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Twenty-three-year-old Tahireh Sanchez is one of a new generation among the Guaymís in Panama. She works at Radio Bahá'í Panama, broadcasting in her native language and working to help preserve her traditions and culture.

SOLOY, Chiriquí Province, Panama — As has been the story with many indigenous peoples, the impact of "outside" society on the Guaymís has been almost unavoidable — and in many ways negative.

Loosely bound by a common language and diffusely settled in the rugged Cordillera Central mountains in Western Panama, the Guaymís exist largely on the margins of Panamanian society and have historically been among its poorest members.

For years, their traditional lands have been slowly consumed as "Latinos" — which is what the Guaymís call Panamanians of Spanish descent — have moved into the region looking for farm and grazing land. Pushed ever farther into the remote and less productive highlands, the 80,000 Guaymís have been increasingly unable to support themselves with the slash and burn agricultural techniques they have relied on for centuries.

To survive, families have sent their young men out to work in coffee and banana plantations for a few months each year. But this has come at great cost to the community and family structures here.

Vulnerable to exploitation because of their unfamiliarity with the Spanish language and culture, Guaymí men often have had to work in

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Foundations of Social Development

The upcoming World Summit for Social Development, scheduled to be held in Copenhagen in March, promises to be historic for its focus on the well-being of people, instead of the welfare of states.

"It's the first time in history that heads of state will come together to discuss the problems of ordinary people — questions of poverty, unemployment, of violence, social tension, problems in our streets and in our inner cities — in a practical way," said Ambassador Juan Somavia, chairman of the Summit's Preparatory Committee.

As they stand now, the Summit's main documents are already historic, offering a startling testament on the degree to which nations concur on the scope and depth of worldwide social problems.

The documents, for example, look to free markets and democratic institutions — along with strong assistance from the organizations of civil society — as being among the primary mechanisms for encouraging social development. Given the huge ideological gap that sundered the world just a few years ago, this development is amazing.

Also somewhat startling, given the largely secular nature of world politics, is the way the Summit's draft documents take note of the importance of spirituality in addressing social problems. Just three paragraphs into the draft Declaration, for example, governments "acknowledge that our societies must respond more effectively to the material and *spiritual* needs of individuals, their families and communities in which they live throughout our diverse countries and regions."

In this light, encouragement should be given to governments — and organizations of civil society and the media — to go farther in exploring the connection between spiritual insight and material progress. For unless the spiritual reality of humankind is considered in any program of social action, progress will be fitful at best.

Spiritual qualities and social development are deeply connected. Qualities like

love, faith, hope, compassion and altruism have been fostered by the world's great religious teachers, providing the motive impulse for social advancement. Indeed, throughout history, religion has been connected with the social advance and development of the world's great civilizations. It is impossible, for example, to understand the development of Europe without Christianity; to comprehend Arabia without Islam; or to know India without Hinduism.

What is needed at this point in history is a new and unifying vision of spirituality and human nature which can provide a moral framework for the revitalization of humanity on a global scale — and a concomitant structure for addressing our interconnected and worldwide social problems.

Although the following theme has been addressed on these pages many times before, we would like nevertheless to suggest again that the beginnings of such a framework can be found in the spiritual principle of the "oneness of humanity."

A genuine appreciation of the oneness of humanity reveals that human life on this planet is an organic whole, interrelated and integrated by our dependence on each other not only for food, shelter and health, but also for culture, ideas, and human relationships.

It also shows us that all prejudices based on race, nation, class, ethnicity or sex are ephemeral and must be discarded.

The oneness of humanity, when fully understood, also tells us that all peoples — and all individuals — not only have universal human rights, but also universal capacities and capabilities. It informs us that these capacities and capabilities must be developed if humanity is to progress and prosper.

It is on this point, of encouraging the development of individual capacities and capabilities especially, that those concerned with the core issues of the Social Summit — eradicating poverty, increasing productive employment, and enhancing social integration — have the most to gain from a greater understanding of the spiritual dimension of human reality.

Ultimately, neither governments, nor even the organizations of civil society — however high-minded their programs and projects — will alone solve global social

Perspective

problems. In the end, these problems will be resolved only as people around the world develop their own individual capacities and capabilities — and apply them in ways that are guided by a strong moral vision, tempered with fresh spiritual insights, and focused by innovative new social structures.

Productive and meaningful employment, for example, will only be widely achieved when individuals come to understand that work is a form of service to humanity (and worship of the Creator), and not merely the means to personal enrichment. In a global environment where many young people today drift with no sense of purpose in their lives, such a starting point becomes ever more important.

Poverty will only be completely and finally eradicated when individuals come to appreciate the degree to which the Creator, in creating us all “from the same dust,” desires that humankind should be “even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land...” Once this spiritual imperative is embraced, it will be unthinkable for anyone to allow his or her neighbor to go wanting.

And genuine tolerance of others — a key imperative of the Summit’s call for social integration — flows not from new legislation but from the development in every individual of a real appreciation of the value and spiritual dignity of every other

individual in the world.

Each of these insights stems from a comprehension of the spiritual principle of the oneness of humanity, which is today the driving force behind the planet-wide integration of humanity. Ultimately, it will be understood that human oneness derives from the oneness of creation — which itself reflects the oneness of the Creator.

