

[TRANSCRIPT OF ORIGINAL NEWS ARTICLE IN ENGLISH]

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The silent massacre

Sydney Richardson on a religious sect being persecuted in Iran

Martyrdom and persecution are today facing the followers of a worldwide religion in a grisly replay of some of history's most shameful episodes.

"In a way we are much like the early Christians who were persecuted and put to death for their beliefs."

The words, spoken without any hint of histrionics, come from a young Iranian wife who has watched from afar the cruel oppression of the Baha'i religion in Iran.

A more recent parallel can be drawn with the persecution of Jewish people under the Nazis. Baha'is in Iran – birthplace of the religion in the middle of the last century – are being systematically deprived of status and possessions. And often their lives.

The young woman and her husband, living and working in Hertfordshire and safe from the murderous tentacles of the mullahs and the Islamic courts can do little more than pray for the safety of the 300,000 followers of the Baha'i faith in Iran.

It seems a remote hope. In December all but one of the nine members of the faith's ruling body in Iran, the National Spiritual Assembly, were arrested and later executed without trial.

Seventeen months earlier, their nine predecessors on the ruling body had been taken from a meeting at gunpoint, never to be seen again. Iranian authorities today deny all knowledge of their fate.

Bodies found by chance

Nine more leaders of the Baha'is in Iran have been elected but the chances of their staying alive seem slim unless the Baha'is, who have 111,000 spiritual assemblies around the world, can force world opinion to stop the slaughter.

That in itself seems an impossible task. Baha'is are forbidden to take part in any political activity or violent action – even against such devastating oppression – and their religion says they must obey the government in power.

Baha'is have spiritual assemblies all over Britain, including Watford, Luton, St Albans and Hemel Hempstead.

Six followers of the religion met at the house of one of them in Hemel Hempstead and talked about the plight of the Baha'is in Iran. Four of them were Iranians.

Keith McDonald, secretary of the St Albans spiritual assembly of the Baha'is, said: "Previously the regime used to go through at least the formalities of a trial. Nowadays relatives have no idea what is happening.

"Bodies are found almost by chance. They are just dumped in a burial ground marked for infidels. Relatives literally have to go around searching for bodies."

Baha'is say that 110 of their followers in Iran are known to have been executed since the revolution in 1979 which deposed the Shah (himself no friend of the Baha'is and instigator of much of the restriction on their rights). Another 250 are missing.

Fears of a deliberate campaign to eradicate the religion in Iran are real. Already excluded from many jobs and services, the Baha'is face a new onslaught on their means of even basic existence.

Sinister organisations

Iranians are being issued with new identity cards under a census now being held in which people are obliged to state their religion. Baha'is are not recognized by the Iranian constitution and are unlikely to be issued with papers.

Without these it is impossible for them to obtain food ration coupons or paraffin for cooking, among other basic needs. The only way they can escape this bureaucratic strangulation is to renounce their faith.

"They are trying to make it impossible for the Baha'is to live any kind of ordinary life unless they recant their religion. But they will never do that. They are dying for their religion," one of the group, a retired businessman living in Hemel Hempstead, told me.

One of the two Iranian wives in the group suggests that a sinister organisation, trained in the task of rooting out Baha'is, is at work in Iran.

"I do not know what the relationship between this organisation and the government is, but I believe they are part of a plan to eradicate the Baha'i faith in Iran."

She says that there are many Muslims among the more educated people of Iran who have Baha'i friends. "They would never betray the Baha'is, but among the uneducated people in the villages, who have no understanding of the faith, there may be people who would lead a mob against them."

'Spying' for the West

Ayatollah Khomeini's regime has steadfastly refuted all allegations of religious persecution. The Iranian government has rejected appeals by the Council of Europe, the United Nations and national governments.

Its stock response is that those members of the Baha'is executed have been guilty of crimes, largely "spying" for the West.

An official at the Iranian embassy in London trotted out the official line. "When someone is doing wrong and is arrested or questioned because of doing wrong, it is not just because they are followers of some political or religious order."

Periodic purges

His government's record since the 1979 revolution bears a different testimony. Baha'is have also seen their holy places destroyed or desecrated and the businesses and farms of their followers confiscated.

Baha'is are barred from holding government posts, from voting and from sending their children to schools. Baha'i marriages are not recognized in Iran and Baha'i wives face possible prosecution for prostitution.

Persecution has been the lot of the Baha'is in Iran since the faith was founded in 1844. There have been periodic purges of the faith and many martyrs through the years.

They are regarded as heretics by the Muslim clergy who believe Mohammed to be the ultimate deity. Baha'is accept Mohammed and Christ and others as part of a continuing process of divine revelation.

Hard-line Muslims also revile the Baha'i belief in equality of the sexes.

The emigre businessman points out that his wife has friends in Iran who are dedicated Muslims. He said: "They write to her from Iran saying, 'We miss you but don't come back!'"

[photo:]

These people, with one exception, are all dead or missing without trace in Iran. They were leaders of the Baha'i religion in that country. They were accused of being spies for the imperialists and Zionists.

Several of them are known to the local Baha'is, who talked to the Evening Post-Echo about the persecution of their faith by the Iranian authorities. Two were cousins of one of the local Baha'is and one was a friend of 30 years' standing.

The one who escaped execution is a woman who was unwell on the night of a meeting of the Baha'i national spiritual assembly in Tehran in December when her colleagues were arrested. She is now in hiding. Her figure is obliterated on the photograph for her protection.

Escape route

Seated in the front row (second from left) is Dr Hossein Naji, a specialist in heart surgery who was chairman of the national spiritual assembly.

Dr Naji, who has now vanished and is presumed dead, lived with his wife and daughter for a time in Langley Road, Watford, but returned to Iran in 1960. The Watford assembly of the Baha'is was started in 1962.

Widows of two of the men executed after the latest arrests are now in Britain, having fled Iran via a secret escape route. They did not learn of their husbands' fates until two weeks after they had been arrested.

Their worst fears were confirmed when an official of the Evin Prison in Tehran telephoned the father of one of the missing Baha'is to tell him he could collect his son's body from the prison.

A son of one the women now in Britain told the Post-Echo: "They did not give the bodies back. They were buried in an area which they say is for 'infidels.'

"The only way they know where the body is by a number given to each grave. There is no headstone or anything, just a number. They are not allowed to put flowers or anything else on the grave."

[The content above was transcribed from the original document. If you find any typographic error, kindly email us using the 'Contact' page form.]