

[TRANSCRIPT OF ORIGINAL NEWS ARTICLE IN ENGLISH]

[The Baha'is of Ivel: Undaunted spirit](#)

GENEVA—5 July 2010—

Following the demolition of Baha'i homes in the Iranian village of Ivel – [reported last week](#) – there is another story that must also be told: that of sympathetic villagers who have commiserated with their Baha'i neighbors over the injustices they have been forced to endure.

It is also the story of an undaunted spirit and a commitment to social good that continues to enable the Baha'is to transcend their prolonged persecution and be active participants in the social and economic development of their village.

Service and persecution

In its earliest days, Ivel was the summer residence for sheep farmers from the surrounding region of Mazandaran. There have been Baha'is in the village for more than a century and a half. Indeed, since the years immediately following the establishment of their Faith in mid-19th century Iran, the Baha'is have comprised about half of Ivel's total population. All the while, they have lived side by side with their Muslim neighbors in comparative harmony.

Unfortunately, however, outside elements strongly inimical to the Faith have periodically sought to stir up the local population against the Baha'i community, resulting in intermittent persecution – ranging from life-threatening to less harsh forms of harassment.

In 1941, for example, lives were imperiled when gangs from outside roused local citizens to attack the Baha'is. The Baha'is were arrested, severely beaten and subjected to extortion; their houses and belongings were plundered. Finally, they were banished to a village seven kilometers away. When the situation eased some months later, the Baha'is returned to their homes and farms.

The lengths to which those holding enmity towards the Baha'is would go are perhaps best summed up in an incident that occurred in the mid-1950s when a member of the newly-established “Hojjatieh” society arrived in Ivel. Hojjatieh – a semi-clandestine traditionalist Shia organization – was founded on the premise that the most immediate threat to Islam was the “heresy” of the Baha'i Faith, which had to be eliminated.

When this individual proved unsuccessful in his attempts to drive a wedge between the Muslims and the Baha'is, he endeavoured to prevent their cows from grazing in the same pasture, on the basis that the Baha'i cows were “unclean”.

For a few days, the cattle belonging to the Baha'is were confined to their barns while those of the Muslims went to graze. The Baha'is repeatedly referred the matter to the village head, appealing for compassion to be shown to the animals. Consequently, a decision was made to have the cows enter the pasture from opposite sides, so as to respect the decree. This did not accord with the natural instincts of the livestock, who continued to graze together.

Contribution to social progress

Throughout the years, notwithstanding the efforts to repress them, the Baha'is have actively contributed to the betterment of life in their village. In addition to the role they played in the area's agriculture, they established a school at which local children, regardless of their religion, were educated. By 1946, when the Iranian government had begun to organize rural schools and assumed responsibility for the one in the village, Ivel's school extended to six elementary level classes in which some 120 pupils from Ivel and seven other nearby villages were receiving general education.

In 1961, in another example of service to their community, the Baha'is completed a bath house for use by the villagers, which included modifications to the local reservoir and the introduction of modernizations to improve the facility's levels of hygiene and the general health of the people.

Escalation of attacks

Following Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979, the situation for Baha'is in Ivel deteriorated. Land was confiscated and attempts to regain it proved unsuccessful. Baha'is were denied access to health clinics and other institutions that they themselves had helped establish. Muslim children were encouraged by their teacher to harm their Baha'i classmates. When parents protested, the teacher found other means to persecute his Baha'i pupils, including failing them in their exams.

In June 1983, the Baha'is were forced out of their homes and transported by bus to the nearest major city, Sari. When they arrived, the authorities made them go back. Returning to Ivel, they were locked into a local mosque. More than 130 of them – including children and the elderly – were held captive for three days without food and water. When pressure to make them recant their faith failed, they were allowed to return home. However, that same night, they were attacked by villagers. A few were taken off by the mob, others were injured, and more were forced to hide in a nearby forest.

Since that time, many of the Ivel Baha'is have resided nearby and return to the village only in the summer to plant and harvest their crops and tend to their properties. According to Natoli Derakhshan, a Baha'i from Ivel who was interviewed recently by the Persian-language Radio Farda, "Each time or each year when they wanted to go there they had to obtain permits from the Justice Administration to be allowed to stay in their own homes for two or three days."

In the past three years, the Baha'i International Community has monitored an increase in efforts to put pressure on the Baha'is of Ivel to leave the region altogether. "Their empty homes have been burned, Baha'is have been subjected to verbal and physical attacks, and the 100-year old Baha'i cemetery was confiscated and sold for conversion into residential property," said Diane Ala'i, representative of the Baha'i International Community to the United Nations in Geneva.

"Numerous complaints have been filed at all levels but, in general, the Baha'is are only met with indifference. The authorities say that there's little they can do in the face of the opposition Baha'is face from the local residents," she said. "In every case, knowledge of the demolitions or the motive behind them was denied by local government officials."

"What we are witnessing in Ivel, and the surrounding region of Mazandaran, is part of a wider campaign to humiliate and dishearten all the Baha'is and prevent them from practicing their faith in any way whatsoever," said Ms. Ala'i. "The government has certainly demonstrated thus far that if it is not behind it, it is either unwilling to stop it or incapable of doing so."

In recent weeks when Mr. Derakhshan heard stories about the imminent destruction of the Baha'i homes in the village, he went with other Baha'is to various officials to find out if the rumors were

true. “We were told not to worry and that there was not such a possibility; we believed them,” he told Radio Farda.

“We do not know and cannot say that it was ordered by someone,” he said. “All we know is that unfortunately everything has been completely destroyed.”

Local and international support

There are, however, many villagers in Ivel who are deeply troubled by these developments. In an interview with the Rooz Online website, Mr. Derakhshan paid tribute to those who have expressed dismay and concern at the ill-treatment of their Baha'i neighbors: “These days many of our Muslim folks sat together with us with tearful eyes, and apologized to us, and held our hands! We are thankful to them all.”

The news from Ivel has also received widespread attention from further afield – in the world's news media and online news services, including a host of Persian language outlets.

Among the English language reports, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty ran a story on 29 June with the headline, “[Baha'i Houses Demolished In Iran](#).” It also carried video of the incident which had been obtained by Human Rights Activists of Iran.

Also on 29 June, the National Review Online published an article under the headline “Regime Razes Bahai Homes in Iran.”

A feature on the BBC website, titled “[Iran's Bahai community fear rise in persecution](#)”, began: “First there are the images of wooden beams on fire. Then buildings come into view, some without windows and doors, others reduced to rubble. The shaky mobile phone footage posted on YouTube by Iranian human rights activists shows scenes of destruction filmed secretly from inside a car...The reports from Ivel residents say that by June 22, almost 50 houses belonging to Bahais had been flattened.”

“Several of these websites have offered places for comments by readers,” said Ms. Alai. “After enduring so much persecution for so long, we are certain that the Baha'is of Ivel appreciate the support of people from all over the world – including many sympathetic Iranian citizens – who have taken the time to express their outrage over this latest incident.”

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