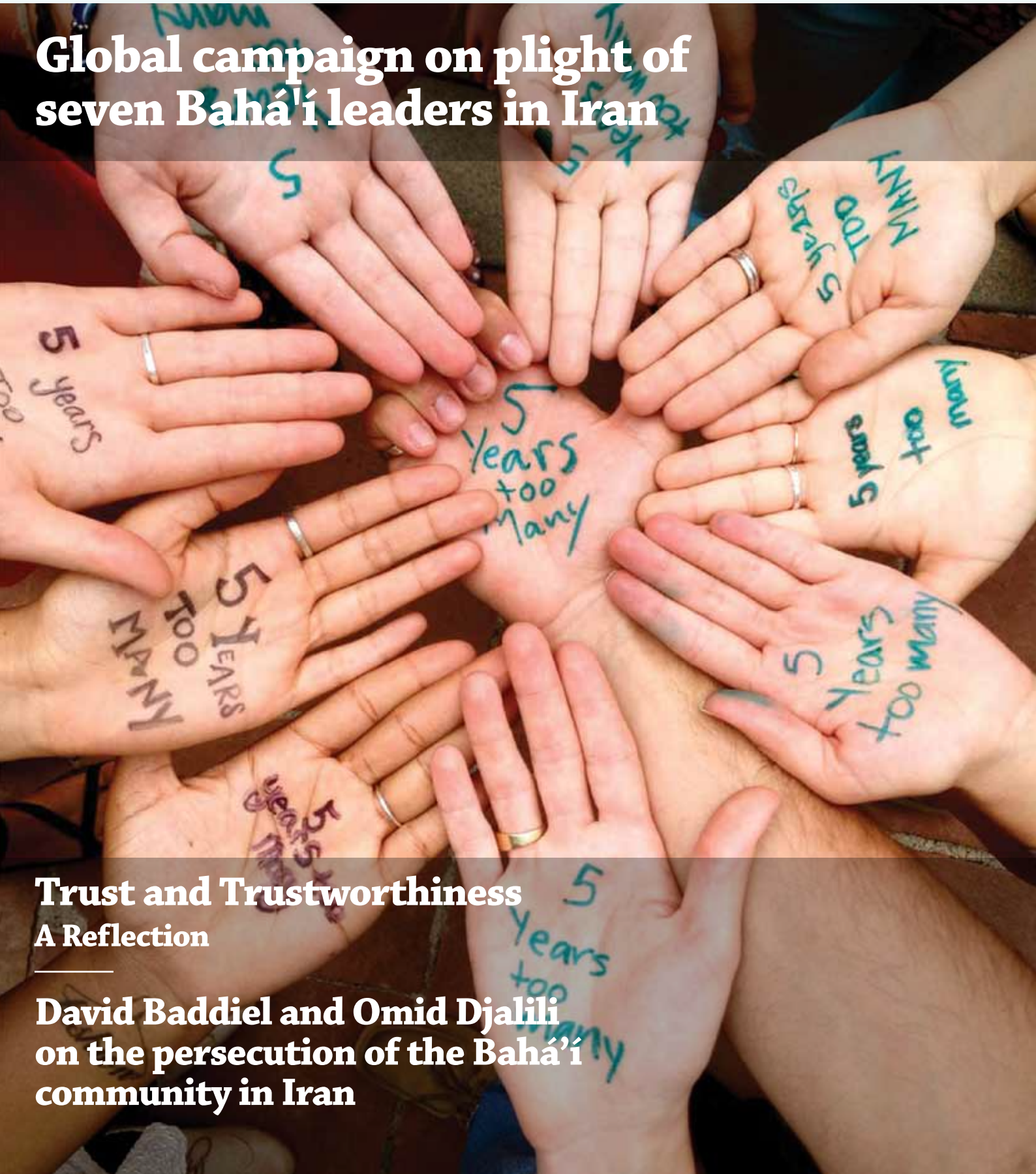


# UK Bahá'í Review

September 2013

## Global campaign on plight of seven Bahá'í leaders in Iran



### Trust and Trustworthiness A Reflection

David Baddiel and Omid Djalili  
on the persecution of the Bahá'í  
community in Iran

For five years, seven Bahá'í leaders have been wrongly imprisoned in Iran. Their 20-year sentences are the longest given to any current prisoners of conscience in that country. Their harshness reflects the Government's resolve to oppress completely the Iranian Bahá'í community, which faces a systematic, "cradle-to-grave" persecution that is one of the most serious examples of state-sponsored religious persecution today. Bahá'í communities around the world have launched a campaign calling for their immediate release – and the release of all innocent prisoners of conscience in Iranian prisons.

### Faith leaders urge William Hague to call for release of imprisoned Bahá'ís in Iran

*Fifty leaders of faith communities in the United Kingdom signed an open letter, on 14 May, addressed to the Rt Hon William Hague MP, the Foreign Secretary, calling on him to renew the UK Government's support for the seven former leaders of the long-suffering Bahá'í community in Iran, who are currently serving prison sentences of 20 years each.*

Today marks the day that these seven innocent Bahá'ís have been behind bars for five full years, imprisoned solely because of their religious beliefs.

A delegation of faith representatives, lead by HG Bishop Angaelos of the Coptic Orthodox Church, presented the letter to Alistair Burt MP, Minister for Middle East and North Africa, who received it on behalf of the Foreign Secretary William Hague at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The faith leaders, representing the Bahá'í, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, and Sikh communities; and including Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi, and Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra, said: "Iran has abandoned every legal, moral, spiritual and humanitarian



Minister for Middle East and North Africa Alistair Burt MP with His Grace Bishop Angaelos of the Coptic Orthodox Church holding the open letter

standard, routinely violating the human rights of its citizens. The government's shocking treatment of its religious minorities is of particular concern to us as people of faith."

The Foreign Secretary, who was unable to attend the presentation because he was travelling, responded to the letter. Referring to the seven imprisoned Bahá'ís, the Foreign Secretary said, "That [the seven] have remained in prison for five years on baseless charges following an unfair trial is a terrible reflection of how the Iranian regime chooses to treat its religious minorities. The UK fully supports the call for their immediate release..."

The full text of the Foreign Secretary's response is produced below.