Trying to address spirituality in a secular world — however badly it is needed — will not be easy. Many people do not recognize the value or even the existence of the spiritual dimension. At one point in the preparation of the draft Declaration and Program of Action this fall, nearly all of the references to spirituality had been edited out. They were restored and others were added after the intercessional meeting in October.

An unbiased analysis of the great social problems facing our global society today will reveal that our collective failure to pay heed to the new spiritual realities of our day stands at the foundation of many of our most egregious problems.

The fact that the world’s richest nations, which have perhaps most closely embraced secular materialism, are coming to Copenhagen with severe social problems indeed offers persuasive evidence that something more is needed than merely a fine-tuning of the old paradigm. ☉



In Turkmenistan, the Bahá'í community was invited to a reception hosted by the nation's president. About 500 representatives of various religious groups attended.

Consensus on action for social development is building

The premise behind the Social Summit is that contemporary civilization is gradually being undermined by a lack of security in people's daily lives. While the threat of a catastrophic global war seems to have diminished, concern over unemployment, the persistence of poverty, and the lack of social cohesion around the world has given rise to a sense of crisis.

UNITED NATIONS — Before the end of the Cold War, it almost seemed unthinkable that the world's governments might reach any real consensus about how to tackle the world's social ills.

In ideological terms alone, the disagreements over whether free markets or planned economies are better for promoting economic progress would surely have prevented accord on any overall framework for promoting global social development — even in the unlikely event that agreement could be reached concerning the eradication of poverty, the globalization of trade, and access to technology.

In that light, observers find remarkable the degree to which the governments, despite lingering questions over financial commitments and operational mechanisms, have made progress in developing a draft Declaration and a global Plan of Action in recent preparatory meetings for the upcoming World Summit for Social Development, which will be held in Copenhagen next March.

The degree of consensus on an overall approach to the global problems of poverty, unemployment and social disintegration that the Summit intends to address were especially evident at recent "intercessional" negotiations for the Summit, which were held in New York, 24-28 October 1994.

In a final round of consultations on the last day of the meeting, delegation after delegation expressed its pleasure at the general result of the week-long negotiations, which sought to ready documents for a final Preparatory Committee (Prepcom) meeting scheduled to be held in New York in January.

"We were somewhat nervous coming into the session," said Ambassador Hugo Østergaard-Andersen of Denmark, reflecting the general concern that many felt on entering the session, which had been added into the preparatory schedule because so many issues were not resolved at the last Prepcom in August. "But I leave New York in a much more comfortable mood. What we must never forget is politics is about differences of opinion and convergence toward agreements. We are in a process that is steadily progressing, and the Declaration is taking shape."

Security for People, not States

The main premise behind the Social Summit is that contemporary civilization is gradually being undermined by a lack of security in people's daily lives. While the threat of a catastrophic global war seems to have diminished, concern over unemployment, the persistence of poverty, and the lack of social cohesion in many countries around the world has given rise to a sense of crisis in virtually every country.

United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, left, addresses the Second Prepcom of the World Summit for Social Development last August 22 in New York. Looking on, right, is Ambassador Juan Somavia of Chile, chairman of the Preparatory Committee.



UN Photo 185736 / Evan Schneider

"In the past, challenges to international peace and security resulted mainly from conflicts," said United Nations Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali last August at the opening session of the Second Prepcom. But in recent times, he said, the forces of globalization and a general "weakening of the social fabric" have caused the stability and effective governance of States to be undermined. "The capacity of States to provide a social and political environment in which their citizens can lead useful, productive and fulfilling lives is eroding," said Mr. Boutros-Ghali. "The global social crisis threatens many States as much as any foreign army."

In setting an agenda for the Summit, the United Nations General Assembly has asked governments to focus on three areas: 1) the eradication of poverty; 2) enhancing productive employment; and 3) improving social integration.

"It must be seen in this context," said Ambassador Richard Butler of Australia during the intercessional meeting, referring to the draft documents: "We are taking humanity towards the future and talking about issues which center around people instead of issues of peace and security which are primarily directed at the welfare of states."

From the August Prepcom and the October intercessional meeting there emerged a proposed Declaration under which governments would "commit" themselves to nine general goals in the launching of "a global drive for social progress and development."

These goals would include making commitments to "create an enabling economic, political and legal environment conducive to social development" and to "the goal of eradicating poverty." Governments would promise to work towards "enabling all people to attain secure and sustainable livelihoods through freely chosen productive employment and work" and towards "promoting social integration and [the] participation of all people by fostering societies that are stable, safe and just." Governments would also be committed to "achieving full equity and equality between women and men" and to "promoting the economic, social and human resource development of Africa and the least developed countries." Other goals deal with "ensuring that struc-

UNICEF Photo / Mark Edwards / Still Pictures



tural adjustment programs include social development goals," making efforts to utilize resources more efficiently, and working to improve international cooperation for social development.

Throughout the draft Declaration and Plan of Action there is a general commitment to basic human rights and a subsidiary goal of uplifting and empowering marginalized groups around the globe. In this regard, both documents pay considerable attention to the concerns of women, the neglect of the poor and the subjugation of indigenous peoples.

The Program of Action seeks to convert the commitments of the Declaration into reality. Its language, in the present draft, ranges from rather vague pronouncements, such as suggesting that governments should give "priority to programs which most directly promote job growth when budgetary adjustments are required," to the specific. In the section on the "eradication of poverty," for example, it calls on "governments and other social organizations" to meet the basic needs of all members of society by providing universal access to basic education for at least 80 percent of primary school-age children, reducing infant mortality by one third, and cutting maternal mortality in half — all by the year 2000.

