

The Universal House of Justice

Riḍván 2003

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

As the Five Year Plan enters upon its third year, momentum is building: the record of achievement during the year just ended far outdistanced that of the previous twelve months. The thrust of this momentum owes as much to the increased coherence achieved in the Plan's constituent elements as to the animating effect of the spirit of unrest pervading the planet.

The circumstances attending the opening of this new administrative year are at once critical, challenging and extraordinary in their significance. The entire course of the previous year was agitated by a succession of crises that culminated in the outbreak of war in the Middle East. The implications are no less significant for the progress of the community of the Most Great Name than for the evolution of an increasingly global society in the throes of a turbulent transition. Of necessity, the timing, scale and tendencies of this transition have not been predictable. How swift indeed has been the current change in the tide of world conditions! In the resultant conflict, involving so conspicuously the countries in which the earliest history of the Cause took shape, we see a fresh reminder of Bahá'u'lláh's warning that the "world's equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order." That the events of this crisis directly affect a territory with as rich a Bahá'í legacy as Iraq is particularly noteworthy.

The disruptions caused by this and other situations in the world have, in one instance, suggested the opening of a new chapter in the history of the highly prized but woefully oppressed Bahá'í community of a land in which the Manifestation of God for this Day resided for a whole decade. In another, they have dashed the preparations for the Ninth International Convention at the World Centre of our Faith. But, however disappointing, this calls for no dismay. When the Major Plan of God interferes with His Minor Plan, there should be no doubt that in due course a way will providentially be opened to an opportunity of stellar possibilities for advancing the interests of His glorious Cause.

The sorrows, fears and perplexities evoked by this latest conflict in the unfoldment of the Lesser Peace have intensified the feelings of grievance and outrage at the recurrent crises agitating the planet. The anxieties of people across the globe are even now being played out publicly in angry demonstrations too overwhelming to be ignored. The issues they protest and the emotions they arouse often add to the chaos and confusion they hope by such public displays to resolve. For the friends of God, there is an unambiguous explanation for what is occurring; they have only to recall the vision and principles offered by the Faith if they are to respond effectively to the challenges posed by the spread of distress and dismay. Let them strive to understand more deeply the Teachings that are relevant by reviewing letters of Shoghi Effendi which have been published in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, particularly those entitled "The Goal of a New World Order," "America and the Most Great Peace," and "The Unfoldment of World Civilization."

While the world continues on its tumultuous course, the Five Year Plan has reached the operational capacity to enable our community to make giant strides towards its major aim of advancing the process of entry by troops. The details of so encouraging a state of affairs for the Faith on all five continents have already been given in our 17 January letter; to it we invite your further study. Only a few key details need now be underscored: The division of countries into clusters has been completed in 179 of them; there exist some 17,000 of these seedbeds of expansion. Reflection meetings at the level of clusters have become a powerful means of unifying thought and action across institutions and localities; they have lent a potent stimulus to institutional and individual initiatives in a mutually supportive spirit. The institute process has

demonstrated even more prominently than before its influence as a generating force for expansion and consolidation. The core activities of the Plan have attained a scale far outstripping that of the past year. As a result, a growing number of friends are now active in the teaching and administrative work throughout the world, demonstrating the infectious spirit of confidence inspiring the enthusiasm of their efforts. Youth and children have been more systematically involved in the programs of the community, and non-Bahá'ís have been participating more numerous in study circles, devotional meetings and children's classes. It is indeed heartening to note that, in the brief period since the beginning of the Plan, where in many communities these three core activities had been sporadic they have become regular features and have multiplied. Here, then, is a snapshot of a world community focused and on the move as never before.

During the past year, as this pattern of growth became more firmly rooted in the operation of the Plan, other important developments were taking place. In the arena of external affairs, agencies of the Bahá'í International Community engaged in activities too numerous and varied to describe here, but of a collective effect too impressive to let pass without some mention. The highlight of such activities was the message we addressed last April to the world's religious leaders. This has given a fresh impulse to the approach being taken by the Bahá'í community to call the attention of the most influential elements of society to issues of critical importance to ensuring the peace of the world. Through the coordinating efforts of the Bahá'í International Community's Office of Public Information and the prompt efficiency of National Spiritual Assemblies, the message was distributed in a short time to the topmost ranks and other echelons of religious communities across the globe. The purpose of the initiative is to bring to the attention of all concerned the urgent need for religious leadership to address the problem of religious prejudice, which is becoming a steadily more serious danger to human well-being. The immediate reactions from many recipients indicate that the message is being seriously regarded and is even in some places lending new perspective to interfaith activities.

In the field of social and economic development a tempo has been attained that impresses ever more deeply the effects of institutional and individual effort on both the internal development of the community and the community's collaboration with others. The Office of Social and Economic Development reports that during the second year of the Plan eight new Bahá'í-inspired development agencies were established, operating in such diverse fields as the advancement of women, health, agriculture, child education and youth empowerment.

In the Holy Land, the English translation of Bahá'u'lláh's Arabic epistle known as Javáhiru'l-Asrár was released under the title Gems of Divine Mysteries. The restoration of the Cell of Bahá'u'lláh in the prison at 'Akká was completed, and work began on the remainder of the upper floor of the prison cell area. As of the next pilgrimage season, beginning in October 2003, the number of pilgrims in each group will be raised from 150 to 200.

Furthermore, efforts at fostering the development of institutions operating at the World Centre were especially evident in the continuing evolution of the institution of Huqúqu'lláh under the distinguished leadership of the Trustee, the Hand of the Cause of God 'Alí-Muhammad Varqá. Through his wise initiative and constant endeavor, Dr. Varqá has inspired the education of the friends everywhere concerning the law of Huqúqu'lláh. In the decade since the law was universally applied, a network of national and regional boards of trustees has been brought into existence, which provides coordination and direction to the service of an increasing number of deputies and representatives. Knowledge of this great law has spread widely, and friends from all continents are responding to it with a spirit of devotion, which the Trustee hopes will touch those who have not yet availed themselves of the promised blessings flowing from adherence to this law.

In the nearly two years since we announced the special necessity for financial support to maintain, at a befitting standard, the buildings and gardens at the World Centre, the World Centre Endowment Fund has been established. The contributions have not yet reached a level equal to the annual need. However, we have felt obliged to set aside five million dollars of the contributions

received as an earmarked fund towards building a corpus to provide a source of investment income dedicated to the original purpose. We have done so by drawing upon the Bahá'í International Fund to assist in covering the necessary expenditures, suspending activities in other fields that it would have been normal to pursue.

We are delighted to advise that, in response to the call issued by the National Spiritual Assembly of Chile, 185 design concepts have been received from architects and designers around the world for the Mother Temple of South America to be constructed in Santiago. A final choice will be announced in due course.

Dear Friends: Gratified by solid evidence of the progress being made far and wide, we trust in the continuing confirmations of our Supreme Lord upon the dedicated efforts you exert within the framework of the Five Year Plan—a Plan designed to fit the requirements of these times. May your persistence in its pursuit release those pent-up forces that, through the grace and favor of the Abhá Beauty, can advance by mighty thrusts the process of entry by troops in every land.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]