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New UN agency for women has strong roots in civil society

NEW YORK — For years, one of the most persistent challenges facing the United Nations has been to avoid fragmentation in its delivery of humanitarian aid and development assistance.

This has been notably true for issues concerning women, which were handled by at least four agencies, sometimes with competing or overlapping responsibilities. As well, many felt women's issues generally took a backseat at the UN in all its activities and deliberations.

But last July, the UN General Assembly approved the creation of a new UN agency in an effort to address both of these problems.

In a move seen by many as historic, the Assembly brought into being the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women — known more concisely as "UN Women."

"UN Women will give women and girls the strong, unified voice they deserve on the world stage," said Asha-Rose Migiro, Deputy Secretary General of the UN. "I look forward to seeing this new entity up and running so that we — women and men — can move forward together in our endeavor to achieve the goals of equality, development and peace for all women and girls, everywhere."

The creation of UN Women was historic for another reason, too. Those who followed the process closely say that civil society played a key role in shaping the concept for the agency and supporting its passage in the Assembly.

"This is really an example of the new role of civil society," said Charlotte Bunch, director of the Center for Women's Global Leadership.

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Michelle Bachelet, newly appointed head of UN Women, at a press conference in September. At right is Martin Nesirky, Spokesperson of the Secretary-General. (UN Photo/Rick Bajornas)

With five years left, empowering women is essential for Millennium Development Goals

IN BRIEF

- In September, world leaders pledged renewed efforts to meet the Millennium Development Goals, which aim to reduce poverty, inequality and disease by 2015
- Recent economic and environmental crises have cast doubt over whether the goals can be achieved. More than 1.4 billion people remain in extreme poverty, for example
- Because all the goals are highly dependent on women's participation, an increased focus on gender equality and the empowerment of women, especially at the grassroots level, offer a powerful strategy for meeting MDG targets

In September, the United Nations held a three-day summit to examine and support progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) — an ambitious set of promises to significantly reduce poverty, inequality and disease worldwide by 2015.

Some 140 heads of state and government attended, and they pledged to make “every effort to achieve the Millennium Development Goals,” despite the various economic and environmental crises that have in many countries slowed progress towards their achievement.

The Goals were established in 2000 at the Millennium Summit. In their broad outline, the eight MDGs are simple but bold. They aim by 2015 to halve global poverty and hunger; to achieve universal primary education; to eliminate gender disparity in education; to reduce child mortality by two-thirds; to reduce maternal mortality by three-fourths; to halt and then reverse the spread of HIV/AIDs, malaria, and other major diseases; to improve environmental sustainability, including halving the portion of the population without access to safe drinking water and sanitation; and to improve the world's financial and economic system to better meet the needs of poor countries.

Worldwide, progress towards the Goals has been mixed. According to a report released in March 2010 by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, while a number of countries have achieved success in combating extreme poverty and hunger, improving school enrolment and child health, expanding access to clean water, and the control of major diseases, progress worldwide has been uneven.

Mr. Ban noted, for example, there are still some 1.4 billion people living

in extreme poverty, as defined by the “dollar-a-day” international poverty line. Moreover, he said, global hunger has actually been rising, because of high food prices and the global financial and economic crisis.

For the other goals, the story is similar. While many countries have made progress at increasing primary school enrollment, more than 72 million children of primary school age around the world, about half of them in sub-Saharan Africa, remain out of school. As to the gender equality goal, Mr. Ban notes, the share of national parliamentary seats held by women has increased only slowly, averaging 18 percent as at January 2009. And while the child mortality rate in developing countries fell from 99 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 72 in 2008, this is nevertheless well short of the target of a two-thirds reduction to 33 deaths per 1,000 live births.

The outcome document adopted by world leaders at the Millennium Goals Summit in September seeks to address many of these shortfalls, pledging governments to “renewed commitment, effective implementation and intensified collective action.” The 31-page document promises a number of specific steps, including strengthening national ownership and leadership of development; further reform and modernization of the international financial institutions; and increased “respect for and promotion and protection of human rights.”

“Women are agents of development”

World leaders also cited the importance of the empowerment of women as “essential” to meeting the Goals.

“Women are agents of development. We call for action to ensure

the equal access of women and girls to education, basic services, health care, economic opportunities and decision-making at all levels. We stress that investing in women and girls has a multiplier effect on productivity, efficiency and sustained economic growth,” world leaders declared.

The Bahá’í International Community wishes to emphasize this point. We believe that efforts to promote the advancement of women is one of the most powerful strategies available for meeting the MDGs, and that the careful analysis of how development programs impact women, moreover, can be used as a critical tool for understanding whether they are likely to be effective.

A point-by-point examination of the eight Goals highlights the crucial role of women at the local level in creating the conditions for social change necessary to resolve the issues of poverty, education, inequality, and disease that the Goals seek to address.

The first goal, for example, is concerned with the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. The vital role of women in the social and economic development of communities everywhere is clear for all to see.

The second goal, on universal primary education, also hinges to a great extent on the empowerment of women. The record has shown that when women are given the opportunity, they will take whatever steps are necessary to see that their children receive schooling.

Progress towards the other goals, too, depends greatly on women’s advancement. The reduction of childhood mortality is intimately linked with the education of mothers. Improvements in maternal health likewise center on women’s education and access to services. So does the reduction of HIV/AIDs and other diseases.