The open letter cites a report by Dr Ahmed Shaheed, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Iran's human rights situation, who reports that members of religious minorities in Iran

suffer arbitrary arrests, unlawful trials, imprisonment and torture. Places of worship, businesses and homes are ransacked; students are barred from university because of their faith; and cemeteries are desecrated. The persecution affects Bahá'ís; Gonabadi Dervishes, who are themselves Shia Muslims; the Yarsan, a Kurdish religious minority; and Christians, despite that faith's constitutional protection.



A delegation of faith leaders presenting the open letter to Alistair Burt MP at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office

The faith leaders' open letter was part of a global campaign, which ran from 5 May to 15 May, under the title "Five Years Too Many". Bahá'í communities and others around the world are holding public events that focus on the plight of the seven, who face 15 more years in prison, and whose 20-year sentences are the longest of any current prisoners of conscience in Iran.

Dr Kishan Manocha, spokesperson for the UK Bahá'í community, said: "Their arrest on false charges, their wrongful imprisonment and severe mistreatment while in detention, are emblematic of the suffering of the entire Iranian Bahá'í community – and the situation of the hundreds of other innocent prisoners of conscience who have been incarcerated for their beliefs."

"The long prison sentences of the seven reflect the Iranian Government's determination to completely oppress the Iranian Bahá'í community," he added.

Calling for the freedom of the seven Bahá'ís, the faith leaders wrote: "The Bahá'ís wish to serve their country, the land in which their faith was born, and they have the right to work for its



betterment without fear of reprisal. Emancipation for the Bahá'ís is long overdue."

## Law Society and Bar Human Rights Committee co-host seminar on trial and sentencing of seven former Bahá'í leaders in Iran

*Issues of due legal process and access to justice in Iran came under scrutiny at a high-level seminar, on 9 May, organised to mark the fifth anniversary of the arrest of Iran's seven former Bahá'í leaders.*

Held at the Law Society of England and Wales – and co-hosted by the Bar Human Rights Committee – the seminar attracted more than 50 practising barristers, solicitors and human rights lawyers.

The seminar heard how the trial and sentencing of the seven Bahá'ís to 20 years in prison each, was conducted under proceedings that violated international and national Iranian laws. The case can be seen as a major example of wide scale abuses in the Iranian justice system, used as a tool of oppression against religious and ethnic minorities, human rights lawyers, activists and others.

Coinciding with the seminar, a letter signed by 18 prominent UK human rights lawyers was published in the Telegraph newspaper. The trial of the seven, "violated national and international laws as well as shariah norms," they wrote. Signatories to the letter included Sir Desmond de Silva, Cherie Booth CBE QC, Lord Lester of Herne Hill QC, Lord Macdonald of River Glaven QC, Michael Mansfield QC, and Professor Philippe Sands QC.

The history of the case of the seven – who formed an ad hoc group that looked after the affairs of Iran's 300,000-strong Bahá'í community –

## Foreign Secretary William Hague issues response to Faith Leaders' open letter on Bahá'ís in Iran

31 May 2013

From the Secretary of State

Thank you for your open letter about the incarceration of the seven Bahá'í leaders by Iran, which was presented to Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, Alistair Burt on 14 May by a delegation of faith leaders led by His Grace Bishop Angaelos.

As you will know, I very much share the concerns in your letter. I have made clear many times that I do not believe that there is any justification for the arrest and imprisonment of the seven Bahá'í leaders. That they have remained in prison for five years on baseless charges following an unfair trial is a terrible reflection of how the Iranian regime chooses to treat its religious minorities. The UK fully supports the call for their immediate release, and will continue to work with the international community to highlight Iran's violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief as well as of its other international obligations. In this context, we strongly support the work of the UN Special Rapporteur and urge Iran to allow him access to Iran to further his important work.

I commend the Bahá'í Community of the UK for this cross-faith initiative to highlight the plight of their seven community leaders and the wider persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran. I should like to thank the many signatories for giving such strong support. Through this kind of co-operation, you underline your common resolve to defend the rights of all to freedom of religion or belief, whatever their faith or belief, in Iran or elsewhere. This is something which I wholeheartedly support.

SIGNED: WILLIAM HAGUE



Iranian human rights lawyer Mahnaz Parakand (left), with Kirsty Brimelow QC, chair of Bar Human Rights Committee

was outlined by Mahnaz Parakand, the Iranian lawyer who defended them and herself fled Iran in 2011 fearing execution.

Detailing the blatant disregard of due legal process in their case, Ms. Parakand recounted how, among other procedural violations, the seven prisoners were deprived of any meeting with their legal representatives for the first two and a half years of their incarceration.

She also noted how the particular official dealing with them had a dislike for the Bahá'ís which extended to their



Dr Ahmed Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran (left) with Dr Nazila Ghanea, lecturer in International Human Rights law at the University of Oxford

lawyers. "And this actually meant that the way they were dealt with did not follow correct legal procedures," she said.

"Having studied their case, it was clear that there was no basis for the allegations that had been brought against them," Ms. Parakand added.

She further noted how human rights lawyers in Iran are put under extreme pressure – either imprisoned or forced to leave the country. "And those that are as yet untouched are also put under a lot of humiliation and intimidation," she said. "At present

there are 10 lawyers who because of their profession are serving prison sentences.”

Dr Ahmed Shaheed, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran opened the seminar.

“The Bahá’ís are the most persecuted religious minority in Iran,” he said. As a consequence of three Articles in the Iranian constitution, Bahá’ís are considered “non-persons outside the protection of the law.”

“When we look at the case of the seven Bahá’í leaders, we see the hallmarks of the legal issues faced by the Bahá’ís and other minorities in Iran. They are frequently subject to unfair trials and persecuted.”

Dr. Shaheed stressed the importance of documenting cases, highlighting those who abuse human rights, and supporting workers for justice in Iran.

Dr Nazila Ghanea – a lecturer in international human rights law at the University of Oxford – outlined a number of specific violations of due legal process exemplified by the case of the seven. These included the non-independence and partiality of the judiciary; a lack of transparency towards the accused, their lawyers and their families; and the hampering of the efforts of their lawyers who defend them, even by threat of imprisonment.

