THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

26 May 2024

Transmitted by email

Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

The Universal House of Justice is aware that Bahá'í youth are increasingly being confronted by the question of what their response should be to serious conflicts and related humanitarian crises raging in the world. It notes that this is a question of particular relevance to the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, given the seminars which the Institute offers for youth and young adults. With this in mind, the House of Justice has asked us to share the following comments with you in the hope that they may be of assistance to Bahá'í youth who are seeking a clearer understanding of the Bahá'í attitude towards various world events in the context of the Teachings.

The suffering and bloodshed that are the outcome of conflicts are deeply distressing. Surely, every conscientious soul is pained by such events. As Bahá'í youth will be aware, 'Abdu'l-Bahá repeatedly stressed humanity's need for universal peace, and on an occasion referred to war as "the greatest catastrophe in the world of humanity". In its Riḍván 2022 message, the House of Justice described its sorrow "at seeing the persistence of conditions and conflicts in the world that create misery and desperate suffering—in particular, at observing the recrudescence of destructive forces that have disordered international affairs while visiting horrors upon populations." The House of Justice referred again in its most recent Riḍván message to the "desperate" condition of the world, before stating that "this demands from every conscientious soul a response." The question, then, is what kind of response is appropriate. This question merits deep reflection. Reports indicate that, just in the last few years, hundreds of thousands of people have been killed as a direct result of armed struggle across the world—not only in the wars that fill news bulletins and dominate social media, but also in conflicts that unfold in relative obscurity, yet are similarly horrific for human society. What kind of response can be considered adequate in the face of such destruction of human life?

Popular opinion, especially as expressed online, tends to place the highest value on the expression of outrage and being outspoken. Particular significance is attributed to speaking out about conflicts and related humanitarian crises by making the kind of public statement that apportions blame to one or other government or political entity and condemns them. As is well known, Bahá'í institutions do not comment in this way on any ongoing conflict. This stance can only be properly understood in light of the Bahá'í principle of non-involvement in the political affairs of governments. However, to interpret such a stance as indifference to the suffering being caused by conflict would be unjustified. The House of Justice has repeatedly drawn attention to conditions in the world and has stressed the responsibility Bahá'ís must feel to labour for the emergence of a peaceful world. As it states in its Riḍván 2024 message, "heartfelt concern" about humanity's sufferings "must prompt sustained effort to build communities that offer hope in place of despair, unity in place of conflict." It should be borne in mind, too, that Bahá'ís themselves are not unaffected by war—there are Bahá'í communities in many countries where conflicts are now occurring. In such places, despite their limited resources, and at times under extreme conditions, Bahá'ís naturally do what they can to offer humanitarian assistance to those around them, often without drawing attention to their own efforts. The Humanitarian Relief Fund established by the House of Justice offers a means to support the relief work carried out by Bahá'ís and others. Beyond this, Bahá'í communities in these circumstances also engage in other

constructive endeavours to comfort and support populations that are caught up in strife. There have even been notable examples, in certain traditional societies with strong Bahá'í communities, where the believers have contributed to the resolution of conflicts between previously contending peoples. All these endeavours are praiseworthy. However, it should be evident that a response to the condition of the world that focuses only on treating the symptoms of disunity, but does not address its fundamental causes, would be inadequate.

Resolving deep-rooted differences in society requires the patience to bring about profound social change through the application of moral and spiritual principles. It calls for sustained and sacrificial exertion. The Nine Year Plan in which the Bahá'í world is now engaged is designed to meet this need. In this year's Riḍván message, the House of Justice refers to the prosecution of the Plan as "the means by which long-term, constructive processes, unfolding over generations, are being set in motion in every society." Notwithstanding the scale of the challenge involved in realizing this aim, Bahá'ís would be failing in their duty before Bahá'u'lláh to attempt anything less. As the House of Justice stated in its Riḍván 2015 message, "it is systematic, determined, and selfless action undertaken within the wide embrace of the Plan's framework that is the most constructive response of every concerned believer to the multiplying ills of a disordered society."

This, then, is what it means for Bahá'ís to take a stand against conflict—to act, in the words of the House of Justice, as "true practitioners of peace". In the message it addressed to the Bahá'ís of Iran at Naw-Rúz this year, the House of Justice stated that "in purifying the heart and cleansing its mirror from prejudice on the one hand, and in creating the social conditions for peace and unity on the other, every individual has agency and the capacity to play a part." The theme of working for peace was explored at length in the 18 January 2019 message of the House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world:

> The establishment of peace is a duty to which the entire human race is called. The responsibility that Bahá'ís bear to aid that process will evolve over time, but they have never been mere spectators—they lend their share of assistance to the operation of those forces leading humanity towards unity. They are summoned to be as leaven to the world. Consider Bahá'u'lláh's words:
>
> > Address yourselves to the promotion of the well-being and tranquillity of the children of men. Bend your minds and wills to the education of the peoples and kindreds of the earth, that haply the dissensions that divide it may, through the power of the Most Great Name, be blotted out from its face, and all mankind become the upholders of one Order, and the inhabitants of one City.