In general terms, the documents indicate that free markets and democratic institutions — along with strong assistance from the organizations of civil society — should be among the primary mechanisms for delivering on these promises. While they

Efforts to eradicate poverty will be high on the agenda of the World Summit for Social Development. Worldwide, women and children are hit especially hard by the effects of poverty. Shown above are women in Burkina Faso, who spend long hours every day searching for and carrying fuel wood.



**WORLD SUMMIT
FOR SOCIAL
DEVELOPMENT**

mention the need for governments themselves to regulate private enterprise and to devote significant resources to social programs, much of the emphasis is on creating an "enabling environment" that will allow private actors to address social problems.

High NGO Participation

In keeping with the idea that the Social Summit should focus on people, and with the recognition that civil society must be involved in the solutions to social problems, non-governmental organizations have been encouraged to participate in the preparatory process for the Summit.

Some 300 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were accredited to the August Prepcom, with many taking a very active role in making suggestions about how governments should frame the Declaration and Program of Action. This process continued at the intercessional meeting in October.

"What we have found here in New York at the United Nations is that there is an implicit agreement at the theoretical level on the diagnosis of the problems and the necessary goals and objectives of governments and the international community," said Francisco Vio Grossi, one of the two global coordinators of The People's Alliance for Social Development, a worldwide network of NGOs concerned with social issues. "The problem now is at the level of action."

Foremost in the minds of many NGOs is to ensure that the Summit does indeed promote a new international "environment" that will "enable" civil society itself to tackle

social problems. "Addressing social problems is the task of the entire society, not only of governments," said Mr. Grossi. "So the first thing we want to do is to strengthen the capacity of civil society to confront these issues."

NGOs representing women's organizations continue to play a key role in bringing forth new and important ideas. "Women are the biggest stakeholders in this process," said Susan Davis, executive director of the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO). "Women have been left out of the political and economic decision-making processes in the world for the most part, and so for heads of state to come together and talk about any aspect of social problems and how they affect women is important."

Ms. Davis urged governments to go farther in making specific commitments. "It is not enough to say we are going to eradicate poverty," said Ms. Davis. "We have to look at specific commitments under that — such as to say things like that 80 percent of the world's farmers will have access to credit by the year 2000, with full gender equity."

Jaime Duhart, a representative of the Bahá'í International Community, said the very process of raising major social issues — which have for so long been considered strictly national concerns — to the level of a world summit will open the door to a general discussion of the process of globalization and its effect on all of humanity.

"At this point in history, some groups have benefited from the effects of globalization more than others," said Prof. Duhart, who is Vice Rector at the Bolivariana University in Santiago, Chile. "Other groups of people, such as the disadvantaged and the marginalized, have tended to suffer from its effects, as jobs flow to other countries and/or they are exploited in some way or another for their labor or resources."

"In the long run, however, the growing interdependence and integration of the world's peoples will come to be understood as a necessary and ultimately beneficial stage in the evolution of humanity," said Prof. Duhart. "Part of what we hope the processes surrounding the Social Summit will do is help the world to coordinate and integrate the forces of globalization so that all peoples can advance and benefit." ☉

Among the issues to be discussed at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in March is how to promote social integration. Bahá'í communities around the world are acutely concerned with promoting unity while at the same time respecting diversity. Shown below are the Bahá'ís of Yakutia in Siberia, at a gathering which featured songs and dance, as well as a discussion of spiritual and moral principles.



In Cairo, women take center stage in setting global population policy

CAIRO — Moving dramatically away from past policies that aimed at stabilizing world population largely through technical programs of contraception and fertility education, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) adopted a program of action that places the advancement of women and women's rights squarely at the center of global efforts to manage population growth and promote sustainable development.

Held September 5-13 in Cairo, the Conference brought together delegations representing some 180 governments and more than 10,000 representatives from non-governmental organizations and civil society.

Although marked by intense worldwide media coverage over the role of abortion in population programs, the Conference nevertheless reached a high level of accord on most issues, producing a 16-section, 118-page program of action that lays out a series of principles and actions which are seen as necessary to stabilize the growth of world population, which is currently increasing by 86 million people a year.

The empowerment of women is at the center of this program. "Advancing gender equality and equity and the empowerment of women, and the elimination of all kinds of violence against women, and ensuring women's ability to control their own fertility, are cornerstones of population and development-related programs," states the Program of Action.

"Perhaps the most significant outcome of the Conference was the near universal recognition that the first order of business on the population and development agenda is to raise the status of women and to view them as equal partners with men," said Dr. Beth Bowen, who was one of two Bahá'í International Community representatives to the Conference. "The acceptance of this principle alone opens the door to far better consultation and unity on every level, from the family to the nation to the planet."

The program of action also draws attention to unsustainable patterns of

production and consumption, calls for the elimination of poverty, defines the family as the fundamental societal unit and affirms the universal right to education. "The world community has a special responsibility to ensure that all children receive an education of improved quality and that they complete primary school," states the document.

On abortion, it was agreed that governments "should take appropriate steps to help women avoid abortion, which in no case should be promoted as a method of family planning, and in all cases provide for the humane treatment and counselling of women who have had recourse to abortion."

