Justice in the pioneer call released in the early months of the Plan, and its regular assistance to the Continental Pioneer Committees placed in its charge; its unflagging attention to the educational needs of the community as expressed in its interactions with Counselors concerning the inclusion in teaching projects of deepening programs for new believers, the devising of courses and workshops for training in different capacities, the training of children's teachers, and the multiplication of children's classes; its stimulation of efforts to establish training institutes in different parts of the world—all have produced resounding results. Major credit must also go to the Teaching Center for the influence it exerted through the Counselors on the adoption of core literature programs in an increasing number of countries. Through such programs a few titles essential to the propagation of the Faith and the deepening of the believers were selected, printed in large quantities and made available at reduced prices. The outstanding progress in the evolution of this vital institution operating at the World Center was palpable in its preparation and conduct of the Counselors' Conference last December which set the course for the work of these high-ranking officers of the Faith during the immediate years ahead.

A relevant development was the notable rise in the assumption of responsibility by indigenous believers for the teaching and consolidation work in their own countries. In greatly troubled areas, such as Angola, Cambodia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, the friends claimed important victories, whether in pursuing teaching activities which resulted in numerically significant enrollments, or in establishing and reactivating Bahá'í Assemblies, or in initiating and sustaining development projects. In places with recently formed National Spiritual Assemblies, such as countries of the former Eastern Bloc, the friends have shown an admirable capacity for administering the affairs of the Cause. A highlight of this period was the upsurge of vigor, courage and creativity in Bahá'í island communities throughout the world. The categories of activity were wide-ranging, involving the raising up of local teachers, the training and dispatch of scores of traveling teachers to neighboring islands, the inauguration of primary schools, the multiple occasions for proclamation of the Faith, the sponsorship of events attended by high-ranking officials and influential persons. The fact that in recent years a number of government leaders of island nations have visited the Bahá'í World Centre is indicative of the vitality of the activities of the believers in these small lands scattered throughout the seven seas. Taken together, all the foregoing examples of the attitudes and efforts of the friends in different settings demonstrate a heightened commitment to the teaching work and a growing maturity and resilience reflective of the depth of faith motivating Bahá'ís from diverse populations.

Consonant with these observations were the outstanding contributions of the youth to expansion and consolidation. Their activities took on added dimensions during the three-year period. Actuated by youth conferences and other gatherings attentive to their interests, youth throughout the world invested immense amounts of time, energy and zeal in the teaching work as traveling teachers within and outside their countries and as teams in collective teaching projects and, in so doing, they stimulated hundreds of new enrollments and the formation of many Local Spiritual Assemblies; involvement of youth in music and the arts as a means of proclaiming and teaching the Cause distinguished their exertions in many places; the spread of dance and drama workshops was particularly effective; participation of youth in external affairs opened new possibilities for the Faith in this field; commitment to a year of service was more widely demonstrated; at the same time there was a notable increase in the number of youth acquiring formal training and achieving academic, professional and vocational excellence—altogether an indication that the youth are doing more in direct service to the Faith while at the same time contributing to the general development of society.

Signs of the consolidation of the community were also discernible in the greater involvement of the friends in social and economic development, particularly in the field of education. In one outstanding instance, a government asked the Bahá'ís to take responsibility for the management of seven public schools, and they did so with the backing of the Office of Social and Economic Development at the World Center. Worthy of note is that in Africa Bahá'í communities in exile because of political unrest in their home country continued to develop farming and other projects that went far towards ensuring self-sufficiency. Efforts at improving the status of women gathered momentum in a number of countries where, in addition to Bahá'í participation in projects sponsored by other organizations, the Bahá'í institutions set up committees and offices to attend to the interests of women. The Bahá'í International Community's Office for the Advancement of Women emerged as a symbol of this upswing.

In a number of countries, too, there was significant Bahá'í participation in government-sponsored programs to improve health; in other instances Bahá'í groups initiated such programs and carried them out. The work in social and economic development was also distinguished by the firm establishment and consolidation of a number of major projects and organizations. Three pilot literacy projects were begun as a first step in a literacy campaign which the Office of Social and Economic Development intends to extend throughout the world. The Bahá'í initiation and involvement in development projects also resulted in proclamation of the Faith as they attracted the participation of the public and the interest of mass media.

