

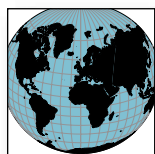


ONE COUNTRY

"The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens" — Bahá'u'lláh

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Newsletter of the Bahá'í
International Community
July-September 2008
Volume 19, Issue 4



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The Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh and the Shrine of the Báb join the Vatican, the Old City of Jerusalem, and the Pyramids, among other places, as sites of "outstanding universal value."



A view of the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, upper right, shows the design of the surrounding gardens. The Shrine is located outside Acre, Israel, and is a major site of pilgrimage for Bahá'ís.

ACRE, Israel — The holiest place on earth for Bahá'ís is an 19th century mansion and surrounding grounds outside this historic city in northern Israel. Known as Bahji, it is the final resting place of Bahá'u'lláh and the main pilgrimage site for the more than five million Bahá'ís worldwide.

Now that site and another Bahá'í holy place in nearby Haifa have been added to the United Nations' World Heritage list, recognized for their "outstanding universal value" as part of humanity's cultural heritage.

The decision by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, meeting in Quebec City, Canada, on 8 July 2008, means that the Shrines of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb join a list of internationally recognized sites like the Great Wall of China, the Pyramids, the Taj Mahal, and Stonehenge.

The World Heritage list also includes places of global religious significance like the Vatican, the Old City of Jerusalem, and the remains of the recently destroyed Bamiyan Buddha statues in Afghanistan.

The Bahá'í shrines are the first sites connected with a religious tradition born in modern times to be added to the list, which is maintained by UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

"The decision to include the Bahá'í Faith's two most holy sites on the World Heritage list is noteworthy because it adds yet another layer of international recognition to the Bahá'í Faith as an historic and cultural phenomenon of global importance," said Albert Lincoln, secretary general of the Bahá'í International Community.

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The future of food: balancing the local and global

In June this year, global food prices climbed to an all-time high, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

While consumers in developed countries have been forced to look a bit harder for discounts at their local grocer, the effect on those living in poverty has verged on the catastrophic. In some countries, among them Egypt, Haiti, and even Mexico, the rapidly escalating price of basic cereals and edible oils led to riots.

Although prices have declined since June, the crisis nevertheless highlighted an important fact: our global food supply is under pressure from multiple avenues, and the need for a coordinated global approach to food and agriculture is greater than ever.

Various factors are responsible for the immediate rise in food prices. They include the rising cost of petroleum, unseasonable droughts over the last several years, and an increasing demand for a more varied diet in newly prospering nations.

These factors are likely to be compounded by other trends, such as the impact of climate change on agricultural conditions in many parts of the world, increasing soil erosion worldwide, and the continuing growth in world population, now projected to rise from 6.7 billion people to 9.2 billion by 2050.

Other factors are connected to the problem. The global food system mirrors economic inequalities. While some starve, developed nations face an epidemic of obesity. The industrialization of food processes is contributing to rural-to-urban migration. And many worry about the safety of our food supply because of the increasing use of questionable hormones or additives to boost yields, storage time or palatability.

Food is, of course, among the most basic of necessities. But survival aside, lack of access to proper food affects health, intelligence, educational attainment, and a whole host of other development issues.

As well, the manner in which we produce food — whether by methods that will ultimately exhaust the earth or by processes that can be sustained in the long term — stands at the foundation of sustainable development.

Policy makers are increasingly looking to religious communities for help in achieving sustainable development. Faith communities and faith-based organizations not only have extensive networks at the grass roots but also sacred writings that have proven to be a powerful source of motivation for change and transformation.

Like most issues related to sustainable development, the challenges brought by the food crisis are cross-cutting and multifaceted, touching on virtually every dimension of human existence: social, technical, economic, educational, moral and spiritual.

Any integrated approach to the food crisis, then, must take religion into consideration, given its influence on the attitudes, behaviors, and social practices of individuals and communities. Many religions, for example, have dietary laws that affect what is eaten and how it is produced. And, as with sustainable development generally, faith-based organizations have much to offer, from strong membership at the local level to moral and ethical principles that can promote positive change.

As policy makers attempt to formulate a comprehensive and integrated long-term policy on food, they will find that the holistic and global-minded principles found in the Bahá'í sacred writings offer a number of important insights.

First and foremost is the principle of justice. Writing 80 years ago, 'Abdu'l-Bahá specifically mentioned the importance of food in discussing social justice: "We see amongst us men who are overburdened with riches on the one hand, and on the other those unfortunate ones who starve with nothing; those who possess several stately palaces, and those who have [no place] to lay their

head. Some we find with numerous courses of costly and dainty food; whilst others can scarce find sufficient crusts to keep them alive.... This condition of affairs is wrong, and must be remedied.”

The Bahá’í writings offer a number of specific ideas about how to promote economic justice. These include concrete principles for balancing taxation and wealth re-distribution, the promotion of corporate profit-sharing as a means to improve the worker’s share in productivity, and underlying spiritual concepts that promote individual responsibility, such as the notion that work performed in the spirit of service to humanity is equivalent to worship.

A critically important feature of today’s food crisis is the interplay between local and global forces.

No approach can succeed without a deep exploration of how to better address trade, agricultural subsidies, development, climate change, and energy policy at the global level. At the same time, food and agriculture remain intensely dependent on local conditions. Soil, climate, the availability of water and labor, and even the educational level of farmers — all have their impact.

Further, even as international agriculture has become increasingly commoditized, making it possible for consumers in one region to enjoy out-of-season fruits and vegetables nearly around the year, many today are calling for a return to “local food.” This is spurred by concerns over food quality and safety and by the realization that the packaging and transportation of food produced elsewhere sometimes adds greatly to the carbon footprint.

Significantly, the Bahá’í writings, which emphasize the oneness and interconnectedness of humanity, also address the small-scale side of life on this planet. They emphasize the importance of individual initiative, ethical behavior, local control, and community participation — all elements needed to ensure the proper balance between the global and the local dynamic in any solution to the food crisis. Specifically, the Bahá’í writings offer:

- *An understanding of the fundamental role agriculture plays in community life.* The Bahá’í writings uniquely emphasize the importance of agriculture, placing it in the first rank among social concerns and emphasizing its significance as an honorable profession. “The fundamental basis of the community is agriculture, tillage of the soil,” said ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. “All must be producers.” Food production and agriculture is the world’s single largest

source of employment; nearly 70% of the poor in developing countries live in rural areas and depend on agriculture for their livelihoods. The farmer must be accorded his or her rightful place in the processes of development and civilization building.