The program of action also called for a "broad and effective partnership" between governments and NGOs "to assist in the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of population and development activities. The "essential role" of women's organizations was especially noted.

Not every aspect of the program was unanimously accepted. Formal reservations were expressed by 24 delegations on such issues as sexual relations outside of marriage, family reunification, the regulation of fertility, reproductive and sexual rights, abortion, and the definition of family. ☉

The International Conference on Population and Development agrees that empowerment of women is the key to effective action

Dr. Beth Bowen, standing, at left, a representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the ICPD, was among the speakers at a series of workshops that sought to provide the perspectives of various religions and spiritual groups on the issues of the Cairo Conference. The workshop series was organized by the World Conference on Religion and Peace. Shown at right is Patrice Brodeur of WCRP.



Women gather in Vienna to prepare for Beijing

VIENNA — Representing an enormous diversity of nationalities, professions, interests and backgrounds, more than 1,200 women representing non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from some 54 countries in Europe and North America came together here for three days in October to discuss ways to promote the advancement of women throughout the region and the world.

The result of their deliberations — issued as a “Call to Action” — dealt with various regional issues but above all else stressed the interconnectedness of women’s concerns with the issues of human rights, social and economic development, and peace at all levels of society.

As such, the gathering offered a preview of the concerns and energy that NGOs plan to take to Beijing next September, when some 20,000 representatives are expected to gather in a much larger and more comprehensive NGO Forum overlapping with the Fourth World Conference on Women there.

“The processes and focus of this Forum herald the upcoming 1995 NGO Forum in Beijing,” said Khunying Supatra Masdit, who is the Convenor of the Beijing Forum. “As with other fora, NGOs have two

primary goals. The first is to provide substantive input to the Platform for Action the member states are going to adopt. The second is to strengthen the international women’s movement through a visionary celebration in Beijing of women’s diversity, common ground and universal aspirations.”

The Vienna NGO Forum '94, which was held 13-15 October in advance of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) High-Level Preparatory Meeting for the Fourth World Conference on Women, is one of five regional preparatory meetings for NGOs. Other regional NGO fora were held for Asia and the Pacific (Manila) in November 1993, for Latin America and the Caribbean (Buenos Aires) in September 1994, and for Western Asia (Amman) and for Africa (Dakar) in November 1994.

Input to Governments

In seeking to provide input to governments in the ECE region, which includes all of Europe, the U.S., Canada, and Israel, representatives at the Vienna NGO Forum spent much of their time working to produce a consensus document, which was given the title “Call to Action,” as well as a special negotiating document which offered line-by-line suggestions to governments for the regional platform for action.

In collaboration with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the International Women’s Rights Action Watch (IWRAP), the Bahá’í International Community sponsored a workshop entitled “Bringing Human Rights Home: The Creation of Violence-Free Families and Communities” at the Vienna NGO Forum '94. Shown standing near a display easel at the front of the room is Dr. Michael Penn, a clinical psychologist and a Bahá’í who has studied violence against women



Produced piece by piece in various issue-oriented workshops and then integrated into one document by an ad hoc committee, the 12-page Call to Action sought to serve as the conscience for the government delegations attending to the ECE meeting. It started by reminding them of the enormous impact that the economic policies set by Europe and North America have not only on women in the region, but also on the world as a whole.

The document expressed concern that "current economic policies do not provide for sustainable development and peace," adding that the dominant economic paradigm "is inherently detrimental to the rights of women."

"Industrialized nations consume 75 percent of world resources and represent 20 percent of global population," the Call to Action stated. "Unsustainable economic growth in the ECE region jeopardizes women's lives and any prospects for sustainable and just livelihoods in the region and worldwide and leads to a widening gap between rich and poor, both within and between countries."

The statement aimed to show how the advancement of women will in fact lead to increased well-being for all of humanity, because of the crucial but often ignored role that women play in holding together the foundations of human society.

The NGO statement, for example, emphasized the role that women play in community development, and it urged that government officials, policy makers and community planners be required to develop policies "in partnership with grassroots women and their organizations."

"Grassroots women understand the problems of women, children and families and local values, and support their families and communities through their work," the document stated.

A Process of Consensus-building

In many ways, the process of networking and consensus-building which produced the Call to Action was as important as the actual statement itself. According to participants, it demonstrated the distinctive capacity of women for inclusion and non-adversarial decision-making — which is itself another overall point that NGO leaders hope to showcase in Beijing.

"People are not here with their own



agenda and that is one of the things that has impressed me the most — the willingness of all these different organizations to listen to one another," said Patricia Daniels, the president-elect of Soroptimists International, a women's professional service organization. "We agree on certain points and agree to disagree on certain other points and then we build a consensus. What is important is that all points of view come out for discussion."

Another important aspect of the Forum, said participants, was the degree to which it brought women representing newly established organizations in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Republics into the existing network of women's NGOs in Western Europe and North America.

Anna Syomina, the director of "Mama 86," a mothers' environmental organization in Kiev, Ukraine, said she made many useful new contacts during the Forum, which she hopes will lead to new joint projects. To discover the great diversity of the women in the region was also enlightening, she said.

"I recognized for the first time how wide is our world and how different are its people — but women, really, all of them, from all nationalities and all colors of skin, are very beautiful," she said. "It was a very good experience."

