

17 June 2011

To the Believers in the Cradle of the Faith

Dearly loved friends,

We were deeply distressed to learn of the raid conducted by agents of the Ministry of Intelligence on the homes of some of the believers associated with the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) and of the arrests of some of the same devoted friends. However, the reports attesting to your steadfast determination to forge ahead with your efforts in pursuit of knowledge and learning have filled our hearts with joy.

One of the outcomes of the 1979 revolution was the dismissal of Bahá'í professors and lecturers from universities and the debarring of Bahá'í youth from institutions of higher learning. Despite the fact that the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran claims to uphold equal rights for all and the fact that the civil laws of the country provide no basis for such a deprivation, and although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which Iran is a signatory, clearly stipulates access to higher education as an inalienable human right, the authorities, swayed by religious prejudice and acting in direct violation of the law and of international standards, have sanctioned this discrimination as official government policy and enforce it with determination.

As a result of the requirement to specify one's religion on the application forms for the National University Entrance Examination, Bahá'í youth were unable to enter Iranian universities as their only alternative would have been to dissimulate their faith. When the efforts of Bahá'í lecturers and students to secure redress through representations to the judicial institutions of the land proved unavailing, the Bahá'í community arranged for the lecturers who had been dismissed to teach the youth who had been denied access to universities. Many members of the community lent their support to this effort. This educational initiative, this grassroots undertaking, was thus begun through the sacrificial exertions of individuals who sought to serve the cause of learning, despite the unfavourable conditions and without imposing the least burden or expense on the government. The institute gradually expanded, and in the early 1990s, it took the name of the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education. Over time a number of other distinguished lecturers in Iran and abroad, some of whom were not even members of the Bahá'í community, began to collaborate with the Institute.

Bahá'í youth continued to be excluded from universities until, in 2006, following widespread and persistent protests around the world, a representative of the Iranian government duplicitously stated before the international community that the enquiry about religion on the university entrance examination forms was not related to the religious beliefs of the students but was merely intended to clarify their choice of religious studies. The Bahá'í youth, highly sceptical of the veracity of this explanation but ready to demonstrate their goodwill, accepted the statement, and beginning in 2006, despite fresh obstacles that had been placed in their path, a number of them entered university. It soon became clear, however, that the claim advanced by the Iranian government representative before the international community was completely false, as later that year the head of the central security office of the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology, in a confidential letter, instructed the administrators of 81 universities to dismiss any student as soon as he or she is identified as a Bahá'í.

The official policy of the Iranian government to eradicate the Bahá'í community as a viable entity was laid out in a confidential document issued in 1991 by the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution under the signature of its then secretary, Hujjatu'l Islam Seyyed Mohammad Reza Hashemi Golpaygani, and approved by the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. In this document, government agencies are asked to ensure that the

“progress and development” of the Bahá’ís “are blocked”, and explicit directives are given that Bahá’ís “must be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Bahá’ís.” Consequently, over the course of the past thirty years, Bahá’í youth have been denied access to Iranian universities and deprived of the opportunity to earn academic qualifications through the requirement to specify one’s religion on the application forms, or under the pretext advanced by the country’s Educational Measurement and Evaluation Organization that the university entrance examination files of Bahá’í applicants were “incomplete”, or through the expulsion of students as soon as they are identified as Bahá’ís, whether during the registration process, in the course of their studies, or even in the final stages before their graduation.

The recent raid on the homes of those involved with BIHE is the fourth such attack aimed at suppressing this constructive and self-sustaining effort of the Bahá’í community. While the authorities vigorously use all the means at their disposal to debar Bahá’í youth from university, they resort to every possible deception to conceal this shameful policy from the Iranian people, from the international community, and from human rights agencies. At times they deny their actions through lies; at other times they endeavour to justify them through accusations that have long been rejected by the public; and now, in a desperate attempt to win the support of the Iranian people and of the international community, they brazenly seek to portray as illegal the very activities the Bahá’í community has been forced to undertake in order to educate its youth.