The third goal, of course, is explicitly about the empowerment of women. The fact that it remains so far from full implementation only points to the profound changes that are required in our collective thinking. Specifically, it requires an acknowledgement that the responsibility for effecting change also



Women line up for a medical clinic in Haiti. A focus on women and their empowerment is key to achieving the Millenium Development Goals.

falls on men, who must themselves participate in efforts to ensure that women are empowered and treated with full equality. This needs to happen in all areas of life, whether home, work or the public sphere. Men everywhere have a profound effect on promoting opportunities for women.

“Humanity has two wings”

The Bahá’í Writings state: “The world of humanity has two wings — one is women and the other men. Not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly. Should one wing remain weak, flight is impossible. Not until the world of women becomes equal to the world of men in the acquisition of virtues and perfections, can success and prosperity be attained as they ought to be.”

Ultimately, the effort to achieve the MDGs depends on how humanity chooses to use its resources. There is little doubt that the world today possesses the collective wealth and expertise to meet the Goals.

One NGO recently pointed out that achieving the water and sanitation target would cost on average \$6.7 billion per year until 2015 — which is less than half what Europe and the United States spend annually on pet food (\$17 billion).

Before the Summit, Mr. Ban announced a US\$40 billion Global

Strategy for Women’s and Children’s Health. “Our challenge is to put our resources where they will have the greatest impact — education, jobs, health, smallholder agriculture, infrastructure and green energy,” said Mr. Ban. “That is why, during the Summit, I will launch a Global Strategy for Women’s and Children’s Health. No area has more potential to set off a ripple effect — a virtuous cycle — across the Goals than women’s health and empowerment.”

That “virtuous cycle” hints at why a focus on women is so important. Over the next five years, as projects are initiated or funded, the degree to which those same projects and funds will help women at the grassroots can be used as a key rubric for determining their likely effectiveness and subsequent priority.

A century ago, the historic journeys of 'Abdu'l-Bahá transformed a fledgling faith

IN BRIEF

- A century ago, the leader of the Bahá'í Faith embarked on an historic series of journeys outside the Holy Land, noteworthy for their impact and lasting legacy
- Bahá'í communities around the world will over the next few years commemorate 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visits to Egypt, Europe, and North America
- The journeys launched a fledgling faith into a world religion

HAIFA, Israel — One hundred years ago, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the eldest son of Bahá'u'lláh and His appointed successor as head of the Bahá'í Faith, embarked on a series of journeys which, over the course of three years, took Him from the Holy Land to the Nile delta, from the Pacific coast of North America to the banks of the River Danube.

Despite the advanced age of 66, 'Abdu'l-Bahá set out in August 1910 to present Bahá'u'lláh's teachings about the dawning of a new age of peace and unity, to high and low alike. These historic journeys launched a fledgling faith on its way to becoming a world religion.

This historic journey will be commemorated in the coming years by Bahá'í communities around the world, and especially in those countries outside the Middle East where 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited.

Following the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, all prisoners of conscience of the Ottoman Empire — including 'Abdu'l-Bahá and His family

— were set free. Two years later He left the confines of the Holy Land, heading first to Egypt where he stayed for one year.

Then, in August 1911, 'Abdu'l-Bahá set sail for Europe, spending a month in London and two months in Paris. After returning to Egypt for the winter, He set off again in March 1912 for an eight-month tour of North America, followed by second visits to London and Paris, as well as to Austria, Germany, Hungary and Scotland.

Breakthrough to new cultures

"From the time of Bahá'u'lláh's passing [in 1892], the Bahá'í Faith's spread to North America and Europe had been a very significant development," said Moojan Momen, a historian based in the United Kingdom, "but these communities were rather few in number."

"So 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visits not only saw Him generally proclaiming the Bahá'í teachings further afield, but also

'Abdu'l-Bahá's first visit to England in September 1911 included a weekend stay in the city of Bristol where He met Bahá'ís and their friends. "What struck some of those present was his extremely natural and simple behavior," wrote an observer, "and the pleasant sense of humor, which his long imprisonment and awful trials had not succeeded in destroying."



consolidating the religion's breakthrough into new cultures."

At 'Abdu'l-Bahá's first ever public talk — given at the City Temple church in London on 10 September 1911 — 'Abdu'l-Bahá told the congregation, "The gift of God to this enlightened age is the knowledge of the oneness of mankind and of the fundamental oneness of religion."

Paris-based writer Jan Jasion, who is researching 'Abdu'l-Bahá's travels in Europe, said: "Over and over again, He stressed the need for understanding between people, for bringing religions together, for world peace. He wanted to bring people closer to God and for them to understand the reality of religion and rid themselves of superstitions."

'Abdu'l-Bahá was also able to participate comfortably in discourses about themes that lay outside of the Middle Eastern experience. "For example, the great dangers of racism," said Firuz Kazemzadeh, emeritus professor of history at Yale University, "the relationship between capital and labour, and the conflict between worker and employer; the impending Great War; and federalism as a solution to the problems among the States."

For three years, 'Abdu'l-Bahá tirelessly addressed thousands of people — including clergymen, journalists, academics, diplomats, philosophers, suffragettes, and social reformers. He also met with and attended to the needs of the poor.