A thrust in the external affairs work exceeding all previous records for a similar period boosted the proclamation of the Cause. A prodigy of effort in all parts of the world redounded to a much greater visibility of the Faith than obtained before and to a consequent rise in the prestige of the Bahá'í international community. The broad lines of progress were evident in the ease with which Bahá'í communities, large and small, sponsored or participated in public events; in the emergence of the Bahá'ís as a force in society recognized by governmental and nongovernmental organizations and many prominent persons; in the ready accessibility of the media. Indeed, the wide coverage accorded Bahá'í events and interests by the print and electronic communications media was beyond calculation.

In the sweep of activities throughout the world, certain specific developments stood out: the frequency with which high public officials would invite Bahá'ís to participate in or assist with events or projects; the successful initiatives of Bahá'ís in influencing government action; the establishment of Bahá'í academic programs and courses in colleges and universities and the adoption of curricular material for public schools; the use of the arts by Bahá'í institutions, groups and individuals in proclamation events.

During 1995, two major United Nations events exemplified the gathering momentum of an emerging unity of thought in world undertakings, and these engaged the active attention and participation of the Bahá'í community. First, the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen during March involved 250 friends from more than 40 countries who mounted an impressive effort to acquaint the summit participants and the related NGO Forum with the Teachings. It was on this occasion that the statement *The Prosperity of Humankind*, produced by the Bahá'í International Community's Office of Public Information, was first distributed and discussed. Follow-up activities all over the world included the holding of conferences and seminars, as well as the distribution of the statement. Second, the Fourth World Conference on Women and the concomitant NGO Forum held in Beijing during September drew the attendance of more than 500 Bahá'ís from around the world, in addition to the official delegation of the Bahá'í International Community. In that same year, a third event, the observance of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the United Nations, prompted the Bahá'í International Community's United Nations Office to produce and distribute a statement, entitled "Turning Point for All Nations," containing proposals for the development of that world organization.

Also of particular note among the external affairs activities were two occasions involving the prominent participation of Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum. Last spring she headed the delegation of the four official Bahá'í representatives to the Summit on the Alliance between Religions and Conservation, patronized by His Royal Highness Prince Philip and held at Windsor Castle. During October Rúhíyyih Khánum was the keynote speaker at the Fourth International Dialogue on the Transition to Global Society held under the auspices of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and organized by the Bahá'í Chair for World Peace and the Department of History at the University of Maryland.

Nor can we neglect to mention certain other significant marks of the period under review. An edition of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas in the original Arabic was published with, for the first time, notes in Persian, supplementing the text as in the English edition. The Law of Ḥuqúqu'lláh became more deeply rooted in the hearts of the believers throughout the world, and during the final year of the Plan, the Trustee of Ḥuqúqu'lláh, Hand of the Cause of God 'Alí-Muḥammad Varqá, took up residence in the Holy Land. This significant step also means that all three Hands of the Cause of God—Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum, Mr. 'Alí-Akbar Furútan, and Dr. Varqá—are now residing at the World Center, bringing inspiration to pilgrims and visitors, and to the friends serving at the World Center.

It is against such a background of heartening developments that we embark at this Riḍván upon a Four Year Plan that will carry us to Riḍván 2000. We earnestly and lovingly call upon our brothers and sisters of every land to join us in a mobilization of effort that will ensure to generations of the fast-approaching twenty-first century an abundant and lasting legacy.

The Four Year Plan aims at one major accomplishment: a significant advance in the process of entry by troops. As we have stated earlier, such an advance is to be achieved through marked progress in the activity and development of the individual believer, of the institutions, and of the local community.

The phrase “advance in the process of entry by troops” accommodates the concept that current circumstances demand and existing opportunities allow for a sustained growth of the Bahá'í world community on a large scale; that this upsurge is necessary in the face of world conditions; that the three constituent participants in the upbuilding of the Order of Bahá'u'lláh—the individual, the institutions, and the community—can foster such growth first by spiritually and mentally accepting the possibility of it, and then by working towards embracing masses of new believers, setting in motion the means for effecting their spiritual and administrative training and development, thereby multiplying the number of knowledgeable, active teachers and administrators whose involvement in the work of the Cause will ensure a constant influx of new adherents, an uninterrupted evolution of Bahá'í Assemblies, and a steady consolidation of the community.

Moreover, to advance the process implies that that process is already in progress and that local and national communities are at different stages of it. All communities are now tasked to take steps and sustain efforts to achieve a level of expansion and consolidation commensurate with their possibilities. The individual and the institutions, while operating in distinctive spheres, are summoned to arise to meet the requirements of this crucial time in the life of our community and in the fortunes of all humankind.