- *A model for community administration that balances the local and the global.* Unique among religious communities, the Bahá’í writings establish a clear hierarchy between locally elected governing councils, national-level administration, and international coordination. This bottom-up/top-down administrative system is already functioning around the world, and it encourages sensitivity to local conditions with a unified global perspective.

- *An explicit call for equality between women and men.* Equality is something that is unmistakably necessary for progress in food and agriculture. According to the FAO, women produce between 60 and 80 percent of the food in most developing countries and are responsible for half of the world’s food production. The Bahá’í view that women and men are fundamentally equal creates new possibilities for change and transformation at the grass roots.

- *Teachings on health and consumerism that recommend a moderate and simple diet.* Although Bahá’í dietary laws allow the eating of meat, vegetarianism is encouraged. “The food of the future will be fruit and grains,” wrote ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. “The time will come when meat is no longer eaten.” Such a prescription, research shows, contributes not only to individual health but also to planetary well-being, by reducing the disproportionate demand for land and resources needed for intensive animal rearing.

- *An emphasis on the importance of science and technology, moderated by moral values.* As the world seeks to boost food output, questions over genetically modified food, petroleum-based fertilizer, and bio-fuels — among other issues — highlight the need for scientific progress governed by social concern. The Bahá’í writings encourage a reliance on science but also stress the need for consultation about its impact and direction.

Taken altogether, these principles — along with other aspects of the Bahá’í teachings on the environment, ethics, social justice, community participation, and the importance of diversity — offer a vision for human-scale living with deep roots at the local level that is nevertheless guided by a keen understanding of the trends and conditions at the global level. It is precisely such a balance that can help to solve the food crisis in the long run. ❀

The Bahá’í writings, which emphasize the oneness and interconnectedness of humanity, also address the small-scale side of life on this planet. They emphasize the importance of individual initiative, ethical behavior, local control, and community participation — all elements needed to ensure the proper balance between the global and the local dynamic in any solution to the food crisis.

Concerned about “quagmire” in human rights, Bahá’ís launch new discourse

“Human rights mechanisms have proven incapable of addressing, much less preventing, violations on a massive scale... [We must] begin to chart a course out of the quagmire in which human rights matters are bogged down.”

**— Bani Dugal,
Bahá’í International
Community**

Participants gathered at the offices of the Bahá’í International Community in New York, from 19-22 May 2008 to launch a new “Human Rights Discourse.”

NEW YORK — Concerned that the goal of establishing a universal standard for human rights has become mired in competing international agendas, the Bahá’í International Community has launched an initiative to explore how best to strengthen the promotion of human rights and ensure their central place in the governance of human affairs.

“It is alarmingly apparent that human rights are being assaulted from all sides,” said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá’í International Community, at the opening session of the first effort in this new initiative, a “Human Rights Discourse,” held 19-22 May 2008 at the BIC offices here.

“Human rights mechanisms have proven incapable of addressing, much less preventing, violations on a massive scale,” said Ms. Dugal, while the elimination of various forms of discrimination “has yet to be manifested in spirit and in formal processes.”

In launching a new discourse on human rights, Ms. Dugal said, the goal is “to begin to chart a course out of the quagmire in which human rights matters are bogged down.”

Against that backdrop, the May event brought together some 30 individuals who specialize in human rights, international law, and social action to discuss the challenges facing the advancement of human rights and how the vision for a universal standard might be realized.

Participants, who came from 12 coun-

tries, included representatives of UN missions, officials of UN agencies, academics, and activists from human rights-oriented non-governmental organizations, along with one journalist. Many had prepared discussion papers in advance of the meeting.

The focus was on three themes: reconciling rights with responsibilities; the challenge of implementing the emerging doctrine of “responsibility to protect”; and how to safeguard established rights currently under threat.

The format of the meeting was informal, using a modified version of the Chatham House rules that gave participants the choice to remain anonymous in the attribution of their remarks, allowing them to engage in a free-flowing conversation without fear of offending particular governments or organizations.

While the discourse produced no formal outcome document, there was a rich exchange of ideas. A number of points emerged:

- That rights and duties are interdependent among all actors in society, whether government, corporate, or individual. All human beings have a moral obligation to respect, uphold and defend the rights of others, especially in view of the principle of collective trusteeship, an understanding that every human being is born into the world as a trust of the whole.

- Nevertheless, states have a primary responsibility to respect and protect human rights. In doing so, they must consider the human rights of individuals outside their borders. States should support the United Nations in protecting endangered populations, including responsibilities to prevent, react and rebuild, despite the costs and risks to personnel.

- The attempts of governments who are committing human rights violations to enlist the support of other rights-violating governments should be resisted. Efforts must be made to ensure that the Human Rights Council is not politicized in this way.

- An important step toward creating and implementing a universal standard of human rights is the involvement of individuals and organizations at all levels of society, through



processes that emphasize the moral, legal, and religious foundation of human rights.

Humanitarian intervention

The discussion of the emerging doctrine of “the responsibility to protect” was among the most lively, as participants debated whether states should intervene militarily to protect populations whose rights are being violated or whether traditional norms of state sovereignty should hold sway. The doctrine is sometimes known as “humanitarian intervention.”

Participants brought up real world examples, such as Darfur and Rwanda, as well as the humanitarian crisis that followed Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar last May, saying the international community should have felt the obligation to intervene militarily to prevent bloodshed or a larger crisis.

Others noted the complexities of such actions. “We should not be too euphoric about this abstract notion,” said one participant, noting that, for example, it would have taken a huge military force to intervene in Burma if the military regime there wanted to fight. “The people with guns on the ground control relief.”

National politics also prevents states from acting on a strictly moral plane. “People will recall that in Somalia, it took the deaths of just a few US military personnel to freeze the United States out,” continued the same individual.

Nevertheless, participants agreed, the international community needs to find ways to strengthen its commitment to the responsibility to protect. “One dimension is winning support from the local population,” said a participant who is a legal specialist in humanitarian intervention. “How do we inspire people around the world to support their governments in giving aid or sending in troops?”

Freedom of religion or belief

Another vigorously discussed topic concerned how to promote freedom of religion or belief. “Our laws, both national and international, loudly speak of freedom of religion with all its essential attributes, but our day-to-day practices evidence widely prevalent inhumanities and human miseries emanating from religious intolerance and discrimination,” wrote one participant, in a paper prepared for the discourse.

Several participants noted that freedom of religion or belief has become something of a “second-class citizen” within the realm of human rights, in part because any dialogue about religion often becomes contested. As a result, the issue is often swept under the rug.