Among those deeply impressed by Him was Dr. David Starr Jordan, the American scientist and university administrator, who famously said, "'Abdu'l-Bahá will surely unite the East and the West, for He walks the mystical path with practical feet."

Dr. T. K. Cheyne of Oxford, the celebrated theologian, spoke of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the "Ambassador to Humanity."

"What is striking is that, while 'Abdu'l-Bahá had a great deal of praise for progressive thinkers, He was also very clear-eyed and uncompromising in His assessment of the ways in which they fell short of their own ideals," said Kenneth E. Bowers, the current



'Abdu'l-Bahá glimpsed on board the S.S. Celtic as He sailed away from New York City bound for Liverpool, England, 5 December 1912. His parting words expressed the wish "that the East and West may embrace each other in love and deal with one another in sympathy and affection."

Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States. "He challenged people to rise above their own understanding of reality, to a higher level of realization a spiritual level as well as the social.

"He carried Himself remarkably well in cultures that were entirely alien to Him. I think one of the things we should remember about Him — and which we sometimes forget as a characteristic of a 'spiritual' figure — is that He was someone who was extremely witty and charming," said Mr. Bowers.

"A major religious event"

By the time 'Abdu'l-Bahá's travels came to an end, the nascent Bahá'í community had received a wider vision of its faith, and citizens of nine countries, on three continents, had been informed of the Bahá'í teachings for the first time.

"At the beginning of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ministry, the Bahá'í Faith was a fairly obscure religious movement. There was very little accurate information about it anywhere," said Dr. Momen. "By the end of His life, not just in Europe and North America but all over the world — in Asia, the Pacific, Australia, South Africa, South America — large numbers of people knew about

the Faith and had a positive impression of it."

"His travels were certainly a major religious event of the 20th century," said Dr. Momen. "They had much the same sort of effect as St. Paul's journeys which had a sizable impact on the spread of Christianity."

Mr. Bowers believes it is impossible to conceive of today's American Bahá'í community, for example, without taking 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit into account. "Through His life and words, He was the personification of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. He inspired the first handful of Bahá'ís not only to spread their Faith but, just as importantly, withstand all sorts of tests. In a very tactful, loving and wise way, He set the example to be followed."

As a result of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's journeys, the Bahá'í community began to propagate His ideas further and these became reinforced in the general population. "This is where the real impact of His visits lies," said Dr. Kazemzadeh, "in the capacity of the community He raised to continue what He taught them after all these years."

New UN agency for women has strong roots in civil society

IN BRIEF

- In July, the UN General Assembly approved the consolidation of various UN agencies on women's issue into a single, higher level entity
- That entity, known as UN Women, was four years in its creation and its birth was helped greatly by NGOs
- In a campaign involving more than 275 NGOs in 50 countries, civil society gave support to the concept and contributed to its final shape
- The effort is seen by some as a model for UN reform and UN/civil society interaction

UN Women, continued from page one

The involvement of civil society in the process of establishing a unitary UN agency for women began in 2005, during the UN World Summit that year, which coincided with the 10th anniversary of the 1995 Fourth World Summit for Women in Beijing.

"We kept talking amongst us about why is there not more conversation in UN reform about women," said Ms. Bunch in an interview in late July.

Then, in early 2006, UN Secretary General appointed a high-level panel to consider how the UN might improve its delivery of humanitarian and development assistance. Called the "Coherence Panel," it sought to consider ways to "eliminate unnecessary duplication and competition" among agencies across the entire UN system.

"At that time, there were only three women on the panel (out of 15)" said

Ms. Bunch, describing how non-governmental organizations (NGOs) gathered at the March 2006 Commission on the Status of Women began to organize on this issue.

From that effort arose the Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR) campaign, undertaken by a coalition of NGOs concerned with women's rights and gender equality.

Drawing on the strong network of NGOs that has grown worldwide through the various UN global conferences on women, GEAR ultimately enlisted the support of more than 275 organizations in at least 50 countries.

The Bahá'í International Community was involved from the beginning, said Bani Dugal, its principal representative to the United Nations. In 2006, Ms. Dugal was chair of the NGO Committee on the Status of Women, and hence at the center of



Charlotte Bunch, executive director of the Center for Women's Global Leadership, at a panel discussion on to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women at UN headquarters in November 2006. (UN Photo/Paulo Filgueiras)



Above: Then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan (center) meets with representatives of NGOs on 3 May 2006. The meeting is seen as an important early step on the path to the creation of UN Women. (*UN Photo/Mark Garten*)

many of the early discussions on how NGOs could support Mr. Annan's vision for more coherence at the UN.

"Quite soon after we started consulting and meeting together it seemed very obvious that we needed a new entity at the UN that consolidated the four existing ones because that was the only thing that made sense," she said.

Some of the existing agencies, Ms. Dugal added, resisted the change at first, concerned that consolidation would mean giving up their particular set of priorities. "But in the end, everyone lined up behind the idea of a unified agency," said Ms. Dugal.

Before UN Women, the main agencies involved in women's issues were the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the Secretary-General's Special Advisor on Gender Issues (OSAGI), the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), and the International Research, and the Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW). Other agencies, including UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNESCO, the High Commissioners for human rights and refugees, sometimes do important work on gender equality, but it is only a part of their mandate, and often receives low priority.