Ever since the inception of this educational initiative it has been clear that BIHE could not issue official educational certificates. Notwithstanding this, the courses offered have been of the highest standard, and every attempt has been made to meet the standards of learning established by the most reputable universities of the world. Given the aptitude of the students and their eagerness to learn, a number of leading universities in Europe, Australia, Canada, India, and the United States have come to recognize the capacity and level of achievement of BIHE’s graduates and have admitted them, without undergraduate degrees, to Master’s and PhD programmes. After receiving their graduate degrees, the vast majority of these students have selflessly chosen to return to Iran and many have in turn undertaken to teach at BIHE. Under such conditions, and considering that BIHE does not issue any official diplomas, to portray as illegal these efforts of the Bahá’í community to educate its youth is entirely baseless and absurd. It is as though one were to deny certain citizens access to available food supplies and when they undertake with untold hardship to cultivate their backyards in order to survive, declare their efforts illegal and destroy their crop. Persistence in these dehumanizing acts serves only to expose the irrational determination of the authorities to block the social progress of the Bahá’ís.

In a land where learning is traditionally cherished and where the ideal of “seek thou knowledge from the cradle to the grave” has long been championed, and under a government which claims to be the advocate and preserver of the teachings of the Prophet of Islam Who proclaimed “seek after knowledge, even unto China”, every true and noble Iranian bemoans with a heavy heart the fact that, contrary to all human values and without the least regard for the laws of the country, a group that shows no commitment to the glorious cultural history of that land and which—owing to its fanatical religious prejudice—has derived no benefit from true Islamic values is depriving some of the nation’s young citizens of access to higher education. Now, after thirty years, this patent violation of human rights in Iran has spread to such a degree that it extends beyond the Bahá’ís to encompass thousands of other Iranian students and enlightened academics who are deprived of educational freedom; the matter has come to such a pass that there is even talk of limiting access to higher education for half of the country’s population—namely, the women of that land.

Acceptance of the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh carries with it the commitment to strive for individual spiritual maturity and to participate in collective efforts to build a thriving society and contribute to the common weal. Science and religion are the two inseparable, reciprocal systems of knowledge impelling the advancement of civilization. In the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “The progress

of the world of humanity dependeth upon knowledge, and its decline is due to ignorance. When the human race gaineth in knowledge it becometh heavenly, and when it acquireth learning it taketh on lordly attributes.” To seek to acquire knowledge and learning and to study useful sciences and crafts are among the fundamental beliefs of the followers of Bahá’u’lláh. Therefore, the long-term solution you have chosen as a means of counteracting the difficulties imposed upon you in the path of higher education is to engage in constructive collaboration with other proponents of peace and reconciliation to build a progressive and orderly society committed to the promotion of knowledge and social justice. You, the faithful lovers of the Blessed Beauty who have remained immovable as a mountain in the tempest of trials and tribulations, place your trust in His Word and consider every woe as a blessing and every difficulty as a new opportunity to serve. With dynamism, patience, and fortitude, you are therefore determined to pursue the educational activities of BIHE and have accepted that these recent attacks will naturally result in temporary difficulties that may cause certain disruptions and require some adjustments in the way its affairs are conducted. You are well aware of the importance of maintaining the unity and harmony of the community, which, especially in these tumultuous days, is your shield and protection, and at all times you place your hopes in the outpourings of God’s unfailing grace.

The enlightened people of Iran and other well-wishers around the world stand with you. We, too, are following the situation with close attention. Rest assured that the valuable experience you have gained in providing higher education to students who have been deprived thereof will be an effective contribution to the advancement of learning among the youth of that nation—a nation renowned for the promotion of knowledge. Beyond them, countless oppressed people around the world will also find inspiration in your constructive and peaceful approach to opposing injustice and iniquity.

We supplicate on your behalf in the Sacred Shrines and fervently implore God to unlock before your faces the portals of freedom and prosperity.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]