Iradj Roberto Eghrari, a Bahá'í and president of the National Forum on Human Rights Education, a coalition of NGOs involved in human rights education in Brazil, speaks at the Human Rights Discourse at the Bahá'í International Community offices in New York in May.

“It is very difficult to mobilize big, international non-governmental organizations on questions of freedom of religion or belief,” said one participant. “It is very normal to be defended if you hold a political idea. But if you have a religion, they say, why don't you just hide that fact?”

One way to better enforce current laws on freedom of religion or belief, participants said, would be for the UN Human Rights Council to demand information on the efforts of governments to protect the right to change one's religion as part of the Council's periodic review mechanism.

A third area of discussion concerned the right to development. Participants called it complex and noted it means different things to different people in different places. The promotion of development is dependent not only upon the states but also supporting actors, such as the United Nations, multinational corporations, NGOs, and individuals. There is no way to assure human rights without international cooperation and an enabling environment, participants said.

The Bahá'í International Community intends to continue the discourse on human rights with further gatherings and activities in other places, said Ms. Dugal.

“Several participants said they saw the discourse as a way to help bridge the divide between north and south in discussions on human rights, and as a way to bring different coalitions together,” she said.

“And we see this as an organic, ongoing process,” said Ms. Dugal. “Our hope is to bring together and consult with more specialists on human rights, including those who work on the front lines as defenders at the national and even local levels.” ❀

“We see this as an organic, ongoing process. Our hope is to bring together and consult with more specialists on human rights, including those who work on the front lines as defenders at the national and even local levels.”

**— Bani Dugal,
Bahá'í International
Community**

Iranian Bahá'ís face new attacks — and also gain increased support

A number of Iranian human rights activists, like Shirin Ebadi, as well as prominent Iranian journalists and writers, have given support to Bahá'ís — or condemned the government for its oppression of them.

In June 2008, the Mousavi family of Fars province narrowly escaped injury when an arsonist poured gasoline and caused an explosion and fire that destroyed a hut near where the family was sleeping outside their home.



NEW YORK — In recent months, Iranian Bahá'ís have continued to face increasing persecution from their government and its proxies. At the same time, however, they are receiving growing support and succor from both inside and outside Iran.

Among recent developments:

- At the United Nations, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon issued a 20-page report expressing concern over human rights violations in Iran against Bahá'ís — and other minorities, women and juveniles.

- In July, Iranian rights activist and Nobel Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi took the case of defending seven Bahá'í leaders who were jailed in March and May — and for this she has been severely attacked in the government-controlled news media.

- Another sign of internal support for Bahá'ís came with the release, by an Iranian human rights group, of a secret report that essentially exonerated three Bahá'ís currently imprisoned in Shiraz. The confidential report, written by an inspector for a regional representative of Iran's Supreme Leader, found the Bahá'ís, arrested in May 2005 along with 50 others, were essentially innocent of government charges. Yet the government has

been unwilling to release them.

- Violence directed against Iranian Bahá'ís by the government or its proxies continues, and arson against Bahá'í homes and vehicles emerged as the latest tactic of oppression against them.

- Bahá'í university students continue to face impediments to enrollment or expulsion after matriculation, and recent court cases have confirmed that such exclusion remains official government policy.

“The Bahá'ís of Iran face increasing attacks, arson, rising imprisonments, the deprivation of education and income, and day-to-day harassment,” said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations. “Yet, in the midst of this grim reality, there is a ray of hope in the fact that many individuals and organizations both inside and outside of Iran are raising their voices in support.”

Iranian activists give support

A number of Iranian human rights activists, like Shirin Ebadi, as well as prominent Iranian journalists and writers, have in recent months given support to Bahá'ís — or condemned the government for its oppression of them.

In September, for example, noted Iranian activist Ahmad Batebi published an extensive article on the prominent online newspaper *Rooz* titled “The Bahais and higher education in Iran.” The article discussed government efforts to block Bahá'ís from attending university and the recent arrests of Bahá'í leaders, outlined Iran's obligations under its constitution to protect freedom of religion, and concluded with a rhetorical question, asking why the Islamic Republic of Iran seems “so afraid of any contact between the people and not only the Bahá'ís but every religious minority group.”

Iranian journalist Akbar Ganji, likewise, has recently expressed concern about the situation of Iran's Bahá'ís in several recent speeches or articles, including an article titled “The right of being Bahá'í versus being Bahá'í with rights,” published on 11 June 2008 on his Web site.

The report of the UN Secretary General on human rights in Iran devoted nearly a full page to the situation of Iran's 300,000-member Bahá'í community, which is that country's largest religious minority.

"Reports continue to be received about members of the Bahá'í community being subjected to arbitrary detention, false imprisonment, confiscation and destruction of property, denial of employment and government benefits, and denial of access to higher education," Mr. Ban's report said.

"A significant increase has been reported in violence targeting Bahá'ís and their homes, shops, farms and cemeteries throughout the country. There have also been several cases involving torture or ill-treatment in custody."

Mr. Ban's report also discussed the arrest and imprisonment of seven Bahá'í leaders in March and May, who are still held at Evin Prison.

Shirin Ebadi is attacked

In July, Nobel laureate Ebadi said she would help to defend the seven — and she was almost immediately attacked in the government-controlled news media. On 6 August, for example, the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) ran a story suggesting Mrs. Ebadi's daughter had become a Bahá'í. The story also sought to cast suspicion on Mrs. Ebadi by describing the Bahá'í Faith as "perverse" and connecting it to "foreign governments."

Mrs. Ebadi responded by filing a lawsuit against the IRNA, according to the Associated Press, charging it with "spreading lies and insults." Mrs. Ebadi also reiterated that she and her daughter were both Shi'ite Muslims, the majority faith in Iran.

The Bahá'í International Community also responded with a statement of reply to the allegations against Mrs. Ebadi — along with related accusations that the seven Bahá'í prisoners had "confessed" to operating an "illegal" organization with ties to Israel.

The statement, issued 12 August, noted that such false allegations against Bahá'ís and those who defend them are part of "an established pattern whereby the authorities make or purvey false statements about the Bahá'ís, then deliberately repeat and widely disseminate these falsehoods and misrepresentations to give them credence."

Further, the statement said, such false allegations are an effort to "stir up irrational fears and prejudices" and intimidate anyone in Iran who speaks out on behalf of Bahá'ís.