"Another concern we had was that women's issues, despite all the talk about women, had never been adequately funded at the UN," said Ms. Dugal. "So part of the effort was to ensure an entity like UN Women would be strong and independent, with enough visibility to get the resources needed for women."

The new agency seems to promise most of what NGOs wished for. It merged together the four agencies that

previously focused on women's issues. The Assembly also specifically mandated that the agency "continue the existing practice of effective consultation with civil society organizations."

Significantly, the leader of UN Women has been given the rank of Under Secretary General, which puts the agency at the same level as other major UN programs, such as UNICEF or the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and makes its leader a member of all senior UN decision-making bodies.

In September, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon appointed Michelle Bachelet, the former president of Chile, to lead UN Women, yet another sign of the high profile that Mr. Ban and others have designated for the agency.

"Michelle Bachelet is a top notch choice and has long been one of GEAR's dream candidates," said Ms. Bunch in a GEAR press release at the time. "An effective leader of great integrity, Bachelet has demonstrated strong commitment to women's empowerment and the ability to shape gender equality policies in a variety of areas. She also has the stature to mobilize the resources crucial to make UN Women a success."

UN Women became operational on 1 January 2011 and will have two key roles: It will support inter-governmental bodies such as the Commission on the Status of Women in their formulation of policies, global standards and norms, and it will help Member States to implement these standards, standing ready to provide suitable technical and financial support to those countries that request it, as well as forging effective partnerships with civil society. It will also help the UN system to be accountable for its own commitments

on gender equality, including regular monitoring of system-wide progress, according to a UN press release.

The operations of UN Women will be funded from voluntary contributions, while the regular UN budget will support its normative work. At least US\$500 million — double the current combined budget of UNIFEM, OSAGI, DAW, and INSTRAW — has been recognized by Member States as the minimum investment needed for UN Women, according to the release.

For NGOs, the process of creating and now supporting the agency suggests a model for future interactions between the UN and civil society.

"This new entity represents a new way of thinking about how to go about implementing some of these policies that have been out there for years but haven't gone as far as implementation on the ground," said Rachel Harris of the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO). "This is how you get things done in the 21st century."

NGOs now want to make sure UN Women is effective. "Our concern now is to make sure that it is a lean, efficient agency, so that, as much as possible, funding gets transferred to the ground, to programs that help women and also to women themselves, so they can be empowered in projects they are doing," said Ms. Dugal.

Trial now reportedly over, seven Iranian Bahá'í leaders face harsh conditions in long term incarceration

IN BRIEF

- **After a three-day court appearance in June, seven Iranian Bahá'í leaders, were handed long prison sentences**
- **An international outcry accompanied the trial and sentencing, with the UN, governments and NGOs calling for their release**
- **They have been transferred to Gohardasht prison, notorious for its overcrowded and unsanitary conditions**

NEW YORK — Seven Iranian Bahá'í leaders, already unjustly held in Tehran's notorious Evin prison for more than two years, have reportedly been sentenced to long prison terms following a series of court appearances that culminated in a three-day session in June.

As is often the case with Iran's legal system, court papers have not been made public. However, reports indicate that the seven have been sentenced to 10 years in prison.

On 9 August 2010, the seven were transferred to Gohardasht prison in Karaj, outside Tehran, apparently to begin serving their sentences.

Gohardasht prison is known for its overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. Since their transfer from Evin, the seven have suffered from various medical problems as a result.

"Amongst other indignities, they are forced to endure appalling filth,

pestilence, exposure to disease, and quarters so crammed that it is difficult for them to lie down or even to perform their daily prayers," said Bani Dugal, the representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations. "It is clear from recent reports that their health has deteriorated and they have no access to adequate medical treatments."

More recently, the seven have been transferred within the prison to sections where they are even more crowded, with less access to fresh air. The two women, in particular, have been put into a section where conditions are particularly harsh.

During their trial and since, the seven received numerous expressions of support from the United Nations, governments and human rights organizations around the world. Among other things, governments and others have asked Iranian authorities to

Seven Iranian Bahá'í leaders

have been the focus of international attention since their arrest in 2008. They are, seated from left, Behrouz Tavakkoli and Saeid Rezaie, and, standing, Fariba Kamalabadi, Vahid Tizfahm, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, and Mahvash Sabet.



immediately release the seven on bail, to prove that their trial was fair, and to stop the religious persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran.

International outcry

Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi, who is one of the senior members of the legal team for the seven, told the BBC's Persian service in August that she was "stunned" by the lengthy sentence.

"I have read their case file page by page and did not find anything proving the accusations, nor did I find any document that could prove the claims of the prosecutor," said Ms. Ebadi.

"I have read their case file page by page and did not find anything proving the accusations, nor did I find any document that could prove the claims of the prosecutor."

— Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon specifically mentioned the seven in a report on human rights in Iran that he released in October. Among other things, Mr. Ban's report noted that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has expressed "deep concern" over the absence of international observers and the lack of due process in that trial. [See also page 11]

A statement by the European Union in August summarized the position of many governments.

"The European Union expresses its serious concern about the sentencing of seven Bahá'í leaders in Iran," said a declaration by Baroness Catherine Ashton, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, calling for their immediate release.