The role of the individual is of unique importance in the work of the Cause. It is the individual who manifests the vitality of faith upon which the success of the teaching work and the development of the community depend. Bahá'u'lláh's command to each believer to teach His Faith confers an inescapable responsibility which cannot be transferred to, or assumed by, any institution of the Cause. The individual alone can exercise those capacities which include the ability to take initiative, to seize opportunities, to form friendships, to interact personally with others, to build relationships, to win the cooperation of others in common service to the Faith and

society, and to convert into action the decisions made by consultative bodies. It is the individual's duty to "consider every avenue of approach which he might utilize in his personal attempts to capture the attention, maintain the interest, and deepen the faith, of those whom he seeks to bring into the fold of his Faith."

To optimize the use of these capacities, the individual draws upon his love for Bahá'u'lláh, the power of the Covenant, the dynamics of prayer, the inspiration and education derived from regular reading and study of the Holy Texts, and the transformative forces that operate upon his soul as he strives to behave in accordance with the divine laws and principles. In addition to these, the individual, having been given the duty to teach the Cause, is endowed with the capacity to attract particular blessings promised by Bahá'u'lláh. "Whoso openeth his lips in this Day," the Blessed Beauty asserts, "and maketh mention of the name of his Lord, the hosts of Divine inspiration shall descend upon him from the heaven of My name, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise. On him shall also descend the Concourse on high, each bearing aloft a chalice of pure light."

Shoghi Effendi underscored the absolute necessity of individual initiative and action. He explained that without the support of the individual, "at once wholehearted, continuous and generous," every measure and plan of his National Spiritual Assembly is "foredoomed to failure," the purpose of the Master's Divine Plan is "impeded"; furthermore, the sustaining strength of Bahá'u'lláh Himself "will be withheld from every and each individual who fails in the long run to arise and play his part." Hence, at the very crux of any progress to be made is the individual believer, who possesses the power of execution which only he can release through his own initiative and sustained action. Regarding the sense of inadequacy that sometimes hampers individual initiative, a letter written on his behalf conveys the Guardian's advice: "Chief among these, you mention the lack of courage and of initiative on the part of the believers, and a feeling of inferiority which prevents them from addressing the public. It is precisely these weaknesses that he wishes the friends to overcome, for these do not only paralyze their efforts but actually serve to quench the flame of faith in their hearts. Not until all the friends come to realize that every one of them is able, in his own measure, to deliver the Message, can they ever hope to reach the goal that has been set before them by a loving and wise Master.... Everyone is a potential teacher. He has only to use what God has given him and thus prove that he is faithful to his trust."

As for the institutions, entry by troops will act upon them as much as they will act upon it. The evolution of local and national Bahá'í Assemblies at this time calls for a new state of mind on the part of their members as well as on the part of those who elect them, for the Bahá'í community is engaged in an immense historical process that is entering a critical stage. Bahá'u'lláh has given to the world institutions to operate in an Order designed to canalize the forces of a new civilization. Progress towards that glorious realization requires a great and continuous expansion of the Bahá'í community, so that adequate scope is provided for the maturation of these institutions. This is a matter of immediate importance to Bahá'u'lláh's avowed supporters in all lands.

For such an expansion to be stimulated and accommodated, the Spiritual Assemblies must rise to a new stage in the exercise of their responsibilities as channels of divine guidance, planners of the teaching work, developers of human resources, builders of communities, and loving shepherds of the multitudes. They can realize these prospects through increasing the ability of their members to take counsel together in accordance with the principles of the Faith and to consult with the friends under their jurisdiction, through fostering the spirit of service, through spontaneously collaborating with the Continental Counselors and their auxiliaries, and through cultivating their external relations. Particularly must the progress in the evolution of the institutions be manifest in the multiplication of localities in which the functioning of the Spiritual Assembly enhances the individual believers' capacity to serve the Cause and fosters unified action. In sum, the maturity of the Spiritual Assembly must be measured not only by the regularity of its meetings and the efficiency of its functioning, but also by the continuity of the growth of Bahá'í

membership, the effectiveness of the interaction between the Assembly and the members of its community, the quality of the spiritual and social life of the community, and the overall sense of vitality of a community in the process of dynamic, ever-advancing development.