These words of Bahá'u'lláh are of particular relevance to any Bahá'í youth being questioned about their own response to the suffering caused by conflicts in the world. The House of Justice has often celebrated the extraordinary commitment being shown by Bahá'í youth across the world who are proffering the divine remedy that, ultimately, is humanity's only hope. In its Riḍván message this year, the House of Justice testifies to "how much vibrancy and strength is generated in any society by its youth being awakened to the vision of Bahá'u'lláh and becoming protagonists of the Plan". And it calls for "a sustained, rapid rise in the number of those committing their time, their energy, their concentration to the success of this work." The efforts of today's young believers, undertaken in the company of many like-minded friends, are of course a continuation of the efforts that have been made through the decades by the followers of the Blessed Beauty, youth and adults alike, who have been inspired by His vision of a united world. These are efforts which have required courage, as well as sacrifice. In His second Tablet to the Hague, 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the supreme sacrifices made by so many Bahá'ís for the cause of universal peace: "As ye have no doubt heard, in Persia thousands of souls have offered up their lives in this path, and thousands of homes have been laid waste. Despite this, we have in no wise relented, but have continued to endeavour unto this very moment and are increasing our efforts as day followeth day,

because our desire for peace is not derived merely from the intellect: It is a matter of religious belief and one of the eternal foundations of the Faith of God."

Naturally, there is a clear distinction to be made between expressing political views about an active conflict, which Bahá'ís refrain from doing, and making constructive contributions to the discourses of society, which Bahá'ís are urged to do in an effort to bring insights emerging from the study of the Revelation and from the community's own experience to bear on the problems facing the world. Although some themes of discourse are the focus of such intense controversy and heated political disagreement that they must simply be avoided, there are many important discourses, including broader themes related to peace, to which Bahá'ís can and do make significant and valuable contributions at all levels, from the grassroots to the international stage. Bahá'ís also engage in projects of social action, through which, in a myriad ways, issues related to peace, justice, and unity can be practically addressed. Many Bahá'í youth will already be familiar with the 2 March 2013 message of the House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of Iran, which explores what it means to be "a force of constructive change" and how this relates to the principle of non-involvement in politics. Study of this message will help any follower of Bahá'u'lláh appreciate why certain kinds of action and public statement by Bahá'ís are likely to contribute to unity and why others, however much they might be prompted by sincere concern about human suffering, would risk doing more to deepen and exacerbate the divisions in the world. Discernment is needed to distinguish between them.

Let no one be under any illusions that the approach which has been described is easy or simple. The House of Justice is well aware that Bahá'í youth in many parts of the world find themselves facing considerable pressure from those around them to voice their support for one partisan stance or another. Ardent supporters of particular points of view sometimes use the threat of social ostracism as a way to compel others to adopt their political position. For Bahá'í youth to not only remain clear in their principles in such circumstances, but also continue to show forth courtesy, kindliness, love, and forbearance towards their peers, requires courage and faith, strength of spirit and reliance on God. It also calls for a clear understanding of how Bahá'ís are striving to make a difference in the world. In its 25 November 2020 message to the Bahá'í world, the House of Justice counselled the friends that "vigilance on your part in avoiding discord and in not becoming entangled in society's controversies should under no circumstances be construed as aloofness from the many pressing concerns of this time. Far from it. You are among the most active and earnest of humanity's well-wishers. But, whether through deeds or words, the merit of your every contribution to social well-being lies, first, in your resolute commitment to discover that precious point of unity where contrasting perspectives overlap and around which contending peoples can coalesce."

While the challenge set out above is common to all Bahá'ís, the extraordinary potential that youth possess and the possibilities that are unique to their time of life give them special responsibility. Consider in this light the statement of the House of Justice in its most recent Riḍván message that "all must surge, but the youth must soar." This counsel calls to mind a talk by ʻAbdu'l-Bahá in which He describes how a faithful soul should aspire to flight:

> But human flight is through faith. Human flight is through the virtues of the world of humanity. Human flight is through the acquisition of perfections. Human flight is through adherence to the divine teachings. Human flight is through service to the oneness of the world of humanity. Human flight is through heedfulness to the verses of God. Human flight is to become the sign of guidance among the people. Human flight is to become a heavenly standard. Human flight is to become illumined with the light of truth. Human flight is to be detached from all save God. Human flight is to turn to the Abhá Kingdom. Human flight is to carry out the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh in their entirety. It is my hope that ye will all take flight; that your spirits, your hearts, and your minds

will soar; and all your conditions will fly upwards. Such is my hope. God willing ye will be aided therein.

The House of Justice will supplicate in the Holy Shrines on behalf of Bahá'í youth everywhere, that they may be aided through the confirmations of Bahá'u'lláh to confidently navigate the issues that occupy the minds of so many of their peers and demonstrate their wholehearted commitment to the promotion of peace for all humanity.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

This document has been downloaded from the Bahá'í Reference Library. You are free to use its content subject to the terms of use found at www.bahai.org/legal