The Integration of Issues

In addition to traditional concerns related to greater equality, better access to political participation, and specific "women's" concerns about reproduction

The Bahá'í delegation to the Vienna NGO Forum '94 included representatives from the Bahá'í International Community, identified by city, and representatives from various national communities in Europe and North America, identified by country. Shown in front, left to right, are: Wendy Momen (UK), Mary Power (New York), Françoise Teclemariam (France), and Lois Hainsworth (UK). In the back row are Michael Penn (Philadelphia), Kit Cosby (USA), Jenny Field (New York), Roberta Law (The Netherlands), Giovanni Ballerio (Geneva), Ann Mannen (The Netherlands), Brenda Maxwell (Canada), Sepideh Taheri (UK), Nateghe Saffar (Germany) and Shoreh Rahmatian (Romania). Not shown are Bahia Ettehadieh (Vienna), Neda Forghani (Vienna), Rebequa Getahoun (USA) and Bridget McEvoy (Iceland).

and women's health, the Forum and its Call to Action also addressed questions of global governance, environment and ecology, and disarmament.

"The women's movement today is about connection," said Sue Tibballs of European Women for a Common Future. "You've got to understand how women's issues connect to broader questions such as the globalization of the economy, trade policy, overseas aid policy, community development, and social justice."

The theme of partnership continues to emerge at conferences in the preparatory process for Beijing. Women activists are recognizing that further advancement for women will require changes in the attitudes of men, and that those changes can only come as men are drawn into the movement in a spirit of partnership.

"At this conference, it seemed to me that this theme of partnership was increasingly talked about," said Françoise Teclemariam, who represented the Bahá'í community of France at the Forum. "This I think is a very important point, which will be a main theme at Beijing."

Ms. Teclemariam was one of 18 Bahá'í delegates to the Forum. In addition to rep-

resentatives from the Bahá'í International Community, the communities of Canada, Finland, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, Romania, the United Kingdom, and the United States sent delegates. As well, a Bahá'í representative was sent to a special youth consultation sponsored by the UN Secretariat for the Fourth World Conference on Women.

The Bahá'í International Community, in collaboration with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the International Women's Rights Action Watch (IWRAP), also sponsored a workshop entitled "Bringing Human Rights Home: The Creation of Violence-Free Families and Communities."

"It has become widely acknowledged that violence against women is a major problem worldwide," said Mary Power, director of the Office for the Advancement of Women of the Bahá'í International Community. "The focus of our workshop was not only to illuminate the issue, but also to offer creative solutions. Specifically, we want to promote the idea that we can work to build a new type of family, a unity-based family, which will be violence-free. The workshop sought to explore that." ☉

UN General Assembly expresses continued concern over human rights in Iran and the treatment of religious minorities

UNITED NATIONS — For the ninth time in ten years, the United Nations General Assembly has passed a resolution expressing concern over reports of human rights violations in Iran, also taking special note of the persecution of Bahá'ís there.

By a vote of 74 to 25, with 55 abstentions, the General Assembly on 23 December 1994 called attention to the continued reports of high numbers of executions, cases of torture and cruel treatment, and the failure to "meet international standards with regards to the administration of justice."

The resolution also expressed concern over "discriminatory treatment of minorities by reason of their religious beliefs, notably the Bahá'ís, whose existence as a viable religious community is threatened." It also noted criticisms over "the lack of adequate protection for the

Christian minorities," saying that some have "recently been the target of intimidations and assassinations."

The Assembly called for continued monitoring of the human rights situation in Iran.

Techeste Ahderom, the principal representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations, praised the General Assembly's action, saying that continued international scrutiny remains the key to security for Iran's 350,000-member Bahá'í community.

"The Bahá'ís of Iran, who have faced persecution in Iran solely because of their religious beliefs, are thankful for the support of the international community," said Mr. Ahderom. "A peaceful, law-abiding community, they seek only the right to freely practice their religion, as guaranteed in international human rights instruments that Iran is a party to." ☉



Cirilo Sanchez and his wife, Susana Bejerano, shown in front of their home in Soloy. Mr. Sanchez was one of the first Guaymís to embrace the Bahá'í Faith, and he was instrumental in setting up the indigenous system of tutorial schools in the Guaymí region.

Panama's Guaymís discover new resources for maintaining identity

(Continued from page one)

unsafe conditions for very low wages. And the long separations have opened the door to alcohol abuse and a loss of their cultural identity.

In response, some Guaymís have turned inward, manifesting an increasing distrust of outsiders, albeit at the risk of an even lower standard of living. Others have accepted Latino ways, seeking to accommodate the outside world, though such a move sometimes takes them even farther from their roots.

And then there are the Guaymí Bahá'ís, who have embarked on a rather bold path that appears to offer a way of preserving elements of culture of which they are most proud and at the same time giving them tools to control their own destiny.

Over the last 30 years, some 8,000 Guaymís have embraced the Bahá'í Faith, attracted to it, some say, because of indigenous prophecies that spoke of the coming of a new religion of unity. In the process, Guaymí Bahá'ís have built a distinctive community within a community, one that both serves to strengthen and reinforce their own culture while at the same time promoting such "progressive" principles as equality of women and men, racial and ethnic tolerance, and education for all.