"The intention, of course, is to foment hatred and mistrust of the Bahá'ís so that



there exists within the general population an atmosphere wherein egregious violations of the Bahá'ís' human rights are either condoned or not questioned," said the BIC statement. "Moreover, having themselves done everything possible to rouse the population, the authorities have been disingenuously telling the Bahá'ís that they will be incapable of protecting them when mob violence erupts."

Arson a new tactic

The statement also took note of increasing acts of violence against Bahá'ís, and specifically the rise in arson against Bahá'í homes and vehicles.

Since April 2007, there have been least a dozen cases of arson targeting Bahá'ís, including the torching of the car of a prominent Bahá'í in Rafsanjan in July 2008 and an incident where Molotov cocktails were thrown into the front courtyard of the home of prominent Bahá'ís in Vilashahr, also in July.

In both cases, the incidents were preceded by threats against those individuals or their families. Soheil Naeimi, the owner of the torched car, and 10 other Bahá'í families in the town had received threatening letters from a group calling itself the "Anti-Bahaism Movement of the Youth of Rafsanjan." The Molotov cocktails followed anonymous threats against the Vilashahr homeowner, Khusraw Dehghani and his wife, Dr. Huma Agahi, that had forced Dr. Agahi to close her clinic in nearby Najafabad where she had practiced medicine for 28 years.

University students denied

The beginning of another academic year

Nobel Prize winner Shirin Ebadi has agreed to defend the seven Iranian Bahá'í leaders who were arrested in spring 2008. The seven are, seated from left, Behrouz Tavakkoli and Saeid Rezaie, and, standing, Fariba Kamalabadi, Vahid Tizfahm, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, and Mahvash Sabet. All are from Tehran.

"The intention is to foment hatred and mistrust of the Bahá'ís so that there exists within the general population an atmosphere wherein egregious violations of the Bahá'ís' human rights are either condoned or not questioned."

— Bahá'í International Community statement



A confidential report that essentially proves the innocence of three Bahá'ís in Shiraz, wrongly imprisoned since November 2007, came to light on 23 October 2008 when it was published on the Web site of the Human Rights Activists of Iran.

“It is a manifest injustice that the young Bahá'ís of Shiraz continue to remain in prison when even an internal investigation has essentially proved their innocence, even under the twisted terms that define criminality in Iran.”

— Bani Dugal, Bahá'í International Community

for university students in Iran also brought reports of continuing efforts by the government in its secret but well-documented plan to deny Bahá'í youth access to higher education.

Bahá'í students attempting to gain admittance to universities and other institutions found that their entrance examination results were frozen and their files listed as “incomplete” on the Web site of the national testing organization.

Last year, for the 2007-2008 academic year, of the more than 1,000 Bahá'í students who sat for and satisfactorily completed the entrance examination, nearly 800 were excluded because of “incomplete files.”

Without complete files, enrollment in all public and most private universities in Iran is impossible.

As well, Bahá'ís who had successfully enrolled in universities in previous years continue to be expelled as their identities become known to officials. And those who have sought redress through the courts have been disappointed, their cases rejected.

Secret report proves innocence

In October, a report posted by an Iranian human rights group on its Web site indicated that the government knows that the three Bahá'ís currently imprisoned in Shiraz are innocent — and yet the government continues to keep them locked up.

The report — signed by “Vali Rustami, inspector and legal advisor of the Office of the Representative of the Supreme Leader for the province of Fars” — was published by the Human Rights Activists of Iran on 23 October. The report was addressed to the representative of the Supreme Leader

in the province and states that it was done at his request.

Inspector Rustami examined the case of the three Bahá'ís, Haleh Rouhi, Raha Sabet, and Sasan Taqva, who have been imprisoned since November 2007 on four-year terms. The three, along with 51 other Bahá'ís and a number of Muslims, had been engaged in providing literacy classes and other humanitarian activities to help poor youth in Shiraz when they were rounded up by government agents on 19 May 2006.

While their Muslim colleagues and one Bahá'í among them were released immediately, 53 Bahá'ís were held for periods ranging from several days to more than a month.

Then, in mid 2007, the three were convicted on spurious charges, apparently relating to accusations that they had been engaged in the “indirect teaching” of the Bahá'í Faith, considered illegal in Iran despite international laws upholding freedom of religion.

Although no formal charges were ever made against the three, a government spokesman said in January 2008 that they had been engaged in anti-government “propaganda.”

But the newly released Rustami report, dated 16 June 2008, states that not only was there no mention of religion in their activities, but that youths who attended the classes told him they wanted to continue. “They stated ‘We ... truthfully learned a lot from this group and would like them to come back to us again,’” the investigator said in his report.

Last January, Amnesty International issued an action alert on behalf of the Ms. Rouhi, Ms. Sabet, and Mr. Taqva, suggesting they were prisoners of conscience, held solely for their religious beliefs, and “calling on the authorities not to torture or ill-treat them.”

“It is a manifest injustice that the young Bahá'ís of Shiraz continue to remain in prison when even an internal investigation has essentially proved their innocence, even under the twisted terms that define criminality in Iran,” said Ms. Dugal. “The government’s lies are indefensible.”

Ms. Dugal said the arrests and imprisonment of the Bahá'ís have always been wrongful, since in any event international law protects the right to “teach” one’s religion.

“However, in this case, no such ‘teaching’ was done,” she said. “The Bahá'ís and their Muslim colleagues were solely engaged in a humanitarian effort to serve poor children and young people in their region through free classes in literacy, hygiene, and the promotion of good moral values.” ❀

Rural development is the focus at UN Commission on Sustainable Development

UNITED NATIONS — Over the last 30 years, the Bahá'í-inspired SAT program has trained upwards of 100,000 people in Latin America in new methods of rural development, using a distinctive integrated approach that places knowledge and individual empowerment at its center.

The program and its effectiveness were highlighted at this year's UN Commission on Sustainable Development in a "best practices" Learning Center workshop on 8 May 2008. Titled "SAT: A Model for Building Capabilities for Sustainable Rural Development," the three-hour workshop examined how SAT, an acronym for Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial (Tutorial Learning System), helps students in rural areas develop critical thinking skills and specialized knowledge that lead to social action.

While SAT is an accredited secondary education program, it meets the distinctive needs of rural communities, said Tahirih Naylor, a UN representative of the Bahá'í International Community, which sponsored the workshop.

The tutor and students can determine the time and duration of their classes to fit into their schedule thereby allowing those occupied in farming or other agricultural activities to participate, she said. It is also designed to encourage individuals to stay in their communities and contribute to local development rather than travel to urban areas to obtain secondary education.