The seminar – which was chaired by Kirsty Brimelow QC, Chairwoman of the Bar Human Rights Committee and a leading international human rights barrister at Doughty Street Chambers.

Six of the seven were arrested on 14 May 2008 in a series of early morning raids in Tehran. The seventh had been detained two months earlier on 5 March 2008. The seven are Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Saeid Rezaie, Mahvash Sabet, Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Vahid Tizfahm.

Today they are enduring harsh conditions in two of Iran's most notorious prisons. The five men are incarcerated at Gohardasht prison

in Karaj, a facility known for its overcrowding, lack of sanitation, and dangerous environment. The two women are held at Tehran's infamous Evin Prison.

### 18 prominent human rights jurists sign letter on legal miscarriage of justice for seven former Bahá’í leaders.

Published in the Telegraph, 8 May 2013.

SIR – Five years ago this month, seven former leaders of the Bahá’í community in Iran were imprisoned for their beliefs. This violated national and international laws as well as shariah norms.

The seven – Mrs Mahvash Sabet, Mr Behrouz Tavakkoli, Mr Vahid Tizfahm, Mrs Fariba Kamalabadi, Mr Jamaloddin Khanjani, Mr Afif Naeimi and Mr Saeid Rezaie – were arrested following coordinated raids on their homes in 2008. The fatuous nature of their alleged crimes, which included “spreading corruption on earth” and collaboration with the “tyrannical Quds-occupying regime” (Israel), is self-evident.

The charges against them were first heard in the media rather than in court, nine months after their detention. An arrest warrant was issued 10 months after they were arrested. To this day, they have not been presented with formal charges or a judgment in writing, in clear violation of the Iranian constitution.

The seven Bahá’ís were purportedly “tried” in 2010 in proceedings that can be barely described as a “trial”, and were each sentenced to 20 years in prison.

Lawyers brave enough to represent Bahá’ís – including the Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi – have themselves become victims of the Iranian regime and been forced into exile. Others, such as Nasrin Sotoudeh and Abdolfattah Soltani, are now serving prison sentences on similarly spurious allegations.

Iranian authorities often claim to be champions of justice, equality and fairness. It is time for them to honour these principles, release the seven Bahá’í leaders and restore the rule of law in Iran.

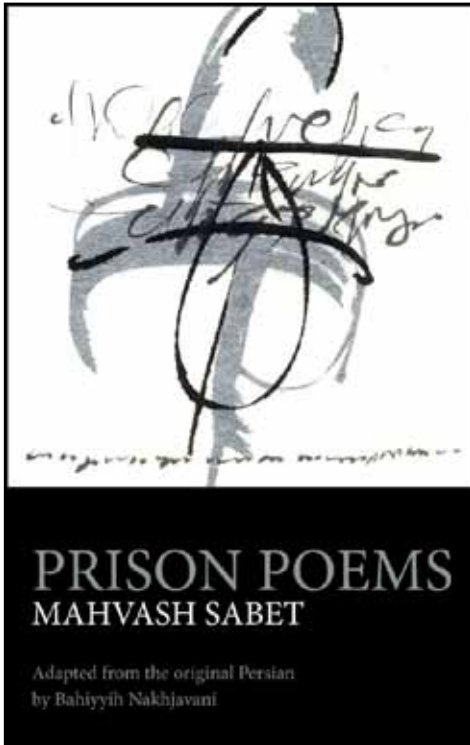
Sir Desmond de Silva QC  
Michael Birnbaum QC  
Cherie Booth CBE QC  
Kirsty Brimelow QC  
Professor John Cooper QC  
Edward Fitzgerald QC  
Dr Nazila Ghanea  
Lord Gifford QC  
Lord Lester of Herne Hill QC  
Lord Macdonald of River Glaven QC  
Michael Mansfield QC  
Professor Rachel Murray  
Sir Geoffrey Nice QC  
Professor Michael O’Flaherty  
Professor Javid Rehman  
Geoffrey Robertson QC  
Professor Philippe Sands QC  
Professor Dan Sarooshi

### Poetess and a prisoner of conscience – Bahá’ís publish Prison Poems from Iran

*An anthology of poems written inside Evin prison, Iran’s infamous and brutal detention block, was launched on 4 June at the National Bahá’í Centre*

*in London by comedian Omid Djaili, writer Bahiyyih Nakhjavani and literary professor Farzaneh Milani.*

The poems are the work of Mahvash Sabet, 55, a teacher and former school principal. Ms Sabet is a member of the Bahá’í Faith – Iran’s largest religious minority and the target of decades of official persecution. She is a prisoner of conscience.



anniversary of the incarceration of Ms Sabet and the six other former leaders.

Mr Djalili, who is also an advocate for the human rights of Bahá'ís and other minorities in Iran, hosted the book's launch. "Iran clearly has control issues," he told the assembled guests. "There are over a hundred Bahá'ís imprisoned in Iran simply for their faith. Iranian Bahá'ís just want to serve the homeland they love."

Ms Sabet was dismissed from her teaching position after the 1979 Islamic revolution. She spent 15 years informally instructing Bahá'í students who were barred from university for their own beliefs. But she was also known for her love of poetry. And Iran itself is the land of the legendary poets Ferdowsi, Sa'adi, Rumi, and Hafez.

19th century Iranian poetess, a herald of women's liberation, an early Bahá'í and source of inspiration for Ms Sabet.

Ms Nakhjavani adapted the initial translations of the poems into an English that echoes the tone of the original works. Speaking at the book's launch, Ms Nakhjavani said that Ms Sabet and her six imprisoned co-religionists are "not victims but witnesses, not prisoners drawing attention to their own plight but representatives of other peoples' suffering, not individuals demanding their rights but servants of humanity."

Ms Sabet's uncompromising faith and devotion to other people is present across the work. Her spiritual strength unifies poems that move from homesickness, to mourning for a lost Iran, to pieces that bear witness to the suffering of her fellow prisoners.

Ms Sabet is also one of seven former leaders of the Bahá'í community in Iran. She was arrested in 2008 alongside her six colleagues. They endured three years of show trials for a litany of trumped-up charges – manifestly untrue allegations such as espionage, political subversion and "spreading corruption on earth". The charges were denounced by international observers and the Nobel laureate, Iranian human rights lawyer Shirin Ebadi. But the seven were nevertheless each sentenced to 20 years behind bars.