"The verdict appears to be based on the defendants belonging to a religious minority and the judicial process was seriously flawed, respecting neither Iran's international commitments under the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) nor its national legislation regarding fair trial rights," said Baroness Ashton.



In June, human rights campaigners in Brazil carried masks depicting Iran's seven Bahá'í leaders. They gathered in front of the Brazilian National Congress, Brasília, to protest Iran's treatment of Bahá'ís.

Other governments and groups issuing statements of protest or concern have included Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, Spain the U.K. and the U.S.A., along with Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, FIDH, and Christian Solidarity.

As well, prominent individuals and groups in Brazil, India, South Africa and other countries that have relatively friendly relations with Iran have also issued expressions of concern about the trial and imprisonment of the seven.

In December, for example, former Indian Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani said: "I appeal to Iran and join the UN and the rest of the international community to treat the Bahá'ís with respect and provide justice to the imprisoned seven leaders of the Bahá'í community."

Religious leaders concerned

In October, top religious leaders in the United Kingdom, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, and the Assistant Secretary General of

the Muslim Council of Great Britain, issued a statement describing the sentencing of the seven as a "gross violation of the fundamental human right to freedom of religion."

The seven — Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Saeid Rezaie, Mahvash Sabet, Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Vahid Tizfahm — were all members of a national-level group that, with the government's knowledge, helped see to the minimum spiritual needs of Iran's Bahá'í community.

They were arrested in 2008 and held at Evin prison for nearly a year without formal charges or access to lawyers. On 12 January 2010, the seven were brought to a preliminary appearance at Branch 28 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran, where they were charged with espionage, "propaganda activities against the Islamic order," the establishment of an illegal administration, cooperation with Israel, the sending of secret documents outside the country, acting against the security of the country, and "corruption on earth."

After several more preliminary appearances, apparently to settle procedural issues, the seven were put on trial for three days, from 12-14 June. The trial was closed to the media and outsiders, although several



In Berlin, Germany, a replica prison cell was erected at the city's historic Brandenburg Gate in June, to draw attention to the case of Iran's imprisoned Bahá'í leaders.

family members were allowed to attend. Throughout the process, the seven have categorically denied all the charges against them.

A catalogue of abuses

Representatives of the Bahá'í International Community who have followed the proceedings closely say that despite the lack of information that has been publicly available, it is nevertheless clear that the arrest, detention and trial of the seven leaders amounts to a lengthy catalogue of abuses and illegal actions, both under international law and Iranian statutes.

"Iranian law requires that detainees be quickly and formally charged with crimes. The seven Bahá'ís were held at least nine months before any word of the charges against them were uttered by officials, and even then it was at a press conference, not in a court setting," said Diane Ala'i, the Community's representative to the UN in Geneva. "For a long time, the seven were also denied access to lawyers. When they were allowed contact, it lasted barely an hour before their so-called trial began.

"Detainees who have been charged also have the right to seek bail and to be released pending trial. The seven

have continually been denied bail, despite numerous requests.

"These are black and white concerns, not subject to interpretation," said Ms Ala'i.

She added that there were reports of a "menacing presence" of government intelligence agents throughout the trial. "The whole event amounted to a complete mockery of justice, something that has become increasingly common in Iran today," she said.

As of this writing, the status of the seven remains uncertain. Reports indicate that the June proceedings found the seven innocent of the charges relating to "tarnishing" Iran's reputation internationally and also of "spreading corruption on earth." In September, word came that a court of appeal had overturned the verdicts on those charges that relate to espionage.

Global Day of Action

The opening date of the concluding trial sessions on 12 June coincided with both the anniversary of the much contested 2009 presidential election and the observance of a "global day of action" established by a coalition of human rights groups known as United4Iran to protest the repres-

sive measures taken by the Iranian government to stifle dissent.

In more than 80 cities around the world, people took to the streets on 12 June to call for an end to human rights abuses in Iran.

In South Africa, buses carried images of Iranian prisoners of conscience as part of the campaign. "This is not about party politics or calls for punitive action," said one campaigner in Johannesburg, "this is a principled call to respect the human rights of every person."

In many cities, demonstrators specifically mentioned the unjust imprisonment of the seven Bahá'í leaders.

In Berlin, Germany, a group erected a replica prison cell at the city's historic Brandenburg Gate. A display depicting the seven Bahá'í leaders read: "Ideals cannot be locked up. But people with ideals can be. In Iran, these people need your help."

"For more than two years the seven Bahá'í leaders have been under arrest without justification," said a supporter in Germany. "They are imprisoned only because they are Bahá'ís. Today it is the Bahá'ís. Tomorrow it could happen to the Sunnis, Jews, Christians or other minorities."

In Brazil, campaigners carrying masks depicting Iran's seven Bahá'í leaders gathered in front of the Brazilian National Congress to call for their release.

Congressman Mr. Luiz Couto — a former President of the Commission of Human Rights and Minorities — told the gathering that a person's faith is an intrinsic human right, necessary for the development of an individual and his contribution to society.