"It's not simply about poverty alleviation," Erin Murphy-Graham, a faculty member in education at the University of California, Berkeley, said during the workshop. "Development is about building human capabilities."

Dr. Murphy-Graham, a Bahá'í who has researched the effects of the SAT in Honduras, said the program seeks first to develop capabilities in individual and group decision-making, given that individual transformation must parallel societal transformation. "We don't see that these two processes can be separated," she said.

Rural development focus at CSD

The Commission was held 5-16 May

2008, and this year's meeting focused on the obstacles and barriers that have prevented sustainable development in Africa, and also on the issue areas of agriculture, land use, rural development, drought, and desertification.

Almost 60 government ministers attended this year, along with 680 representatives from 126 non-governmental organizations, according to the UN.

Need for investment in agriculture

Much of the meeting stressed the need to increase investment in research and development in innovative and sustainable agricultural technologies and infrastructure in developing countries — especially in light of the growing global food price crisis.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, in an address to the Commission, said, "after a quarter century of relative neglect, agriculture is back on the international agenda, sadly with a vengeance. The onset of the current food crisis has highlighted the fragility of our success in feeding the world's growing population with the technologies of the first green revolution and subsequent agricultural improvements."

During the Commission meeting, many countries expressed concern that a number of factors had contributed to the present situation, including climate change, unfair trade policies, poor land management, and a lack of roads and access to markets in rural agricultural areas.

In addition to the workshop on the SAT program, the BIC sponsored two side events at this year's session of the Commission — a panel discussion on "The Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change: Implications for Africa's Agricultural and Rural Development" and another titled "Sustainable Development Without Rural Women?" Nineteen Bahá'ís from nine countries attended as civil society participants.

"Occurring against a backdrop of both the food and climate change crises, the commission this year provided a key platform for Bahá'í delegates to emphasize the importance of agriculture ... in our global development strategy," said Ms. Naylor. ❀

"It's not simply about poverty alleviation. Development is about building human capabilities."

— Erin Murphy-Graham, faculty, University of California at Berkeley

Erin Murphy-Graham of the University of California, Berkeley, speaks at a Bahá'í International Community workshop on rural development at the UN on 8 May 2008.



In Ethiopia, an educational TV show for children wins an audience and more

Bruktawit Tigabu and Shane Etzenhouser of Ethiopia have received an award from Prix Jeunesse International and from The Japan Prize for the excellence of their children's television program, "Tsehai Loves Learning." Shown with them are puppets Tsehai, a yellow giraffe, at left, and Tsehai's younger brother, Fikir, in front.



Styled after classic children's programs like "Sesame Street," "Tsehai Loves Learning" is designed to help youngsters with reading and also to develop other skills, including interacting responsibly with the environment.

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia — "Tsehai," a young giraffe, was born from the marriage of a local schoolteacher and an American software developer.

A hand puppet who is the star of her own Amharic-language television show, Tsehai went on to capture the imagination of children throughout Ethiopia — and two international awards juries as well.

"Tsehai Loves Learning" is the brainchild of Bruktawit Tigabu and Shane Etzenhouser of Addis Ababa, a married couple who are both Bahá'ís.

Styled after classic children's programs like "Sesame Street," "Tsehai Loves Learning" is designed to help youngsters with reading and also to develop other skills, including interacting responsibly with the environment. Indeed, the curious and adventurous Tsehai lives in a world of computer graphics fashioned to resemble the Ethiopian outdoors.

The program became a hit on Ethiopian TV after its premier in September 2006 — and has gone on to win several prestigious international awards. In June 2008, the show

won the "Next Generation Prize" at the Prix Jeunesse International 2008, a biannual awards ceremony held in Munich, Germany, to promote excellence in children's television. And in October 2008, it won the "Pre-school" category at the Japan Prize 2008 International Contest for Educational Media.

The Prix Jeunesse awards jury was "hugely impressed by the program's ability to talk to children, to be creative as well as communicative, on an extremely limited budget."

Noting that the show is directed to Ethiopian children, the jury added that "'Tsehai Loves Learning' was inspired by a great idea born out of the needs of its audience — which after all is the basis of all great TV."

The prize brings a monetary award of 6,000 euros and a year of mentoring from the sponsors, which include the Australian Children's Television Foundation, the BBC, Disney Germany, KRO (Dutch Public Broadcasting), Nickelodeon International, and ZDF (German Television Network).

"The Prix Jeunesse prize recognized 'Tsehai Loves Learning' for its social impact

as well as the quality of the production relative to its low budget,” said Mr. Etzenhouser. “The Japan Prize focuses on the educational value of the content, so ‘Tsehai’ has now been recognized internationally for quality, social impact, and educational value.”

“Tsehai” is the first TV program in Ethiopia to use puppets and animation to teach letters, numbers and shapes, with all instruction in the dominant language of the country. It also offers social and moral lessons, and introduces issues such as stress, the loss of a parent, even something as serious as the child slave trade in Africa.

“For many of Ethiopia’s children, the show is the closest thing to early childhood education they have ever received,” said Mr. Etzenhouser.

“Unless children are sent to private kindergartens, most will not receive the type of education they will need to become good students,” said Ms. Tigabu. “Without this attention being given to these children at an early stage of their development, most will suffer during the rest of their school careers.”

For most of 2006 and 2007, the show aired on weekends, with each eight- to 10-minute episode running for two weeks before a new show debuted.

“I myself have two children, and every morning they want to watch Tsehai,” said

Seifu Seyoum, head of program services for ETV, the national TV station, interviewed in 2007. “There are many children and parents who like this show.”

UNESCO provided a grant to help with the first four programs. A private company, Jolly Jus, provides support in the form of advertisements, and DVD sales also generate revenue. Although the program is currently off the air, its producers are working with UNESCO and development agencies to have it shown in local cinemas and community halls.

For the couple, even the production of the show represents a love story. “We do it because we love the children of Ethiopia,” Mr. Etzenhouser said.

Ethiopia, a country of 74 million people, has a literacy rate of 41 percent among people over the age of 15, according to the United Nations Development Programme. Mr. Etzenhouser and Ms. Tigabu created “Tsehai Loves Learning” to contribute to improving reading among children.

The couple met while teaching in Addis Ababa at the Two Wings Academy, a school inspired by Bahá’í principles, which place great importance on the education of children. They were married in May 2004. “Tsehai really is what we feel for each other,” said Ms. Tigabu. “It is our personal love story.” ❀

“For many of Ethiopia’s children, the show is the closest thing to early childhood education they have ever received.”
Mr. Etzenhouser said.”