Roxana Saberi, the American-Iranian journalist who was imprisoned in Iran with Ms Sabet and Fariba Kamalabadi – the other female member of the detained seven former Bahá'í leaders – was able to voice her support at the book launch by way of a recorded video message. "They tried to make the most out of their situation," said Ms Saberi. "Among the many lessons my cellmates taught me, was overcoming the hatred I had towards my captors." According to Ms Saberi, Fariba and Mahvash didn't hate their captors. Rather, "they had compassion for all of humanity, even for those who wronged them."

Prison Poems is published on the fifth



Bahiyiyih Nakhjavani, who adapted the English translations of Prison Poems from the original Persian

The poems, composed on scraps of paper in her Evin cell, were smuggled out of prison and out of Iran by the help of intermediaries. These samizdat pieces were sent to France, to the home of Ms Nakhjavani, the author of the bestselling *The Saddlebag: A Fable for Doubters and Seekers*. Ms Nakhjavani also wrote *The Woman Who Read Too Much*, a novel based on the life of Tahirih, the celebrated

"And when a woman is forced to stamp / the death warrant with her own thumb / I forget my own shames, choke at hers, / Humiliated and heart-wrung."

But Ms Sabet's poetry does not vilify the Islamic Republic of Iran; indeed, the poems are unique for their defiant and confrontational optimism. Here is a woman of principle refusing to be a victim of her imprisonment. She has perhaps remembered the counsels of her faith, that "freedom is not a matter of place" – words spoken by a central Bahá'í figure, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of faith's Founder, Bahá'u'lláh. Imprisonment has a long history in this religion – Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá were both exiled and incarcerated for over forty years in the 19th century.

A final testament to Ms Sabet's faith is that she does not use her poetry to dwell on her own suffering. The poet has hope for her situation and for her homeland – and yet she is not immune to the horror. Faith is the only response to their common plight.

"My heart aches, for you do not seem to know / The worth of that subtle inner star. / If only you could see the lovely one / Who lies prostrate in who you think you are."



# Eleventh International Bahá'í Convention: A global community reflects



A delegate places her vote at the eleventh international Bahá'í convention

*More than 1,000 representatives of the Bahá'í world community gathered in Haifa, Israel, from 29 April to 2 May 2013, for a unique global event that was infused with joy, reverence and purpose.*

The eleventh International Bahá'í Convention marked the 50th anniversary of the inaugural Convention in 1963 at which the Universal House of Justice – the international governing council of the Bahá'í Faith – was first elected.

The Convention saw the election of the nine members of the Universal House of Justice for the coming five-year term. In a unique electoral process, all forms of campaigning, electioneering and nominations are strictly avoided. Rather, after prayerful reflection, the assembled delegates silently and privately wrote down the names of nine individuals who they felt would be best able to serve on the institution.

For more than three hours, the representatives then filed across the stage to deposit their votes in a simple wooden box. The following day, the result was announced, and the new membership of the Universal House of Justice received a warm and reverent welcome from the gathering.

Central to the proceedings were consultative sessions during which delegates from more than 150 countries – women and men representative of every background and walk of life – had the opportunity to share their thoughts, experiences and insights as part of a global learning process.

The main focus of deliberations was outlined in a letter from the Universal House of Justice, presented to the Convention. The message described the work before the Bahá'í community as it strives to contribute to the spiritual and material advancement of civilisation.

Many of the insights shared from diverse localities around the world – particularly concerning the efforts of young people to take responsibility for the spiritual education of those younger than themselves – had a universal resonance for delegates.

"I begin to identify with what people are talking about and I see the same challenges that we face and how people are managing to overcome it," said Nancy Oloro Robarts, a delegate from Uganda. "And I start to appreciate that the Bahá'í world is one."

Ximena Osorio from Colombia noted a visible change in the picture that is emerging of today's worldwide Bahá'í community.

"Sometimes you don't realize it because you are in your own country, considering your own challenges," she said. "But when you come here you can see that things are moving forward, we are changing and building a culture that is different."

"And all these different activities and elements that we are trying to apply at

the very local level have an impact at the global level."

The proceedings included several vibrant musical presentations from various countries. In one, representatives from the Democratic Republic of Congo paid special tribute to the long-suffering Bahá'í community of Iran.

"Though they are physically not present at this Convention, they are spiritually with us," one of the singers told the gathering.

The absence of the Bahá'ís of Iran – where the Bahá'í community faces intense persecution and its administration has been dissolved – was noted by the placement of a bouquet of red roses at the front of the stage for the duration of the Convention.

As delegates returned to their respective countries, all took heart from the words of the Universal House of Justice which observed "the Bahá'í community moving steadily forward, advancing in understanding, eager to acquire insights from experience, ready to take on new tasks."

Vijitha Serasinghe, a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of Sri Lanka, said both his vision and confidence had been raised by his participation in the Convention.

"I see unity in diversity and the oneness of humanity in reality," said Mr. Serasinghe. "I have a strong feeling to go back and carry out our activities with a lot more confidence than before."



The newly elected Universal House of Justice

## Remembering Mona: 30th anniversary of ten Bahá'ís executed in Shiraz remind us of the only way to deal with injustice

Padideh Sabeti

*18 June marked the 30th anniversary of the execution of ten Bahá'í women in Shiraz, Iran. Their crime? "Misleading children and youth," claimed the authorities; in other words, giving school lessons to Bahá'í children and teaching them about their faith.*

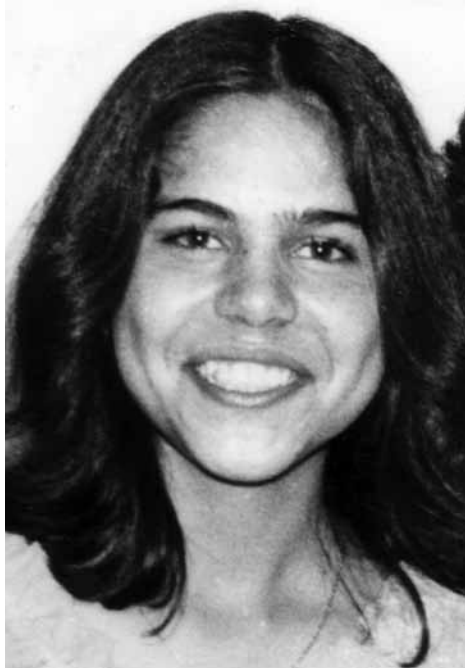
The youngest of the ten was Mona Mahmudnizhad. She was 17 when she was hanged. The other women were Nusrat Yalda'i, Izzat Janami Ishraqi, Roya Ishraqi, Tahirih Siyavushi, Zarrin Muqimi, Shirin Dalvand, Akhtar Sabit, Simin Saberi, and Mahshid Nirumand.