UN General Assembly approves resolution on Iran human rights by a wide margin

IN BRIEF

- **For the 23rd time since 1985, the UN General Assembly has expressed concern over human rights violations in Iran**
- **This year's vote passed by one of the widest margins ever, reflecting strong condemnation by the international community**
- **The resolution follows a report issued by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon that took note of Iran's continued use of torture, its poor treatment of women, and its failure to protect the rights of minorities, such as the Bahá'í, Sufi, Baluch and Kurdish communities**

UNITED NATIONS — For the 23rd time since 1985, and by one of the largest margins ever, the United Nations has once again approved a resolution that condemns Iran's failure to meet its obligations under international human rights law.

By a vote of 78 to 45, with 59 abstentions, the UN General Assembly confirmed a resolution that expressed “deep concern at serious ongoing and recurring human rights violations.” The final vote for what has become an annual resolution on Iran came on 21 December 2010.

The resolution specifically expressed concern over Iran's “intensified crackdown on human rights defenders and reports of excessive use of force, arbitrary detentions, unfair trials and allegations of torture,” as well as its “pervasive gender inequality and violence against women,” and its discrimination against minorities, including members of the Bahá'í Faith.

“The world community has clearly spoken. It is outraged at Iran's continued and intensifying violations of human rights,” said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations.

Ms. Dugal noted that the resolution documents a wide range of violations — from torture to the oppression of women to the persecution of minorities. “All of this has been going on for too long, and it is high time that Iran pays heed to the call of the international community and complies with the standards of international law,” she said.

The resolution devoted an entire paragraph to Iran's treatment of members of the Bahá'í Faith, cataloging

an extensive list of recent anti-Bahá'í activities. These included: “increasing evidence of efforts by the State to identify, monitor and arbitrarily detain Bahá'ís, preventing members of the Bahá'í faith from attending university and from sustaining themselves economically, the confiscation and destruction of their property, and the vandalizing of their cemeteries...”

It also expressed concern over the recent trial and sentencing of seven Bahá'í leaders, saying they were “repeatedly denied the due process of law.”

The five-page document echoes concerns expressed by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, who issued a report in October that criticized Iran's use of torture and the death penalty, its poor treatment of women, and repeated violations of due process of law, as well as its failure to protect the rights of minorities, such as the Bahá'í, Sufi, Baluch and Kurdish communities.

Put forward by 42 co-sponsors, the resolution also calls on Iran to cooperate with international human rights monitors and to allow them into the country.

“The Bahá'í International Community strongly welcomes this resolution, not only for its clear-sighted view of what is happening in Iran but also for its call for increased monitoring,” said Ms. Dugal. “As the resolution notes, it has been more than five years since Iran allowed UN officials into the country to investigate reports of human rights violations — something that is clearly unacceptable, especially for a country that claims to the world that it has nothing to hide.”

Religious freedom is a matter of human dignity, says new UN Special Rapporteur

IN BRIEF

- The new UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief said he strongly supports individual human rights, which are a matter of human dignity
- Dr. Heiner Bielefeldt, a German academic and specialist in human rights politics, introduced himself to the UN community in October
- Among other things, he said that freedom of religion or belief has a broad scope of application, because of its universal nature

“Human dignity is neither an ascribed societal status, nor a privilege granted by Governments. It does not derive from social agreements, nor can it be made dependent on membership within a particular group of people.”

— Heiner Bielefeldt

UNITED NATIONS — Should criticism of religions be banned as hate speech? Can a country prevent its citizens from freely changing religion? Can a minority faith build a place of worship wherever it chooses?

These are among the questions that make up today’s global discourse about religious freedom.

In October, the UN’s newly appointed Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief — set out his thoughts, underscoring the importance of protecting individual human rights.

Dr. Heiner Bielefeldt formally introduced himself at the UN in New York on 21 October, in an interactive dialogue with the General Assembly. The following day, he held an introductory briefing for a group composed largely of non-governmental organizations, held in the New York offices of the Bahá’í International Community.

A German university professor with widely acknowledged expertise in issues of religious freedom and public policy, Dr. Bielefeldt told members of the UN General Assembly’s Third Committee that freedom of religion or belief stands as a fundamental human right, related to the “inherent dignity” of all human beings — and that it cannot be taken away by anyone.

“Human dignity is neither an ascribed societal status, nor a privilege granted by Governments. It does not derive from social agreements, nor can it be made dependent on membership within a particular group of people,” said Dr. Bielefeldt to the Third Committee, which oversees human rights for the General Assembly.

The concept of human dignity and its inalienable nature is spelled out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, he said. But it is also a concept that “resonates strongly in religious or philosophical traditions, across regional and cultural boundaries.”

“As a consequence of its universalistic nature as a human right, freedom of religion or belief has a broad scope of application,” he said.

In addition to protecting the right of everyone to profess a belief — or no belief at all — it also protects “members of newly established communities, minority groups as well as minorities within minorities.”

Dr. Bielefeldt said that governments have a strong obligation to protect the individual right to freedom of religion or belief, which also extends to the



Dr. Heiner Bielefeldt speaking in October at a briefing sponsored by the NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief in New York.

individual's right to "change" one's belief — something prohibited in some countries.

"Protection must also be accorded to those who have exercised, or wish to exercise, their right to change one's religious affiliation, which constitutes an inherent and essential part of everyone's freedom of religion or belief," he said.

He also said international law supports the right of religious communities to build places of worship where they reasonably choose.