"Among ourselves, we are very kind and socialize a lot," said Tahireh Sanchez,

a 23-year-old Guaymí whose parents were among the first Guaymís to become Bahá'ís. "But with the outside people, we are very afraid to talk to them and relate to them. But in my family, I was taught to socialize with others and to treat everyone as equals. So this allows me to go out and make friends with all people. I will do this because I understand that women are equal to men — and also that Indians are equal."

This process of community-building, which has been accomplished with very little help from outsiders, can further be understood as a rather extraordinary case of grassroots-based, participatory development practices.

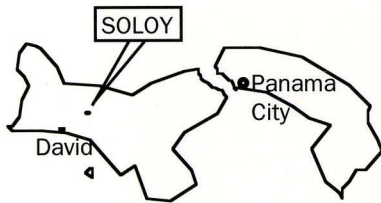
The fruits of this effort — which has a long way to go before it can be fully judged — can be seen most vividly in the system of community-based tutorial schools the Guaymí Bahá'ís have established, which operate in up to 11 villages.

The schools have quite clearly had an influence on the entire community. Not only have they increased the general level of literacy, but their moral content has helped give an entire generation a renewed appreciation of their own culture while at the same time providing a yardstick for evaluating what is good and bad in the outside world.

Other aspects of this community-wide

"In my family, I was taught to socialize with others and to treat everyone as equals. So this allows me to go out and make friends with all people. I will do this because I understand that women are equal to men — and also that Indians are equal."

— Tahireh Sanchez



The centerpiece of the Guaymí Cultural Center in Soloy is a large, open-air meeting place, which was built almost entirely by the Guaymís themselves. Capable of accommodating several hundred people, it is used for large meetings, folk festivals and musical events. Materials for the galvanized roof were trucked in from outside, a contribution of the national Bahá'í community of Panama.

development process can be seen in a series of projects which are conducted under the auspices of the Guaymí Cultural Center, located here in Soloy. The Cultural Center, built by the Guaymís themselves with some materials and technical advice from national and international Bahá'í communities, serves as a regional training and conference center for the Guaymís. In this role, it not only provides a critical element of support for the tutorial schools but also offers a platform for launching other community efforts.

Managed by a committee that includes both Guaymí and Latino Bahá'ís, these broader efforts include a project to experiment with and introduce new agricultural techniques, a forum to create and encourage new leadership capacities among the Guaymí young people, and the sponsorship of culture and folklore festivals. The Center is also associated with Radio Bahá'í Panama, a community-based radio project, which itself has had a huge impact on preserving Guaymí culture and language.

Tutorial Schools

The tutorial schools were initially established entirely by Guaymí Bahá'ís, who realized that only through education could their community progress and control its destiny.

Ruth Pringle was one of the first Bahá'ís to bring word of the Faith to the Guaymís. In a recent interview, she told how two brothers, Luis Cuevas and Cirilo Sanchez, started up the first tutorial schools after

she and her husband visited the area in 1961, leaving behind some basic literacy primers and workbooks.

"After about a year and a half, we saw Luis again, and he announced that he had established a school in his community, so that the children could learn to read and write, and that they would never have to face the embarrassing situation that he had had to face of being ignorant for lack of these skills," said Ms. Pringle, who now lives in Costa Rica. "This was the first tutorial school to be established in the area, and it became the source of inspiration for the other communities over the years. So early on, the Guaymís themselves began to take charge of their own affairs."

Cirilo Sanchez, who like his brother was among the first Guaymís to embrace the Faith, said he and his brother were motivated in part because of the emphasis in the Bahá'í teachings on the importance of education — and because of their own difficult experience at having to go out to Latino schools to get an education.

"When we became Bahá'ís, there were no public schools in the area, so we started teaching in our communities, my brother and I, teaching children to read and write," said Mr. Sanchez, who is 64 and lives in Soloy.

Although there are today some government-run schools in the Guaymí region, the system of Bahá'í schools continues to flourish.





The Cultural Center also features a combination dormitory/kitchen/classroom building, which was built largely by the Guaymí Bahá'ís themselves.

"There are still places where there is no other school," said Alfaro Mina, a 39-year-old Bahá'í development specialist from Colombia, who now works as a full-time advisor to the Guaymís. "And in places where there is a government school, our schools start earlier, providing preschool education."

Mr. Mina said that in every case, the tutorial schools are taught by community volunteers — usually young men — who donate a year of service to their communities. This in and of itself is an enormous sacrifice for such a materially poor people, in that it often takes the teachers away from farming or other sources of income for this period.

"The community helps by providing food, and we also manage to give a salary of \$20 a month, which comes from the international Bahá'í community," said Mr. Mina. "We have a curriculum committee that provides three to four weeks of training, which takes place here in Soloy, at the Guaymí Cultural Center. "The school buildings themselves are very simple. Sometimes just a small hut or shelter, mostly open, with four pillars and a roof."

Focus on Moral Education

While the focus has long been on basic literacy and math skills, the tutorial schools have also emphasized moral education. In addition to teaching basic ethical principles, the moral curriculum in Bahá'í schools promotes a set of progressive ideals, including the equality of women and men, the importance of eliminating all forms of prejudice, and the concept of the oneness

of humanity.

Some 30 years of this type of education has had a distinctive impact on the Guaymí Bahá'ís, who have sought to incorporate these principles in their daily life.

Guaymí youth in the Soloy region, where the network of schools has been most fully developed, speak forthrightly about the degree to which this educational process has given them a new vision of their own identity and capacities.