I lived in Tehran at the time – and I was the same age as Mona. The ten women had been in custody for several months before their execution; they were interrogated, clerics demanded that they recant their faith, and they were bastinadoed for standing firm.

Those years were a time of great turmoil in Iran. The war with Iraq was raging and destroying thousands of lives and families. Iranians around the country were suffering the hardships and brutal tragedies that come with any war.

Bahá'ís were suffering, too. Bahá'í professionals were fired from their jobs, accused of being spies for Israel; young Bahá'ís were barred from attending university. More than 200 Bahá'ís were executed in the early 1980s because of their beliefs.

But we weren't expecting someone as young as Mona to be executed – and in such horrific circumstances. Ronald Reagan, then the US president,



Mona Mahmudnizhad, executed in Shiraz, Iran for teaching Bahá'í children on 18 June 1983.

made a plea for clemency. The Iranian government was deaf to compassion. Revolutionary guards put blindfolds over the eyes of the ten women, late on the night of 18 June 1983, and drove them to a makeshift gallows in a polo field. Mona watched the others – she was the last.

I thought, of course, about what I would have done if I had been taken. I thought of Bahá'ís who had been executed from the older generations. But what happened to Mona showed an uncompromising severity in the persecution of our faith. Events were calling on us to examine our priorities and beliefs when we were barely adults.

Mona's execution moved me to search myself, deep down, and examine what this religion meant to me. We were all put to the test. And no one was safe from harm: everyone wondered who might be next.

Back in 1983, there was no acknowledgement among ordinary Iranian Muslims about what was happening to the Bahá'ís in that country. Today there is much more public understanding. But in 1983 the general sentiment was that "these people", the Bahá'ís, must have done something wrong.

We have moved on. Today in Iran there is widespread acknowledgement of the injustices being perpetrated against the Bahá'ís – as well as the Kurds, Sunni or other Muslim minorities, Christians, and thousands of prisoners of conscience.

We can hope that these sacrifices were not empty. Mona and her nine friends, the 200 other Bahá'ís executed in the 1980s, and the thousands of other Iranians vilified, jailed and executed for whatever baseless reason, have opened Iranians' eyes to what has been done in their name.

Mona's death strengthened my faith; and it strengthened our community. The kind of adversity that Bahá'ís face in Iran has made the community stronger. Bahá'ís are not victims: they are trying to contribute to their society by living their beliefs. The execution of Mona didn't put a stop to classes for children. And the Bahá'í teachings of the oneness of humanity, the unity of faiths, service to others, love and compassion, the harmony of science and religion – I believe these ideas are gradually becoming the norm in an Iran that desperately needs a new way.

Roxana Saberi, the Iranian-American journalist who spent 101 days in Tehran's infamous Evin prison in 2009, was confined with Mahvash Sabet and Fariba Kamalabadi – two women among the jailed seven former leaders of the Iranian Bahá'í community. Saberi credits the two women with helping her overcome feelings of anger toward her jailers. "They showed me what it means to be selfless, to care more about one's community and beliefs than about oneself," she later said.

Mona's sacrifice helped me learn that we can respond to fanaticism with a resignation that is not submission and a compassion that defies anger or hate. I hope that the men and women of my generation – Mona's generation – will remember that lesson. And the young Iranians of today may need to learn it, too.

Padideh Sabeti, born in Iran and now based in the UK, is a lecturer and consultant in human nutrition.



### Conference for UK youth striving to serve society

The London Youth Conference, one of 114 such conferences around the world, was held at the University of Warwick between 30 August and 1 September. More than a thousand young Bahá'ís, including hundreds of their friends from many faith backgrounds and all walks of life, gathered to consult in an exultant and purposeful spirit on the potential of youth to serve humanity.

Participants attended from all parts of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, as well as the Republic of Ireland, Iceland, Malta and Gibraltar, and several other countries.

Among the themes discussed were the unique characteristics that distinguish the period of youth, the





great responsibility facing young people to contribute to the betterment of society, and the importance of fostering an environment of encouragement.

Many attendees were already engaged in acts of service in their neighbourhoods – including efforts to help those younger than themselves to channel their energies for the progress of their communities. And many more at the conference were inspired to take up the same service

work in their own lives.

The Universal House of Justice, the governing body of the Bahá'í Faith, which called the London convocation and the 113 others, wrote in a letter to the participating youth that these gatherings – including study sessions, group consultations, and artistic presentations – should be seen as part of an ever-expanding conversation about the well-being of their communities.





### David Baddiel and Omid Djalili discuss the persecution of the Bahá'í community in Iran

*David is a British-Jewish comedian, Omid is a British-Iranian Bahá'í. Both are open about their own cultural and religious identities, a theme that they worked on together in Baddiel's 2010 film, "The Infidel." In conversation the two explored how religious persecution of Iran's Bahá'í community has similarity with religious persecution that has affected the Jewish community.*

**OD** So this is about the campaign called "Five Years Too Many" ... regarding the seven former leaders of the Bahá'í community in Iran who were imprisoned in 2008 and sentenced to 20 years in prison, and...

**DB** They're in prison for what, exactly?

**OD** No other reason than for their religious beliefs. This May marks the five year anniversary of them being in prison.

**DB** Ok... perhaps you could start by giving me a bit of background on the Bahá'í faith.

**OD** Sure. The Bahá'í faith started in Persia in the mid-nineteenth century. Bahá'ís believe their Prophet, Bahá'u'lláh, is the next in line in a great lineage of Prophets that includes Moses, Jesus Christ, Krishna, Buddha and Muhammad etc. The basic tenet of the Bahá'í faith is unity. Coming from a position that mankind is essentially one, religions are also one – different chapters of the same book, so to speak.



