

The Universal House of Justice

Riḍván 156

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

Our hearts are aglow with hope as we survey what has been accomplished in the year preceding the fateful, final stretch toward the consummation of the Four Year Plan. From the year's momentous beginning with the Eighth International Bahá'í Convention, the Bahá'í world has sustained a rising pace of activity that has significantly advanced the process of entry by troops. Our community has grown appreciably, its human resources have been richly enhanced. From projects of expansion to endeavors at consolidation, from social and economic development to external affairs, from services of the youth to expressions in the arts, from the World Center of the Faith to remote villages and towns—in fact, from whatever angle the community is viewed—progress has been made. The prospects for the Plan are impelling.

The momentum generated at the International Convention pervaded the Counselors' Conference that immediately followed it, further galvanizing the indefatigable participants; and it charged the proceedings of the National Conventions held in May, including those of Sabah, Sarawak, and Slovakia which met for the first time to form their National Spiritual Assemblies. That same energy infused the International Teaching Centre, which has been displaying a remarkable potency in the short time since its sixth term began on the anniversary of the Declaration of the Báb. Concentrating on refining and consolidating their organization, the Counselor members have refrained from their usual travels during this first year, but they can be expected after this to resume their visits to various parts of the world, so as to reinforce their vitalizing influence on the successful conclusion of the Four Year Plan.

Further to these happenings in the Holy Land, the construction projects on Mount Carmel, beheld with such thrilling astonishment by the delegates to the International Convention, press onward towards their scheduled completion at the end of the century. With the opening since last Riḍván of all remaining areas of construction, the speed of work has reached a new peak. The Center for the Study of the Texts and the Extension to the Archives Building are being readied for occupancy within a few weeks; the exterior of the International Teaching Centre building is fully clad in marble, while finishing work at all levels of its interior is proceeding. The lowering of Hatzionut Avenue, to accommodate the bridge which now connects the Terraces of the Shrine of the Báb on both sides of the road, has been completed and normal traffic restored. The unfolding magnificence of the Terraces has so captured public attention that the nineteenth terrace at the top of the mountain has already been opened to visitors on a daily schedule, evoking the enthusiastic response of a grateful populace. As part of a campaign to attract international attention to the city, the Municipality of Haifa has published a pictorial brochure on the Shrine of the Báb and the Terraces, available in five major languages besides Hebrew.

We feel compelled to mention at least two other developments at the World Center of a wholly different order: First, the decision to raise the number of pilgrims in each group to 150 from 100—this to take effect when the revamping, now in progress, of the newly acquired building, situated across the way from the resting place of the Greatest Holy Leaf, has been completed and use can be made of its provision of a pilgrim hall and other facilities for the administration of an expanded pilgrimage program. Second is the notable headway being made, despite the inevitable slowness of the process, in the plan to translate texts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh with a view to publishing a new English volume of His works. Effort is being devoted to providing full versions of such major Tablets as the Súriy-i-Mulúk and the Súriy-i-Haykal, as well as complete texts of Tablets addressed to individual kings and rulers. Also scheduled for inclusion are the Súriy-i-Ra'ís, the Lawḥ-i-Ra'ís and the Lawḥ-i-Fu'ád.

The Cause of Bahá'u'lláh marches on resistlessly, quickened by the increasing application of an approach to the development and use of human resources that is systematic. The further creation of national and regional training institutes, now numbering 344, has pressed this development forward, with the result that, apart from North America and Iran where numerous courses have been given, some 70,000 individuals have already completed at least one institute course. All of this is contributing to a growing body of confirmed, active supporters of the Cause. The untold potential of this progression is illustrated in such reports as the one received from Chad, where in an area served by an institute more than 1,000 people embraced the Faith through the individual efforts of those who had received training. Understanding of the necessity for systematization in the development of human resources is everywhere taking hold.

Collateral with the demonstrated efficacy of training institutes is the pragmatic emergence of Regional Bahá'í Councils in selected countries where conditions have made the establishment of these institutions necessary and viable. Where there is close interaction between a Council and a training institute, the stage is set for a galvanic coherence of the processes effecting expansion and consolidation in a region, and for the practical matching of the training services of institutes to the developmental needs of local communities. Moreover, the operational guidelines whereby the Continental Counselors and the Regional Councils have direct access to each other give rise to a further institutional relationship which, along with that connecting the Councils to the National and Local Spiritual Assemblies, effectuates a dynamic integration of functions at the regional level.

The ever-expanding work in social and economic development is also benefiting from the operation of those training institutes that give attention to such subjects as literacy, primary health care and the advancement of women. The more widespread efforts of the Office of Social and Economic Development to promote a global process of learning about relevant Bahá'í principles are enhanced by the work of these institutes, as well as by the rise of Bahá'í-inspired organizations scattered throughout the planet. Clearly, then, the institutional capacity to administer development programs is gaining in strength. This is apparent in projects sponsored by Bahá'í institutions or initiated by individuals through the inspiration of the Faith. An outstanding example of the latter is Unity College, which was created by a family in Ethiopia as the first, and since late 1998, the only private college in the country, with a student body that swelled to 5,000 during this past year. Another example, on a smaller scale but of significance nonetheless, is the initiative taken by a family in Buffalo, New York: here, in their home, they have been assisting tens of children and youth from the inner city to develop, through Bahá'í spiritual and moral teachings, patterns of behavior that will enable them to overcome self-destructive attitudes bred by poverty and racism.