In taking up his post on 1 August 2010, Dr. Bielefeldt essentially became the UN's chief expert on the issue of religious freedom. He will be expected to issue annual reports on the state of such freedom in the world, as well as periodic reports about the particular situation in various countries.

"The reports by the Special Rapporteur are not binding in any way, but they inform international legal opinion," said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations. "These opinions then influence UN resolution and international treaties."

"Dr. Bielefeldt has started out by clearly setting out what he sees as the issues of religious freedom that are at stake, and to articulate how he intends to approach them," said Ms. Dugal, who is also president of the NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief in New York, which sponsored the briefing.

Dr. Bielefeldt also told the group that he intends to work closely with other UN Special Rapporteurs, such as those who are concerned with racism and freedom of expression.

"Some of the resentment, some of the discrimination that takes place against religious minorities has a very strong similarity to ethnic or racial discrimination," he said. "But on the conceptual level, it must be very clear that religion is not some sort of ethnic issue...like the color of skin."

If that happens, he said, "an important, an essential element of choice, the search for meaning, is actually lost."



In October, Dr. Heiner Bielefeldt, right, the newly appointed UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, introduced himself to the UN community in New York. He posed with Diane Ala'i, left, and Bani Dugal, center, after a briefing at the offices of the Bahá'í International Community. Ms. Ala'i and Ms. Dugal are two of the Community's representatives to the UN.

Dr. Bielefeldt was appointed to the position of Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief on 18 June 2010 by the United Nations Human Rights Council. His mandate extends for a term of three years, and is once renewable.

Dr. Bielefeldt, 52, succeeds Pakistani human rights lawyer, Asma Jahangir, who held the position for six years prior to Dr. Bielefeldt's appointment.

A professor of Human Rights and Human Rights Politics at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg in Germany, Dr. Bielefeldt was also previously the director of the German Institute for Human Rights from 2003 to 2009. He has also held positions at the University of Toronto, the University of Heidelberg, and the University of Mannheim. He holds a PhD in Philosophy, obtained from the University of Tübingen in 1989. He has also undertaken studies in history and Catholic theology.

Award takes note of composer's embrace of a diversity of cultures

REYKJAVIK, Iceland — Since his breakthrough as a composer more than 30 years ago, Lasse Thoresen has been searching for a musical language that brings the world's diverse cultures together.

Now, one of his innovative vocal works has been acclaimed for the commonalities it finds between the ancient and the modern, as well as between musical styles around the world.

In ceremonies in Iceland on 3 November 2010, Prof. Thoresen was presented the Nordic Council Music Prize, which comes with an award of 350,000 Denmark Kroner (US\$56,000), for his piece, *Opus 42*.

"This strikingly beautiful piece reveals the common denominators in ancient and ultra-modern sounds, drawing our attention to the similarities between Scandinavian folk traditions

and the music we might find in, say, the Middle East or India," wrote the Adjudication Committee for the Prize, which includes members from Denmark, the Faroe Islands, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. "It represents a renewal not just of Nordic vocal music, but of score-based vocal music in general."

Prof. Thoresen explained: "There are scales very similar in Scandinavian folk music to things you can find in the East. Neither of them elaborate harmony in a very developed way as was done in western classical music."

Opus 42 also incorporates the traditional overtone singing of Mongolia, in which the singer manipulates the resonances created as the air travels from the lungs to the mouth and nose.

"That takes a few years to learn," said Prof. Thoresen. "For singers to do

that, they must have quite a new oral training. So as a part of this project, a system of training was developed to master these techniques.

"I think it is important to regard cultural differences as a resource and not as a threat," he said. "Even if you cannot escape from your own cultural conditioning, in some ways you can embrace other cultural sensibilities and reflect them in your own cultural context and produce an example of fruitful coexistence of cultural differences."

Opus 42 is a collection of four vocal pieces, titled "Sun Prayer," "Funeral Psalm," "Heavenly Father," and "Dual Doodles." The first was commissioned by the Bergen International Festival, the other three by the Osa Festival, which brings together Norwegian folk and classical musicians. The work has been performed by a Norwegian vocal ensemble, Nordic Voices, which the composer believes to be the only group in the world that can cope with the demands he places on his performers.

Born in Oslo in 1949, Prof. Thoresen has loved music ever since he can remember. He began taking piano lessons at age seven; by 15 he was an accompanist for his school's choir; and at 16 he had composed his first piece. In 1971, he joined the Bahá'í Faith.

As his career progressed, he took a position as a professor at the Norwegian State Academy for Music. In May 2001, his oratorio *Terraces of Light* was performed on the occasion of the inauguration of the spectacular garden terraces around the Bahá'í Holy Places on Mount Carmel, Haifa, Israel.



The Norwegian composer, Lasse Thoresen, won the prestigious 2010 Nordic Council Music Prize for his piece, *Opus 42*. (Photo courtesy Musikkinformasjonssenteret MIC/Lisbeth Risnes)

Review: Desde el corazon de Iran

Cerrato, continued from page 16

Miami-based radio journalist Ninoska Perez Castellon wrote that it is “a necessary book... It’s a call to the world to ensure that the abuses against the Bahá’í community in Iran are not left to fall into obscurity.”