Omid Djalili

**DB** And are there major festivals? Are there feast days? I'm worried there's no holidays, and not enough focus on food...

**OD** A Jew worried about no holidays? Why am I not surprised? The Bahá'í calendar is kind of weird – we have a Bahá'í 'Feast' every nineteen days.

**DB** That's more feast days than Judaism – which is essentially just a calendar of feast days. Feast days and fast days. It's like the 5-2 diet.

**OD** I need that... I like the sound of that...

**DB** So, ok... I see the Bahá'í faith is a very progressive religion. But it seems it was persecuted in Iran from its beginning. Is this because it was seen as some kind of sect of Islam?

**OD** No. The Bahá'í faith has always maintained it is a completely independent faith to Islam. It grew out of Islam in the same way Christianity grew out of Judaism...

**DB** Well that's really going to get the Jews on side. Most of us still haven't got over that.

**OD** I hear you. But here's the thing: in the Koran, Muhammad is referred to as the "Seal of the Prophets" which many assume means He is the last



David Baddiel

prophet that will ever come. The last ever messenger that God has sent. That God says, in His wisdom "the door is shut now folks, don't deal with me, deal with Muhammad from now on. I'm done". So any faith that claims to come after Muhammad is basically heretical. Hence the persecution.

**DB** So the foundation of the persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran is essentially theological, from an orthodox Islamic point of view. What does the persecution then actually look like?

**OD** In the mid-nineteenth century, when the faith was born, around 20,000 Bahá'ís were killed or executed in Persia. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, around 200 Bahá'ís have been executed or victims of random attacks, due only to their belief system.

**DB** I think there's a parallel to be drawn here with the Jewish experience of religious persecution, and indeed my own. My mum was born in Nazi Germany and became a refugee here when my grandparents came over in 1939. As such, I think the issue of religious persecution can really echo with Jewish people.

**OD** Well I hope so... on a daily basis Bahá'ís are being denied access to education and employment and



prevented from practicing their beliefs. Bahá'í students are expelled from schools and universities, Bahá'í businesses are closed, property is confiscated, prayer meetings are raided, and the media vilifies and scapegoats the Bahá'ís as being spies for Israel or out to topple the regime.

**DB** So the state knows about this?

**OD** This is a state-backed campaign. It's very insidious in that all sorts of vicious rumours are spread in schools and the media that, for instance, Bahá'í gatherings are a "nest of immorality" and "great big orgies where everyone sleeps with one another, even family members".

**DB** This looks like a type of dehumanization that excludes Bahá'ís from basic human rights. It reminds me of the demonization of Jews that happened in Nazi Germany. Essentially, an image of Jews portrayed by the Nazis was that the Jew was a depraved figure, an image that is still prevalent across the Middle East and of course in Iran today. Have you ever personally experienced persecution because you're a Bahá'í?

**OD** I have relatives of the 200 [executed after the 1979 revolution] that were killed. The only really close relative was in Evin prison - a really notorious prison - who was an uncle (my Dad's brother). He was released because he sent ironic letters out of prison. He kept writing things like "don't worry, I'm having a great time, the conversation with the prisoners is magnificent, the food is top notch." And of course the authorities read this and they think he's insane. So after being persistently nice and lovely - they thought he was an idiot and having too good a time so they let him go.

**DB** So the main way of getting around Iranian punishment is to say you like it?

**OD** Well clearly looking like a nutter and saying "persecute me, I love it!" is definitely one way to go.

**DB** That raises an important point. It's

a small example of the persecution you're talking about, but I think it's an important one, which is that you, an Iranian and a well known one at that, cannot go to the land of your forefathers. And that's quite an acute example that something's wrong. Do you get any flak for being a Bahá'í over here?

**OD** Not really because I suppose there's not that much media awareness of what being a Bahá'í is. But I was once ostracized from an all Iranian 5-a-side football team that I played for at university called "The Persian Empire". All the other members of my team were Muslims or secular Iranians and when they found out that I was a Bahá'í I was squeezed out of the team. Throughout the next few years at university they never spoke to me or looked me in the eye again.

**DB** Maybe that's because as a footballer you were crap.

**OD** Possibly yes. But back then I was not quite the broken sphere of a man I am now.

**DB** I'm joking. You have great feet for a big man.

**OD** And you.

**DB** Thank you.

**OD** Good to let the readers know of this.

**DB** It's important. Most people kind of assume you're a Muslim, though, don't they?

**OD** Since I've become well-known many Muslims assume I'm a Muslim. Whenever I tell them I'm a Bahá'í, the response is something like, "oh, the Bahá'ís are really nice."

**DB** The Bahá'ís that I've met, I must admit, have been incredibly nice and there is a sort of peacefulness and gentleness that comes with them. Is that because of the faith or the culture?

**OD** It's often described as a 'gentle faith'. I must say that whenever I'm

around Jewish people, I'm very comfortable. There's a wonderful sense of community that both our faiths share, where people of diverse cultures, backgrounds, families and classes come together.

**DB** It's an interesting paradox: there is a sense that the most unassuming, gentle people out there are the ones that get persecuted, possibly because there is a sense of vulnerability that goes along with having these characteristics.

**OD** So true, good point D.

**DB** So what can be done to help the Bahá'ís in Iran?

**OD** Raise awareness. There's a lot of international pressure on Iran regarding its treatment of the Bahá'ís. Roxana Saberi, who is an American journalist that was imprisoned in Iran, has spoken very highly of the integrity of the two female Bahá'ís (of the seven) she was in prison with. They are not trying to victimise themselves, or complain about their circumstances. They are just normal people who, even in prison, are trying to get on with their lives as best they can, and be as supportive to others as they can be. We need more voices to say that five years for these seven former Bahá'í leaders who are imprisoned is already ridiculous, and the fifteen years left on their sentences would be pointless brutality.