Ms. Sanchez, for example, works as a broadcaster at Radio Bahá'í, producing and reading programs and news in their native language, Ngäbere. A one-kilowatt non-commercial station that reaches most of Chiriquí Province, Radio Bahá'í has thus helped to give Ngäbere a new regard in the region.

Tahireh said she feels her service at the radio station is important in helping to protect and preserve her culture. She also feels, however, that some aspects of her culture, such as the traditional domination of women by men, can and should be discarded.

She herself has married another young Guaymí Bahá'í, and they have sought to apply the principles of equality in their marriage, she said.

"In the house sometimes he cooks, and sometimes I do," she said. "Sometimes I wash the clothes, and sometimes he does."

Carbila Cuevas, who is also 23 and works with Tahireh at the radio station, feels similarly about the importance of preserving those aspects of culture of which they are proud and discarding those aspects that are oppressive.

"My father used to tell me that we should not let the outside world come to the area, because it will destroy us," said Mr. Cuevas. "My father said people are forgetting the old language and traditions."

"But Radio Bahá'í has preserved many of these old traditions and we are trying to help people not to forget about them. So during the last 10 or 15 years, most of the Guaymís are learning to love their language, and also their traditions and stories."

In his view, however, not all of the old traditions are good. Mr. Cuevas tells about a traditional form of ritual combat, called "balseria," in which the men of whole villages battle each other by swatting at each other's ankles with huge logs of balsa wood. Injuries are common, he said, and balseria is usually accompanied by much drunkenness. It can also produce lingering feelings of hatred or resentment if participants come to feel their opponents have been unfair.

"Now in the Bahá'í communities, we don't do this," he said. "We dance in the traditional way to celebrate holidays." But because drinking and fighting are against Bahá'í teachings, they avoid balseria — and the divisions it often produces, said Mr. Cuevas.

Structures of Unity

Because of their commitment to certain common principles and their participation in joint activities, the Guaymí Bahá'ís can be said to form a community within a community. However, although the highest concentration of Guaymí Bahá'ís re-

sides in villages near Soloy, the Bahá'ís do not live separately or apart from their kinfolk. Rather, Bahá'í families live dispersed throughout the region.

What unites them is a network of local governing councils, known as local Spiritual Assemblies, which guide their activities. The Guaymís have established about 25 local Spiritual Assemblies throughout Chiriquí Province.

Like the some 20,000 other local Spiritual Assemblies in the Bahá'í world, these local councils are elected each year, following democratic principles, and they utilize a distinctive non-adversarial decision-making method known as consultation.

The very act of gathering together and electing such locally based institutions has contributed greatly to a new sense of empowerment and capacity among Guaymí Bahá'ís, say outside observers.

"Until recently the concept of Guaymí ethnicity was probably very weak," said Whitney Lyn White, an American anthropologist who spent some three months studying the Guaymí Bahá'ís in 1993 and is one of the few outsiders to carefully analyze their situation. "Family alliances, and shifting kin-based alliances expand and contract depending on the 'enemy.'"

"But the Guaymís are under a survival pressure to resist the encroachment of outsiders. And one level of response to this pressure is found in the creation of unity among the Guaymí Bahá'ís.

"The Bahá'í Faith has provided a new leadership model in its institutions, which has greatly expanded the group identity. It also offers spiritual principles that help to maintain unity in groups, so that the group can do something together. Principles like the elimination of racial and ethnic prejudice, in this situation, work to eliminate divisions between families and between clans," Ms. White said.

Guaymí Bahá'ís said the teachings of the Faith about unity had indeed helped them to get along better with their neighbors.

"Lots of my neighbors have problems with their families," said Mariano Rodríguez, a 53-year-old farmer near Soloy who has been a Bahá'í since 1963, explaining that fighting between families and between husbands and wives is not uncommon. "The difference is that the Bahá'ís, within their understanding, are trying to live in peace." ☉

Mariano Rodríguez, his wife Bernarda Bejerano, and their youngest son, Abraham, standing in front of their house in Soloy. Mr. Rodríguez said he believes that the Bahá'í teachings on equality and consultation have helped him get along better with his wife, improving their family life.



Olya's Story

(Continued from back page)

Muqimi faced seemingly endless interrogations, all designed to break her spirit and force her to deny her Faith, without voicing a thought of uttering the simple lie that would have brought freedom. "Now that we have this opportunity, we must teach them the truth and help them to understand it," Ms. Roohizadegan quotes Ms. Muqimi as telling her. "We can't afford to be scared of what they might do. We have to be honest, answer every question they ask us in detail, and not leave anything unexplained."

Equally moving are stories of the way that the hardships of prison life were faced — all while maintaining a sense of dignity and compassion. One day, for example, a single delectable sour plum, a gift to one of the Bahá'í prisoners, was carefully cut into tiny pieces so that all in the cell could share.

Among the most difficult tests that Ms. Roohizadegan herself faced in prison was the separation from her three-year-old son, Payam. At one point, in their efforts to force her to recant, a prosecutor brought little Payam into the interrogation room, hoping the boy's presence would cause Ms. Roohizadegan to succumb to motherly instincts. "If you truly love your child and want to go back to your home and family, just write two words on this paper, '*Bahá'í nistam* — I am not a Bahá'í, and that you have become a Muslim. This is just on paper — it means nothing.'"

"I can't tell such a lie," said Ms. Roohizadegan. "I would rather be hanged."