— Shane Etzenhouser, co-producer, *Tsehai Loves Learning*

Vietnam recognizes its Bahá’ís as a religious community

HO CHI MINH CITY, Vietnam — The government of Vietnam has given full recognition to the Bahá’í community as a religious organization.

A certificate was presented to representatives of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Vietnam at a ceremony on 25 July 2008.

It was the final act in a series of steps that included the election in March 2008 of the Bahá’í Assembly — itself a landmark event in that it was the first time in many years that elections for the governing council were held. Government representatives were on hand to observe the balloting.

The head of the central government’s Committee for Religious Affairs, Nguyen The Doanh, officiated at last week’s ceremony in Ho Chi Minh City.

The official government news agency reported the event and referred to comments by the chairman of the Bahá’í National Spiritual

Assembly, Mr. Nguyen Thuc: “[He] said the Government’s recognition of the Bahá’í religion ‘charts a new course of development for the entire Bahá’í community’ and motivates followers to make more contributions to social and humanitarian activities and to drive to preserve traditional spiritual values.”

The Bahá’í Faith was established in the country in 1954, and the first National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Vietnam was elected 10 years later. In the mid-1970s, formal activities of the community were suspended.

The Vietnam News Agency said the July ceremony means that “the Government’s Committee for Religious Affairs has recognized the Bahá’í Community of Vietnam as a religious organization able to operate on an equal footing with other religions.”

The Bahá’ís of Vietnam are now working on consolidating their community and expanding social projects to serve the people of Vietnam, particularly in the area of education. ❀

The Shrine of the Báb on Mount Carmel in Haifa, Israel, was one of two major Bahá'í holy places inscribed on the UN World Heritage list in July 2008. The permanent resting place of the sacred remains of the Báb, the Forerunner of the Bahá'í dispensation, it is a major point of pilgrimage for the five million Bahá'ís worldwide.



Bahá'í holy places added to World Heritage list

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"In so doing, it highlights an historic process that has unfolded in the last two hundred years, wherein a small persecuted group originally found only in the Middle East has spread and taken root around the globe, to the extent that its present membership includes people from virtually every nationality, ethnic group, and religious background.

"For the more than five million Bahá'ís around the world, the World Heritage Committee's recognition of their most cherished holy places is a cause for rejoicing, and a unique testimony to the triumph of love and unity over violence, hatred and persecution," said Mr. Lincoln.

The Bahá'í holy places were inscribed on the basis of two among six possible criteria that determine whether a man-made site has "outstanding universal value," which is the defining characteristic that all World Heritage sites share. Satisfying any of the six qualifies a site for inscription.

In the case of the Bahá'í holy places, the two criteria met were that the sites "bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization" and that they are "to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance."

In its decision on 8 July, the 21-member

World Heritage Committee stated that the Bahá'í sites met the first criterion because, "as the most holy places of the Bahá'í Faith, and visited by thousands of pilgrims each year from around the world, [they] provide an exceptional testimony to, and are powerful communicators of, the strong cultural tradition of Bahá'í pilgrimage."

The second criterion was satisfied by the fact that the "two holy Bahá'í shrines are tangible places of great meaning for one of the world's religions," said the committee.

The properties demonstrate "integrity linked to the history and spiritual home of the Bahá'í Faith" and demonstrate "authenticity as tangible expression of the body of doctrine and system of values and beliefs that form the Bahá'í Faith," the committee concluded, adopting the recommendation of an expert advisory body, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS).

The World Heritage list was established by the World Heritage Convention, which defines the general criteria for inscription on the list, and includes provisions for recognizing notable natural sites, such as East Africa's Serengeti and Australia's Great Barrier Reef, which are both on the list. Its purpose is to identify, protect, and preserve places of "cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value." The Convention was signed

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"The two holy Bahá'í shrines are tangible places of great meaning for one of the world's religions. [They demonstrate] authenticity as tangible expression of the body of doctrine and system of values and beliefs that form the Bahá'í faith."

— UN World Heritage Committee

Bahá'í pilgrimage: "People can sense the presence of God"

HAIFA, Israel — In its decision to inscribe the two major Bahá'í holy places on the UN World Heritage list, the World Heritage Committee focused in large part on their significance as a place of pilgrimage.

"The Holy shrine of Bahá'u'lláh and the Holy shrine of the Báb, as the most holy places of the Bahá'í Faith, and visited by thousands of pilgrims each year from around the world, provide an exceptional testimony to, and are powerful communicators of, the strong cultural tradition of Bahá'í pilgrimage," wrote the Committee.

By any measure, the sites are beautiful. Stunning formal gardens surround them — the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh in the countryside near Acre, north of the city of Haifa, and the Shrine of the Báb, a golden-domed building on the slope of Mount Carmel in the heart of Haifa itself.

Pilgrims say the outward beauty is but a symbol, an expression of love for the Messengers of God who lie entombed there and a beacon of hope for the future of humanity.

"It's hard to put into words," said Gary Marx, on pilgrimage from the United States. "You can describe things physically, but it's really not about that. Pilgrimage is an experience that goes back to the dawn of mankind. It's a yearning to connect with spiritual reality ... and to connect with yourself."

Although the two shrines have specific meaning for Bahá'ís, their spiritual nature appeals to others as well.

"People who are not Bahá'ís come here and say it is like a piece of heaven falling from the sky," said Taraneh Rafati, who has served for the past 10 years as a pilgrim guide to the Bahá'í holy sites.

"Whether you are a Muslim, Jew, Christian, Buddhist, in the holy texts, heaven is described. It is like this," she said of the peacefulness, the beauty. "You come and feel close to your Lord. It is free of charge, and it is for everyone."

Half a million people visited the shrine areas last year, most of them tourists wanting to see the gardens and get a close look particularly at the Shrine of the Báb, a famous landmark in Israel that looks out over the city of Haifa and Haifa Bay, and beyond that to the Mediterranean Sea.

More than 80,000 of those visitors entered the shrine itself, removing their shoes and walking silently into the room adjacent to the burial chamber of the Báb. Some just want a peek but many linger to read a prayer of Bahá'u'lláh that adorns one of the walls, or engage in their own meditation or prayer. Some are visibly moved.

"The response is as varied as the people who come," said Marcia Lample, a pilgrim guide for the last five years. "There is a spirit surrounding these places. It is palpable. People can sense the presence of God."