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**"In the mid-nineteenth century, when the faith was born, around 20,000 Bahá'ís were killed or executed in Persia. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, around 200 Bahá'ís have been executed or victims of random attacks, due only to their belief system."**

# Trust and Trustworthiness One Bahá'í's Perspective

Wendi Momen

*' . . . what we have experienced over recent years is not, in my view, so much a crisis of capitalism as a crisis of ethics.' Paul Polman, CEO of Unilever.*

## A Crisis of Trust

A 'crisis of trust' has developed between the British public and its institutions. Trust in government has declined sharply over the last decade. The 2012 Eurobarometer shows that in 2007, 41% of people surveyed trusted parliament; in 2012 it was only 23%. The government is trusted even less: in 2007, 34% trusted it, while in 2012 it was only 21%. Only 53% of people trust the media.

Business is not much trusted either. The 2013 Edelman Trust Barometer shows that, globally, banks and financial services remain the least trusted of industries, with only 50% cent of people trusting them -- in the UK, it is only 38%. Only 18% of people say they trust business leaders to tell the truth. For government leaders that drops to 13%.

Yet Bahá'ís do not look back to some mythical golden age in which government, business and the media were more trustworthy. Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í faith, noted the general untrustworthiness of government in a letter to Queen Victoria He wrote in 1867. In referring to the issues which afflict our society, He drew an analogy by comparing the world to a human body which is impaired with various illnesses. He described how its sickness worsened "as it fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full

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..We drive down the road trusting that other drivers will avoid hitting us, we take an elevator trusting that it will function properly, we eat food from a store or restaurant trusting that it will not poison us. . . Without trust, no human society would be possible.

rein to their personal desires and have erred grievously." The human race, he said, was "at the mercy of rulers so drunk with pride that they cannot discern clearly their own best advantage." Even those who wished to improve it, He stated, were motivated by their own gain. It is a primary purpose of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation to place trustworthiness, and related values such as justice, integrity, honesty and morality, at the foundation of a world civilisation in a golden age it is our responsibility to establish.

When we say we 'distrust' a government or a business, who or what are we distrusting? Organisations, governments, businesses are made up of individuals, each of whom carries a set of moral values. 'Every man for himself' is a value, if not a particularly noble one. Often the articulated values of an organisation are not its actual values. When we say we distrust a government or a business, we are often saying that we do not like the values they stand for -- we are wary of them, suspicious that they will not help us but will hurt us, or that they will benefit themselves at our expense. But we want individuals, governments, businesses, organisations to be trustworthy. We want to trust them.

Francis Fukuyama in his book *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* suggests that trustworthiness is simply more efficient -- less expensive -- for society. "If people . . . trust one another because they are all operating according to a common set of ethical norms,

doing business costs less. Such a society will be better able to innovate organizationally, since the high degree of trust will permit a wide variety of social relationships to emerge."

Gregory C. Dahl, an economist and author on globalisation, points out that, "trust is the essential binding force which holds together human society . . . We drive down the road trusting that other drivers will avoid hitting us, we take an elevator trusting that it will function properly, we eat food from a store or restaurant trusting that it will not poison us . . . Without trust, no human society would be possible."

We need individuals, governments, businesses, organisations to be trustworthy. We need to trust them.

## Trustworthy Individuals

It is unconscionable that we would want, need and expect people, governments, businesses and organisations to be trustworthy yet not be trustworthy ourselves. We are outraged if someone lets us down, the government abuses its power, or we are cheated by a cowboy trader we expected to be there but simply wasn't. But are we so outraged when we do not respond to a request from a friend, cheat on our taxes, pay an invoice late or fail to turn up when we say we will? Trustworthiness begins with ourselves.

Bahá'u'lláh has 'counselled all people . . . to adorn their characters with trustworthiness and godliness, and with such qualities as are conducive to the elevation of man's station in the world of being'. His purpose, He says, 'is that they may work for the betterment of the world and live together in concord and harmony'.

## Trustworthy Government

There is a real breakdown in confidence in the government and its leaders. Complaining about the government is a hallmark of our times, both at home and in public. At the root of these complaints is often a feeling of injustice, aggrievement that one's own lot is diminished or compromised. We



are not convinced that the government is properly representing our own views and taking them into account.

When Bahá'u'lláh addressed Queen Victoria, He praised her for Britain's representative Parliament. He wrote in his letter to her, that, "thou hast entrusted the reins of counsel into the hands of the representatives of the people. Thou, indeed, hast done well, for thereby the foundations of the edifice of thine affairs will be strengthened, and the hearts of all that are beneath thy shadow, whether high or low, will be tranquillized.

In the same letter, Bahá'u'lláh also described the characteristics such representatives should possess. "It behoveth them, however, to be trustworthy among His servants, and to regard themselves as the representatives of all that dwell on earth," He wrote. Bahá'u'lláh also wrote on how leaders should conduct their affairs.

"O ye the elected representatives of the people in every land! Take ye counsel together, and let your concern be only for that which profiteth mankind and bettereth the condition thereof . . ."

"We see you increasing every year your expenditures, and laying the burden thereof on your subjects. This, verily, is wholly and grossly unjust . . . lay not excessive burdens on your peoples. Do not rob them to rear palaces for yourselves; nay rather choose for them that which ye choose for yourselves."

Similarly, the Bahá'í writings exhort civil servants to 'approach their duties with entire detachment, integrity and independence of spirit, and with complete consecration and sanctity of purpose'.

How can trust and confidence in government be restored? Those elected or appointed to office must become trustworthy. The Seven Principles of Public Life -- the code of ethics for those in public office in the UK -- are an excellent articulation of Bahá'u'lláh's guidance to Queen

Victoria, calling as they do for selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.

### Trustworthy Business

Statistics indicate how prevalent is the belief that business is not trustworthy. So embedded is this impression that efforts made by business -- especially transnationals -- to demonstrate ethical, green or sustainable practices are met with scepticism, cynicism and derision. The banking crisis, environmental disasters such as that at Deepwater Horizon, fraud and tax avoidance both by corporations and their CEOs have underscored to many that business cannot be trusted to act in the best interests of ordinary people.

Belonging to ebbf, a spiritually inspired non-governmental organisation dedicated to bringing ethical values, personal virtues and moral leadership into the workplace, I have discovered that business can be trustworthy when the people in the enterprise are themselves trustworthy. As Dahl points out:

. . . a person whose motives are to help others and be of service [rather than to get ahead, even at the expense of another person] will naturally reflect those motives in behaviour, and people will come to trust such a person.