The community, as distinguished from the individual and the institutions, assumes its own character and identity as it grows in size. This is a necessary development to which much attention is required both with respect to places where large-scale enrollment has occurred and in anticipation of more numerous instances of entry by troops. A community is of course more than the sum of its membership; it is a comprehensive unit of civilization composed of individuals, families and institutions that are originators and encouragers of systems, agencies and organizations working together with a common purpose for the welfare of people both within and beyond its own borders; it is a composition of diverse, interacting participants that are achieving unity in an unremitting quest for spiritual and social progress. Since Bahá'ís everywhere are at the very beginning of the process of community building, enormous effort must be devoted to the tasks at hand.

As we have said in an earlier message, the flourishing of the community, especially at the local level, demands a significant enhancement in patterns of behavior: those patterns by which the collective expression of the virtues of the individual members and the functioning of the Spiritual Assembly are manifest in the unity and fellowship of the community and the dynamism of its activity and growth. This calls for the integration of the component elements—adults, youth and children—in spiritual, social, educational and administrative activities; and their engagement in local plans of teaching and development. It implies a collective will and sense of purpose to perpetuate the Spiritual Assembly through annual elections. It involves the practice of collective worship of God. Hence, it is essential to the spiritual life of the community that the friends hold regular devotional meetings in local Bahá'í centers, where available, or elsewhere, including the homes of believers.

To effect the possibilities of expansion and consolidation implied by entry by troops, a determined, worldwide effort to develop human resources must be made. The endeavor of individuals to conduct study classes in their homes, the sponsorship by the institutions of occasional courses of instruction, and the informal activities of the community, though important, are not adequate for the education and training of a rapidly expanding community. It is therefore of paramount importance that systematic attention be given to devising methods for educating large numbers of believers in the fundamental verities of the Faith and for training and assisting them to serve the Cause as their God-given talents allow. There should be no delay in establishing permanent institutes designed to provide well-organized, formally conducted programs of training on a regular schedule. Access of the institute to physical facilities will of course be necessary, but it may not require a building of its own.

This matter calls for an intensification of the collaboration between the Continental Counselors and National Spiritual Assemblies. For the success of these training institutes will depend in very large measure on the active involvement of the Continental Counselors and the Auxiliary Board members in their operation. Particularly will it be necessary for Auxiliary Board members to have a close working relationship with institutes and, of course, with the Local Spiritual Assemblies whose communities will benefit from institute programs. Since institutes are to be regarded as centers of learning, and since their character harmonizes with, and provides scope for the exercise of, the educational responsibilities of the Auxiliary Board members, the intimate involvement in institute operations should now become a part of the evolving functions of these officers of the Faith. Drawing on the talents and abilities of increasing numbers of believers will also be crucial to the development and execution of institute programs.

As the term “institute” has assumed various uses in the Bahá'í community, a word of clarification is needed. The next four years will represent an extraordinary period in the history of our Faith, a turning point of epochal magnitude. What the friends throughout the world are now

being asked to do is to commit themselves, their material resources, their abilities and their time to the development of a network of training institutes on a scale never before attempted. These centers of Bahá'í learning will have as their goal one very practical outcome, namely, the raising up of large numbers of believers who are trained to foster and facilitate the process of entry by troops with efficiency and love.

“Center your energies in the propagation of the Faith of God,” Bahá'u'lláh thus instructs His servants, adding, “Whoso is worthy of so high a calling, let him arise and promote it. Whoso is unable, it is his duty to appoint him who will, in his stead, proclaim this Revelation....” Just as one deputizes another to teach in one's stead by covering the expenses of a pioneer or traveling teacher, one can deputize a teacher serving an institute, who is, of course, a teacher of teachers. To do so, one may make contributions to the Continental Bahá'í Fund, as well as to the Local, National and International Funds, earmarked for this purpose.

In all their efforts to achieve the aim of the Four Year Plan, the friends are also asked to give greater attention to the use of the arts, not only for proclamation, but also for the work in expansion and consolidation. The graphic and performing arts and literature have played, and can play, a major role in extending the influence of the Cause. At the level of folk art, this possibility can be pursued in every part of the world, whether it be in villages, towns or cities. Shoghi Effendi held high hopes for the arts as a means for attracting attention to the Teachings. A letter written on his behalf to an individual thus conveys the Guardian's view: “The day will come when the Cause will spread like wildfire when its spirit and teachings will be presented on the stage or in art and literature as a whole. Art can better awaken such noble sentiments than cold rationalizing, especially among the mass of the people.”