Despite the resulting sentence of death, Ms. Roohizadegan was released in early 1983, apparently because prosecutors hoped she would lead them to other Bahá'ís who they presumed were in hiding. Ms. Roohizadegan instead took the opportunity to flee the country with Payam and her husband, making a dangerous and difficult trip through the mountains to Pakistan.

Ms. Roohizadegan spent about a year in Pakistan before obtaining a visa to Great Britain, where her eldest sons were studying at the time. She has lived there since, earning a living as a beautician and hairdresser.

Olya's Story was published in June 1993 to coincide with the 10th anniversary of the hanging of the ten women in Shiraz, and upon its release, *Olya's Story* garnered a series of positive reviews. *The London Saturday Times Magazine* devoted a whole page to her story, and the BBC and CNN both featured interviews with Ms. Roohizadegan.

The book has sold more than 10,000 copies, is shortly to be published in German, and is being translated into Japanese.

Few such accounts of unjust imprisonment and torture have been written by women, and *Olya's Story* stands out as a special contribution to the literature created by prisoners of conscience. In this sense, Ms. Roohizadegan's work takes on a special importance in bringing forward the story of a group of heroic and still largely unknown women who were willing to sacrifice everything for their beliefs. ☸

Few such accounts of unjust imprisonment and torture have been written by women, and *Olya's Story* stands out as a special contribution to the literature created by prisoners of conscience.



In Macau last August, members of the Bahá'í community held a celebration in honor of the International Year of the Family. Shown are some youth participating in a "talent/song" competition.

A survivor's account of persecution in Iran

Olya's Story

Olya
Roohizadegan

Oneworld
Publications

Oxford

There are those stories that — because of their drama, their connection with great and heroic events, and their illumination of the human spirit — deserve to be told again and again.

Such is surely the nature of the stories associated with the persecution of the Bahá'ís of Iran in the early 1980s, when thousands of Iranian Bahá'ís were systematically deprived of property and livelihood, imprisoned, and, in several hundred cases, tortured and executed — solely because of their religious beliefs.

Part of what makes these tales so moving and timeless is the distinctive serenity and spiritual dignity with which Bahá'ís faced their tormenters.

In virtually every reliable account

we have, Bahá'ís were always offered the option of recanting their Faith and converting to Islam, with the promise that they would go free if they did. And in virtually every case, the Bahá'ís said no, choosing continued imprisonment and the very real possibility of death.

Further, the Bahá'ís did not fight back. Rather than taking up arms and going underground, the 350,000 Bahá'ís in Iran continued as best they could to go about their daily business, striving to show to the Islamic Government that it had nothing to fear from them, and, indeed, that the only goal of the Bahá'ís was to promote the highest possible social, moral, and economic development of their country.

In this context comes *Olya's Story* — the personal account of Ms. Olya Roohizadegan, who watched as her friends, neighbors and relatives in the Bahá'í community of Shiraz were arrested, tortured and executed, and who then was herself arrested by Revolutionary Guards and held for more than a year in prison. She was ultimately released, apparently in the hope that she would somehow “incriminate” others on the outside, and she managed to escape to Pakistan and freedom.

By itself, the story is dramatic and stirring, and worth reading simply in terms of human interest alone — even though it comes more than a decade after the events it focuses on.

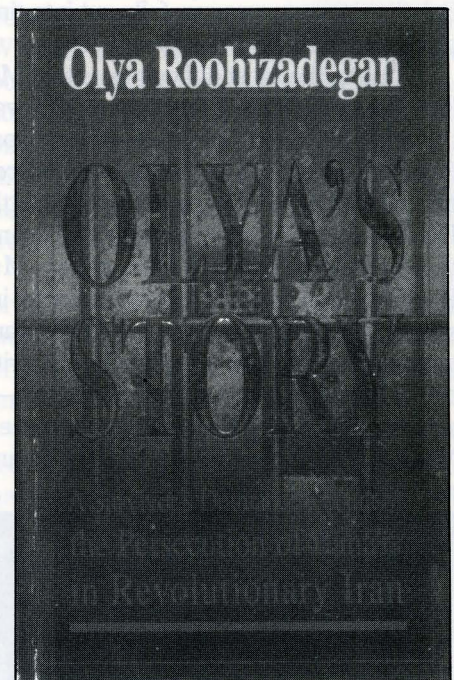
At the same time, however, the deeply

personal nature of this memoir makes it particularly valuable and important because of the insights it provides into the mindset of those heroic Bahá'ís who were singled out for torture, imprisonment and execution.

At the core of the book is a series of intimate profiles of ten women who were executed on 18 June 1983, an event which ultimately helped trigger a huge international outcry against the treatment of Bahá'ís in Iran. Ranging in age from 51 to just 17, the women were accused of “crimes” which focused largely on their service as teachers of Bahá'í religious education classes for children.

Ms. Roohizadegan was incarcerated with these ten women, and early on in her imprisonment she decided that one of her missions in life, were she ever to escape, would be to chronicle their final days.

Review



And so it is that she tells about 17-year-old Mona Mahmudnizhad, who despite her young age constantly expressed more concern for others than for herself, telling her mother once that no matter how downhearted she felt about their imprisonment she must nevertheless make a point of laughing and giving “positive energy” when they were around others, so as to uplift the whole group.

And about how 28-year-old Zarrin
(Continued on page 15)