In the area of external affairs, the most energetic actions have been prompted by two tragic happenings in Iran. The sudden execution in Mashhad last July of Mr. Rúḥu'lláh Rawḥání, the first such official action in six years, registered a shock that provoked a worldwide and unprecedented outcry by governments and United Nations agencies. In late September the government's intelligence agency launched an organized attack on the Bahá'í Institute of Higher Education, involving the arrest of 36 members of the faculty and raids on more than 500 homes across the country. The latter incident inspired a global campaign of protest, still in progress, in which academic institutions and associations, educators, and student groups have been participating, and in which the press has taken a special interest, as reflected in the appearance of substantial articles in *Le Monde*, *The New York Times* and other major newspapers. The successful passage in the United Nations General Assembly last December of yet another resolution on Iran, in which the Bahá'ís are distinctly mentioned, must surely have been influenced by these two conspicuous manifestations of an unrelenting religious persecution.

But intensive as has been the demand upon the friends in all parts of the world to defend our beleaguered brethren, much attention was devoted as well to a wide range of external affairs endeavors. The four-month-long mission undertaken by an emissary of the House of Justice, Mr.

Giovanni Ballerio, to islands of the Pacific Ocean where he met with 22 heads of state, 5 heads of government and more than 40 other high-ranking officials; the efforts pursued by a number of National Assemblies, at the urging of the Bahá'í International Community's United Nations Office, to promote human rights education; the participation, by invitation, of representatives of South Africa's Bahá'í community in the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, at which they were able to recount their record of unflinching support of racial unity throughout the years of apartheid; the recent success of communities in Australia, Brazil, Finland and Portugal in obtaining the decision of educational authorities to include courses on the Bahá'í Faith in the curricula of primary and secondary schools—these, not to mention the public information projects that generated publicity through all forms of the media, are examples of the broadly based enterprises in external affairs that engaged the energies of the community.

A corollary spate of activities involved the use of the arts, of which the musical and other artistic performances associated with the celebration in Paris of the centenary of the establishment of the Faith in Europe were an outstanding instance. The Voices of Bahá Choir, composed of 68 members drawn from Europe and the Americas, delighted audiences in eight European cities and introduced the Faith to many. "Light and Fire," the completed part of an opera/ballet being written by Bahá'í composer Lasse Thoresen of Norway, was successfully performed last September at the prestigious music festival in Poland known as the Warsaw Autumn, which was opened by the Queen of Sweden. The work is based on recent heroic acts of the martyrs in Iran, a fact that exposed the audience to knowledge of the Faith. Europe's apparent lead in these particular endeavors was also marked by the occasion of the Austrian Chamber Music Festival when the Austrian Cross for Sciences and Arts, the highest award of its kind for Austria, was presented by the President of the Republic to Mr. Bijan Khadem-Missagh, a Bahá'í violinist and conductor. A program at that same Festival featured the recitation of extracts from Bahá'í and other sacred scriptures. But a word, too, must be said in recognition of the prominent part being played by youth all over the world in their employment of the arts in the teaching work; renditions by their dance workshops, in particular, have acquired renown within and outside the Bahá'í community.

We therefore enter this Ridván season, as a community in a dynamic state of transformation, enjoying a coherence of vision and activity consonant with the aim of advancing the process of entry by troops. And we begin the final year of the Plan with a boost in administrative strength, as three countries in Europe—Latvia, Lithuania and Macedonia—convoke their first Conventions to form National Spiritual Assemblies and thus raise the number of pillars of the Universal House of Justice to 182. But beyond this festive moment is a chronology of expectations that lists, first and foremost, the conclusion of the Four Year Plan at Ridván 2000. This will be followed by the commencement on the Day of the Covenant of that very year of a new term of office for the Continental Boards of Counselors, whose members will soon thereafter be called to the Bahá'í World Centre for a conference at which, among other matters, the features of the next global teaching and consolidation plan will be discussed. The Counselors' Conference will mark the occupation by the International Teaching Centre of its permanent seat, an occasion for which Auxiliary Board members throughout the world will be invited to join the Counselors in the Holy Land. The Mount Carmel projects will have been completed by this time and the preparations will have been well advanced for dedicatory events, scheduled to take place on 22 and 23 May 2001, to which a number of representatives from each national Bahá'í community will be invited. The details concerning these events are to be announced in due course.

This projection of portentous happenings cuts across the divide in time between the twentieth century and the new millennium, according to the reckoning of the common era. It is a projection that underscores the contrast between the confident vision that propels the constructive endeavors of an illumined community and the tangled fears seizing the millions upon millions who are as yet unaware of the Day in which they are living. Bereft of authentic guidance, they dwell on the horrors of the century, despairing over what these could imply for the future, hardly appreciating that this very century contains a light that will be shed on centuries to come. Ill-

equipped to interpret the social commotion at play throughout the planet, they listen to the pundits of error and sink deeper into a slough of despond. Troubled by forecasts of doom, they do battle with the phantoms of a wrongly informed imagination. Knowing nothing of the transformative vision vouchsafed by the Lord of the Age, they stumble ahead, blind to the peerlessness of the new Day of God.

The pitiful conditions implied by such a state of heart and mind cannot but prompt us all to action, unabating action, to fulfill the intentions of a Plan whose major aim is to accelerate that process which will make it possible for growing numbers of the world's people to find the Object of their quest and thus to build a united, peaceful and prosperous life.

Dear Friends: The days pass swiftly as the twinkle of a star. Make your mark now, at this crucial turning point of a juncture, the like of which shall never return. Make that mark in deeds that will ensure for you celestial blessings—guarantee for you, for the entire race, a future beyond any earthly reckoning.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]