While the friends and institutions everywhere bend their energies to implementing the requirements of the Plan, work on the great projects on Mount Carmel will continue towards their anticipated completion at the end of the century. By the end of the Plan at Ridván 2000, the buildings for the Center for the Study of the Texts and the Extension of the Archives Building will become operational; the International Teaching Centre building will have advanced to the final finishing stage. The section of the public road which now interrupts the path of the terraces above the Shrine of the Báb will have been lowered and a broad connecting bridge with its own gardens will have been built; five of the upper terraces will also have been completed. The remaining four upper terraces and the two at the foot of the mountain will be in an advanced stage of development. Other particular efforts will be pursued at the World Center as well. Attention will be given to such matters as the universal application of additional laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the preparation of a new volume in English of selected Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the further development of the functions of the International Teaching Centre, and the devising of measures for increasing the number of pilgrims and visitors to the World Center.

The Bahá'í world community will expand its endeavors in both social and economic development and external affairs, and thus continue to collaborate directly with the forces leading towards the establishment of order in the world. By improving its coordinating capacity, the Office of Social and Economic Development will assist in building, as resources and opportunity permit, on the progress already made with hundreds of development projects around the world. In the arena of external affairs, efforts will be aimed at influencing the processes towards world peace, particularly through the community's involvement in the promotion of human rights, the status of women, global prosperity, and moral development. In the pursuit of these themes, the Bahá'í International Community's United Nations Office will seek ways to reinforce the ties between the Bahá'ís and the United Nations. Similarly, the Office of Public Information will assist the Bahá'í institutions to utilize these themes towards greater proclamation of the Faith. Defense of the rights of the Bahá'ís in Iran and increased efforts to emancipate the Faith in that country and other countries where it is proscribed will constitute a vital part of our dealings with governments and nongovernmental organizations. In all such respects the Bahá'í friends and institutions are

urged to be alert to the importance of activities in external affairs and to give renewed attention to them.

The formation this Riḍván of two National Spiritual Assemblies lends a propitious beginning to the Four Year Plan. We are delighted to announce that our two representatives to the inaugural National Conventions are the Hand of the Cause of God Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum, Moldova; and Mr. Fred Schechter, Counselor member of the International Teaching Centre, São Tomé and Príncipe. Regrettably, due to circumstances entirely beyond their control, the National Spiritual Assemblies of Burundi and Rwanda cannot be reelected this year. The number of these institutions worldwide will consequently remain at 174.

Riḍván 2000, the point at which the Four Year Plan is to be concluded, will come many months before the end of the twentieth century. At that juncture in time, the Bahá'í world will look back in appreciation at the extraordinary developments and dazzling achievements that will have distinguished the annals of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh during that eventful period—a period which 'Abdu'l-Bahá called the “century of light.” Not the least of the accomplishments then to be recognized will be the completion of the current projects on Mount Carmel which, together with the other edifices on that holy mountain, will stand as a monument to the progress which the Administrative Order will have attained by that time in the Formative Age. The highlight of such appreciations will, God willing, be the holding at the World Center of a major event to mark the completion of the buildings on the Arc and the opening of the Terraces of the Shrine of the Báb to the public.

Beloved Friends, we enter this Plan amid the turbulence of a period of accelerating transition. The twin processes prompted by the impact of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation are fast at work, gathering a momentum that will, in the words of Shoghi Effendi, “bring to a climax the forces that are transforming the face of our planet.” One is an integrating process; the other is disruptive. Out of the “universal fermentation” created by these processes, peace will emerge in stages, through which the unifying effects of a growing consciousness of world citizenship will become manifest.

Towards that end, recent world developments have, paradoxically, been both shocking and reassuring. On one hand, the disarray of human affairs produces a daily diet of horrors that numb the senses; on the other, world leaders are often taking collective actions that, to a Bahá'í observer, signify a tendency towards a common approach by nations to solving world problems. Consider, for instance, the unusual frequency of the global occasions on which these leaders have gathered since the Holy Year four years ago, such as the one in observance of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the United Nations, at which the attending heads of state and heads of government asserted their commitment to world peace. Noteworthy, too, are the promptitude and spontaneity with which these government leaders have been acting together in responding to a variety of crises in different parts of the world. Such trends coincide with the increasing cries from enlightened circles for attention to be given to the feasibility of achieving some form of global governance. Might we not see in these swiftly developing occurrences the workings of the Hand of Providence, indeed the very harbinger of the monumental occasion forecast in our Writings?