“It is because of the integrity of writers like Rafael Cerrato that we can become deeply familiar with a subject that should be on the front page of newspapers,” she wrote.

Born in Cordoba in 1951, Mr. Cerrato studied economics in Malaga before devoting his energy to exploring what he describes as the “great truths not recorded in history but that are key to understanding our present.”

Religion plays a major role in that understanding.

“I have always thought man is a ‘religious animal’ — even more than the political animal that many philosophers have defined,” said Mr. Cerrato. “Without religion, social phenomena or the evolution of the world cannot be understood.”

In his 2005 work, *Letter to Fernando Sanchez Drago*, he drew comparisons between the founders of Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. The following year, *Lepanto, the Unfinished Battle* explored the history of the West’s relationship with Islam

“Religion should be a force for good and a unifying element. But, unfortunately, it is the cause of many problems. The origin of these problems is not religion itself...They are mainly caused by the distortion men make of its content and message.”

— Rafael Cerrato

“Religion should be a force for good and a unifying element,” he said. “But, unfortunately, it is the cause of many problems. The origin of these problems is not religion itself...They are mainly caused by the distortion men make of its content and message.”

Mr. Cerrato has lived for 10 years outside of Barcelona, close to the popular pilgrimage destination of Montserrat, from which he derives his own spiritual inspiration.

Gilbert Grasselly — a professional translator based in Hollywood, Florida — has been asked to translate *From the Heart of Iran* into English.

“He’s calling the public’s attention to what’s happening,” said Mr. Grasselly. “It touched me when I read these histories. It’s very moving.”

Mr. Cerrato hopes that his book will inform Spanish-speaking readers both about the situation the Bahá’ís face in Iran, and the values for which they are prepared to suffer.

“I hope it will open the eyes of leaders, journalists, and intellectuals who read it — if they do — about the plans and actions of the present government in Iran.”

“And at the same time, I hope they see that, through the Bahá’í Faith, many constructive processes of dialogue can be opened between East and West.”



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Spanish author discovers “bridge between East and West”

Desde el corazón de Iran - Los baha'is: La esperanza oprimida

— By Rafael Cerrato
Erasmus Ediciones
Barcelona

IN BRIEF

- Spanish author Rafael Cerrato, specializing in writing about religion, encountered the Bahá'í Faith while touring Israel
- He concluded it offers a unique bridge between East and West, and decided to write a book about it
- The result, published in Spanish, also chronicles the great “faith and steadfastness” shown by Iranian Bahá'ís under persecution in Iran

MADRID, Spain — When author Rafael Cerrato decided to pay a short visit to the north of Israel in 2006, little did he suspect that it would give rise to a new book.

Passing through the city of Haifa, he was deeply impressed by the buildings and gardens of the Bahá'í World Centre, situated on the slopes of Mount Carmel.

“I was amazed,” said Mr. Cerrato. “I immediately thought I had to discover what lay behind that beauty.”

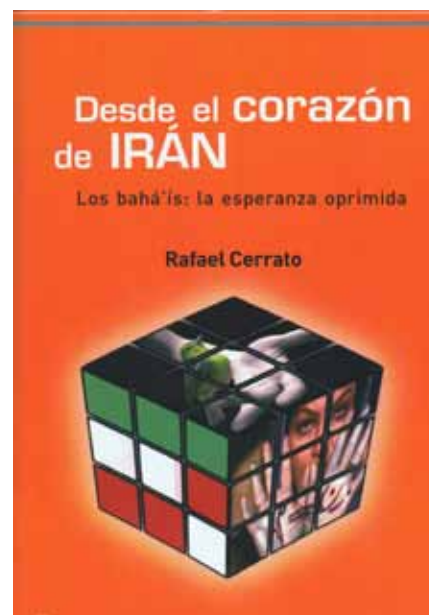
Returning to Spain, the author — who is Roman Catholic and has written extensively about religion — started looking into the history and teachings of the Bahá'í Faith and was fascinated by what he found out.

“I discovered that the long-awaited bridge between East and West — which many politicians and intellectuals have tried to create with the Alliance of Civilizations and such — already exists,” he said.

“Without losing any of the principles of previous religions, the Bahá'í social teachings have it all — the need for supranational bodies, the equality between men and women, universal education... I believe in these principles and they attract me — so I have no problem in broadcasting them.”

During his research, Mr. Cerrato also became impressed by “the great faith and steadfastness” that the Bahá'í community of Iran shows in the face of opposition.

He decided to write a book charting the story of the Bahá'í Faith, with an emphasis on the severe oppression its members have experienced at the instigation of the authorities in



Iran — the land of the Faith's birth — since its inception in the middle of the 19th century.

The book, titled *Desde el corazón de Iran — Los Bahá'ís: La esperanza oprimida* (*From the Heart of Iran — The Bahá'ís: Oppressed Hope*), has recently been published by Erasmus Ediciones. It is one of the first major works written in Spanish about the genesis and persecution of the Bahá'í community in Iran.

Mr. Cerrato's book has been described in one review as a “deftly handled, well-documented and panoramic journey.”

The reviewer, Enrique Cordoba — a columnist for *El Nuevo Herald* — wrote, “I celebrate that Cerrato has published this book...for those who want to inform themselves of a doctrine that should be studied.”

Cerrato, continued on page 15