19th century beginnings

Bahá'í pilgrimage to Acre began shortly after 1868, when Bahá'u'lláh arrived at the ancient walled city as a prisoner of the

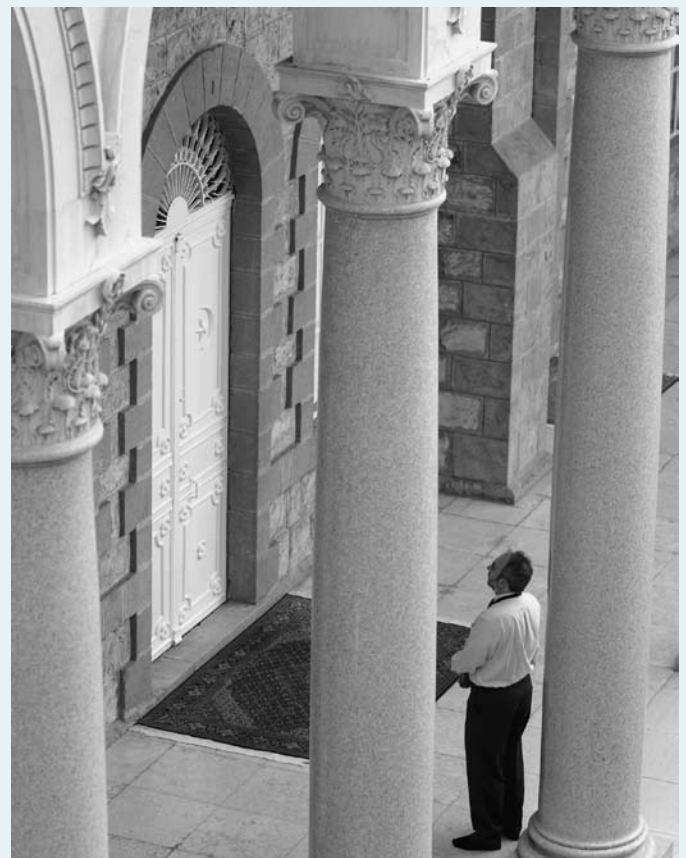
Ottoman Empire. He had been banished from His native Iran 15 years earlier, and lived successively in Baghdad, Istanbul, and Edirne before being sent to Acre, which was then a remote outpost of the Ottoman Empire used as a place of exile.

Devoted followers from Iran determined His whereabouts and would travel on foot for months just to catch a glimpse of Him. Not allowed inside the city walls, the pilgrims would stand outside and look toward the citadel, hoping Bahá'u'lláh would come to a window on the second floor where He was confined, even for a minute, so they could see Him wave His hand.

Later, when authorities allowed Bahá'u'lláh to live outside the barracks, pilgrims could sometimes enter His presence to show their devotion and listen to His explanations of the new revelation from God.

Sometimes He would reveal sacred verses — a prayer or other communication — for the pilgrims to take back to Iran or elsewhere to Bahá'ís thirsty for contact with the leader they considered the mouthpiece of God for this age.

After His passing, pilgrims still came — to pray at His resting place and to pay their respects to His son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, whom Bahá'u'lláh had appointed to succeed Him as head of the Bahá'í community, and later to Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith. *



A visitor at the entrance to the Shrine of the Báb.

The entrance to the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, which is the holiest spot on earth for Bahá'ís — the place they turn to each day in prayer.



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in 1972 and has been ratified by 184 nations since then.

At its annual meeting in July, the Committee listed 27 new sites, including the Bahá'í holy places, bringing to 878 the number of man-made and natural sites on the list.

Experts who followed the nomination process said it was the strong tradition of Bahá'í pilgrimage that convinced the Committee the sites were worthy of inscription.

"The fact that thousands of people keep coming to the place — and not only Bahá'ís but others — this is important," said Giora Solar, an Israeli architect who until September served on the executive committee of ICOMOS. "And it is not something anecdotal to history. It started in the 19th century and it continues and is growing."

The two shrines, one near the recognized heritage site of Old Acre on Israel's northern coast and the other on Mount Carmel in Haifa, are the resting places of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb, the founders of the Bahá'í Faith.

Bahá'ís believe that both Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb were messengers of God, on a par with Abraham, Buddha, Jesus, Krishna, Muhammad, and Zoroaster. The Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh is the focal point of prayer for Bahá'ís all over the world, giving it an importance comparable to the Western Wall in Jerusalem for Jews and the Kaaba in Mecca for Muslims.

Born in Iran, Bahá'u'lláh was banished to Acre in what was then the Ottoman Empire, where he died in 1892. The Báb was executed

in Iran in 1850, and His remains were later moved to Haifa for burial.

As a practical matter, inscription on the World Heritage list will help to ensure that the sites are protected and preserved from encroachment and other threats.

"It is recognition that it has outstanding universal value, which should be preserved for all humanity," said Michael Turner, chair of the Israel World Heritage Committee, which submitted the nomination. The Bahá'í World Centre prepared, as part of the documentation for the nomination, a comprehensive management plan detailing the measures adopted to protect and preserve the sites.

Beyond practical issues, the inscription of the Bahá'í holy places by UNESCO offers a stunning contrast to the situation of the Faith in other countries, such as Iran, where Bahá'ís are persecuted, are denied the right to practice their religion, and have had their holy buildings destroyed.

In August, for example, Benjamin Balint, writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, took note of UNESCO's recognition of the Bahá'í sites and the fact that they attract more than half a million visitors a year.

"At the very moment UNESCO has chosen to recognize what it calls the 'outstanding universal value' of the Carmel shrines and what they stand for, the mullahs are moved to persecute these believers who emerged from the very heart of Islam — and who represent a future that fanatical Islam has so disastrously chosen to reject," wrote Mr. Balint. ❀

"At the very moment UNESCO has chosen to recognize what it calls the 'outstanding universal value' of the Carmel shrines and what they stand for, the mullahs are moved to persecute these believers who emerged from the very heart of Islam — and who represent a future that fanatical Islam has so disastrously chosen to reject."

— Benjamin Balint,
The Wall Street Journal

Collective Security

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the most ardent supporters and defenders of traditional state sovereignty did not argue that a state had unlimited power to do what it wanted to its own people.”

She also spends considerable time examining the evolution of the European Community, suggesting that its emergence after World War II from a collection of states with historic animosities that fueled two global wars to a highly integrated community that now cooperates across the full range of the economic sphere and, increasingly, on issues of security, offers proof positive that even the most entrenched partisans of state sovereignty can be enticed toward ever greater integration.

“[T]he European experience demonstrates that supranational institutions can begin life with limited spheres of jurisdiction that can gradually be expanded over time,” Ms. Ewing writes.