Even though the establishment of the Lesser Peace is not dependent on any Bahá'í plan or action, and although it will not represent the ultimate goal humanity is destined to reach in the Golden Age, our community has a responsibility to lend spiritual impetus to the processes towards that peace. The need at this exact time is to so intensify our efforts in building the Bahá'í System that we will attract the confirmations of Bahá'u'lláh and thus invoke a spiritual atmosphere that will accrue to the quickening of these processes. Two main challenges face us: one is to mount a campaign of teaching in which the broad membership of our community is enthusiastically, systematically and personally engaged, and in which the activation of an extensive training program will ensure the development of a mass of human resources; the other is to complete the construction projects on Mount Carmel towards which every sacrifice must be made to provide a liberal outpouring of material means. These twin foci, if resolutely pursued, will foster conditions

towards the release of pent-up forces that will forge a change in the direction of human affairs throughout the planet.

However short the path to peace, it will be tortuous; however promising the anticipated event that will set its course, it must mature through a long period of evolution, with its attendant tests, setbacks and conflicts, towards the moment when it will have emerged, under the direct influences of God's Faith, as the Most Great Peace. In the meantime, people everywhere will often face despair and bewilderment before arriving at an appreciation of the transition in progress. We who have been enlightened by the new Revelation have the sacred Word to assure us, a Divine Plan to guide us, a history of valor to encourage us. Let us therefore take heart not only from the Word we treasure, but also from the deeds of heroism and sacrifice which even today shine resplendent in the land in which our Cause was born.

For some seventeen years our persecuted brethren in Iran have demonstrated a constancy of faith and courage that has produced a vast proclamation of the Faith, forcing it out of obscurity. Here then is living evidence in our own time of the potencies of crisis and victory. Please God, it may not be too long before our Iranian brethren are relieved of the yoke they bear and are ushered into the glories and wonders of a victory that only the Blessed Beauty can bestow. Their experience is a signal and an example to us all wherever we may live; for eventually, opposition, as the Master has told us, will rear its head on all the continents. Though it may be of a different character from place to place, it will no doubt be intensive. But, thanks to the strengthening grace of Bahá'u'lláh and the demonstration of steadfastness by these noble friends, we shall know how to meet the shafts of the enemy without fear. Indeed, the Lord of Hosts has promised to deliver to His people an overwhelming and decisive triumph.

As humanity is tossed and tormented by the ravages inflicted upon it by a civilization gone out of control, let us keep our heads and hearts focused on the divine tasks set before us. For amid this turmoil opportunities will abound that must be exploited "for the purpose of spreading far and wide the knowledge of the redemptive power of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh and for enlisting fresh recruits in the ever-swelling army of His followers." This Plan to which we are now committed is set at one of the most critical times in the life of the planet. It is meant to prepare our community to cope with the accelerating changes that are occurring in the world about us and to place the community in a position both to withstand the weight of the accompanying tests and challenges and to make more visible a pattern of functioning to which the world can turn for aid and example in the wake of a tumultuous transition. Thus, this Plan acquires a special place in the scheme of Bahá'í and world history. Those of us who are alive to the vision of the Faith are particularly privileged to be consciously engaged in efforts intended to stimulate and eventually enhance such processes.

May you all arise to seize the tasks of this crucial moment. May each inscribe his or her own mark on a brief span of time so charged with potentialities and hope for all humanity. Lest you become distracted or preoccupied with the drastic happenings of this age of transition, bear ever in mind the advice of our infallible guide, Shoghi Effendi: "Not ours, puny mortals that we are, to attempt, at so critical a stage in the long and checkered history of mankind, to arrive at a precise and satisfactory understanding of the steps which must successively lead a bleeding humanity, wretchedly oblivious of its God, and careless of Bahá'u'lláh, from its calvary to its ultimate resurrection.... Ours rather the duty, however confused the scene, however dismal the present outlook, however circumscribed the resources we dispose of, to labor serenely, confidently, and unremittingly to lend our share of assistance, in whichever way circumstances may enable us, to the operation of the forces which, as marshaled and directed by Bahá'u'lláh, are leading humanity out of the valley of misery and shame to the loftiest summits of power and glory."

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]