The second half of the book is devoted to proposing “What we should build next.” In that section, Ms. Ewing lays out, step by step, a series of detailed suggestions for how a genuine and workable system of collective security might be established.

Ms. Ewing, who currently resides in Washington, DC, proposes a new set of international institutions, agencies, and commissions that she believes can create the kind of system that will engender a new level of trust and fairness in the international security arena. She argues that such a system, by winning over the hearts and minds of both political leaders and the people of the world, can help to create the political unity necessary to move forward.

Among her proposals: an international intelligence and inspections agency that could give to the UN Security Council “accurate, timely and reliable” intelligence “that is not tainted or skewed by any single national intelligence agency”; a standing UN military or police force “beyond national control” that could enforce the Security Council’s will; and an international boundary commission that might once and for all settle territorial disputes that have so often fueled conflict.

One of the critical insights she offers is that such a system might well be built from the bottom up, starting in many cases at the regional level, by encouraging new intelligence, security, and disarmament arrange-

ments, so as to create an “efficient, equitable and well-ordered international system that is based on regional security pillars around the world.”

Ms. Ewing is a Bahá’í, and the Bahá’í teachings explicitly say humanity’s only path to long-term peace is through the establishment of international institutions based on collective security. And throughout the book, she draws on this and other Bahá’í principles, using them as a framework for her analysis.

“Our world cries out for new thinking and creativity,” she writes. “Fortunately, the answers are already there. The Bahá’í writings, which have hitherto been little explored by the world, provide us with precisely what we need: a set of basic principles along with a blueprint for a just, efficacious and comprehensive system of collective security that will ensure the peace and security of our world.”

Bahá’u’lláh identified collective security itself as the key principle for international politics. Addressing world leaders in the late 1800s, he wrote: “Should any one among you take up arms against another, rise ye all against him, for this is naught but manifest justice.”

He also identified a number of subsidiary principles and actions that must be undertaken. As delineated by Ms. Ewing, among them are: the overarching recognition of the essential oneness of humanity; a firm commitment to fairness, justice, and equity in all dealings; and an understanding that force can sometimes be a “powerful basis of peace.”

Specific actions and institutions proposed in the Bahá’í writings include: the need for a global convocation or meeting to establish a firm “pact” for peace; the establishment of clearly defined national borders; limitations on armaments such that every country has only what it needs to keep peace within its borders; the creation of an “international force”; the establishment of an effective world court; and, ultimately, a world legislature and world executive.

In her conclusion, Ms. Ewing says her goal in writing *Collective Security Within Reach* was to “pull together various isolated strands of thinking by individuals and groups and to consider them within the broad framework of a vision of collective security in the Bahá’í writings” and, in doing so, show how they all “fit together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle to create a broad-based road map to peace.”

In this effort, she has succeeded. ✨

“Our world cries out for new thinking and creativity. Fortunately, the answers are already there. The Bahá’í writings, which have hitherto been little explored by the world, provide us with precisely what we need: a set of basic principles along with a blueprint for a just, efficacious and comprehensive system of collective security that will ensure the peace and security of our world.”

— Sovaida Ma’ani Ewing

Step by step, a recipe for world peace

Collective Security Within Reach

**By Sovaida Ma'ani
Ewing**

George Ronald

Oxford

If ever there were a great idea that failed most regrettably in its implementation, it is that of international collective security.

The concept is simple: to establish peace, the nations of the world should band together and forcibly reject any aggression among them.

The idea stands at the core of the United Nations Charter, which says the UN's main purpose is to "maintain international peace and security" through "collective measures" including the use of military force.

Yet in practice, the UN has mostly failed to intervene to stop war — or to prevent genocide, human rights violations, terrorism or any of the other things that in today's complexly interdependent world must be considered a breach of the peace.

The main reason for this failure, as any student of political science knows, is that the nations of the world have been unable to create the kind of political unity necessary to undertake collective action in those cases where it is most required.

But the situation is not quite as hopeless as it seems, according to Sovaida Ma'ani Ewing, a lawyer from the United Kingdom who has thoroughly studied the concept and written a new book, *Collective Security Within Reach*.

As the title indicates, Ms. Ewing argues that a comprehensive system of collective security is near at hand, or "within reach."

She makes her case by, first, discussing the progress humanity has made towards establishing a firm foundation for true collective security. Then she lays out a series of small but concrete steps the world could take to move the process forward.

The slow but seemingly inexorable advance towards collective security is analyzed, for example, in an 80-page chapter titled "What have we built so far?"

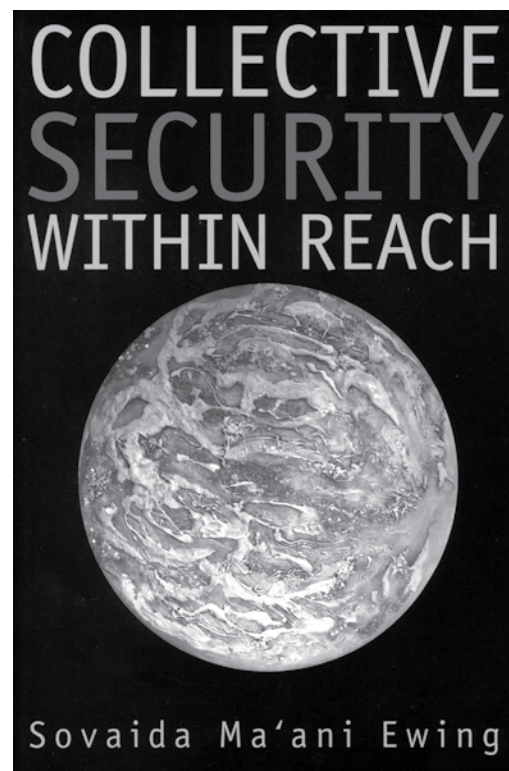
That chapter alone is worth the price of the book, inasmuch as Ms. Ewing shows quite plainly how humanity over the last century has been steadily moving towards

greater integration. In the process, she writes, the foundations for a workable system of collective security have been firmly laid down.

She considers not only broad institutional steps, such as the creation of the United Nations itself, but also the evolution of thinking among many international leaders.

She cites, for example, a study done by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) as one among many studies and reports that is reframing the debate over collective security.

The ICISS was chief among proponents of the idea that the international community has the "responsibility to protect" people



from large-scale loss of life or gross human rights violations, even if it means international intervention.

In its research, she writes, members of the ICISS were "intrigued to discover that even

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