Thus, as in other sectors, 'the starting point for trust building is at the level of individuals. Organisations don't transform; people do.'

### Trustworthy Media

The media, particularly the print media, is not greatly trusted in Britain today. While its menu of sensationalism, materialism and voyeurism continues to sell, its practice of 'dishing the dirt' on celebrities, prying into the private lives of victims of crime, serving up non-news as public interest, acting as judge and jury with little evidence to support its verdict, sensationalising minor events and raising trivia to the level of monumental importance has pushed public credibility to its limit.

Bahá'u'lláh says of this 'amazing and potent phenomenon' of the media, that, 'it behoveth the writers thereof to be purged from the promptings of evil passions and desires and to be attired with the raiment of justice and equity. They should enquire into situations as much as possible and ascertain the facts, then set them down in writing.' At the same time, He exhorts the print media, in writing to The Times, to expose the truth of the persecution of the Bahá'ís of Iran: 'It is hoped that ye will investigate the truth of what hath occurred and vindicate it.'

### Deeds and Words

Trustworthiness starts with individuals. Exhorting each other, our governments, businesses and organisations to trustworthiness is of little value. It is whether we are ourselves trustworthy, and trust others, that will, in the end, matter.

Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith from 1921 to 1957, and authorised interpreter of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, wrote that, "People have grown weary and impatient of rhetoric and discourse, of preaching and sermonizing. In this day, the one thing that can deliver the world from its travail and attract the hearts of its peoples is deeds, not words; example, not precept; saintly virtues, not statements and charters issued by governments and nations on socio-political affairs. In all matters, great or small, word must be the complement of deed, and deed the companion of word: each must supplement, support and reinforce the other.

Wendi Momen, born in the United States and now living in the UK, is a member of the board of ebbf (a business ethics network), a Governor of London School of Economics and a magistrate.

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**the starting point for trust building is at the level of individuals. Organisations don't transform; people do.**

## Greenwich Bahá'ís react to Woolwich attack

The Bahá'í community of Greenwich was shocked by the brutal and tragic murder of Drummer Lee Rigby in Woolwich on 22 May.

Our thoughts are with his family, friends and colleagues, and we are praying for the progress of Lee's soul. We hope that the Rigby family will draw strength from the unity and support of communities across Greenwich.

Greenwich is a vibrant community. We must together seek ways to live in harmony – with unity in diversity as our guiding principle. The people of Greenwich, of all faiths and none, of all ethnicities and backgrounds, should now honour Lee's memory by building fresh bonds of community in our borough.

We stand ready to serve alongside our friends and neighbours in this goal, for the wellbeing, happiness and unity of everyone in Greenwich.

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## Ministers and MPs join Bahá'ís to mark centenary of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to the UK

Government Ministers and Members of Parliament welcomed more than 80 Bahá'ís on 28 November to a unique event to pay tribute to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 100 years after His visit to Britain.

It was the first time the British government had hosted a special reception specifically for the Bahá'í community.

'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921) was the eldest son of Bahá'u'lláh and His appointed

successor as head of the Bahá'í Faith. From 1910-1913, following His release from a lifetime of exile and imprisonment, 'Abdu'l-Bahá made a historic series of journeys to present Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to audiences outside of the Middle East. His two visits to the British Isles took place in September 1911, and from December 1912 to January 1913.

The reception was held by the government's Department for Communities and Local Government. Welcoming the guests, Secretary of State Eric Pickles MP expressed appreciation for the contribution Bahá'ís make to UK society. He praised the "little bits of kindness" he had observed among the Bahá'ís and added, "We wouldn't tick along quite so well without Bahá'ís in our community."

Don Foster MP, Minister for Integration, told the gathering that, of all the significant people to come from his home constituency of Bath, he was proud to include Ethel Rosenberg, a founding member of the British Bahá'í community.

"You continue to distinguish yourselves in the professions, the arts and particularly in the vital areas of education and conflict resolution," Mr. Foster told the Bahá'ís. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's "important truth" that "we should pursue peace together and differences of race and division between religions must cease is as true today as it was then," he said.



A century on, legacy of 'Abdu'l-Bahá honored at UK government reception





Minister for Integration visits Bahá'í National Centre in London

Kishan Manocha, speaking on behalf of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United Kingdom, thanked Mr. Pickles for hosting the event, describing it as a “tremendous honour and pleasure.”

## Minister for Integration visits National Bahá'í Centre

The Rt Hon Don Foster MP, Minister for Integration, was welcomed on 2 July by a delegation of Bahá'ís, including individuals from Mr Foster's Bath constituency, at the National Bahá'í Centre in London.

Mr Foster shared news of the impending launch of a government initiative, “Together in Service”, which will encourage interfaith social action. One of the aims of the initiative will be to consolidate the “A Year of Service” venture which was launched at the National Bahá'í Centre in February 2012 with Eric Pickles MP, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government.

“The best way for a Hindu and a Muslim to understand each other

better,” Mr Foster suggested, “is by sweeping the road or helping the homeless together.”

The Minister also discussed the need for the Government to assist UK faith communities in developing a “counter-narrative” regarding the role of religion in society – to challenge the often negative stereotypes of religion that appear in the media and demonstrate its potential for positive influence.

Mr Foster felt that the spontaneous response of all faith communities after the tragic murder of Drummer Lee Rigby, in Woolwich, in unequivocally condemning the attack and standing together in unity, was a watershed moment. The show of unity and support illustrated the cohesive and harmonising role that all faith communities can have. Mr Foster said he was “very proud” of this swift and united response.

## Bahá'í community co-sponsors dialogue on religious freedom

Canada's newly-appointed ambassador for religious freedom,

“You continue to distinguish yourselves in the professions, the arts and particularly in the vital areas of education and conflict resolution,” Mr. Foster told the Bahá'ís.

Andrew Bennett, met with Paul Bhatti, Pakistan's former Minister for National Harmony and the chair of the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance, for a public discussion on the freedom of religion and belief at Canada House on 4 July. The discussion was co-sponsored by Canada House and the UK Bahá'í community.

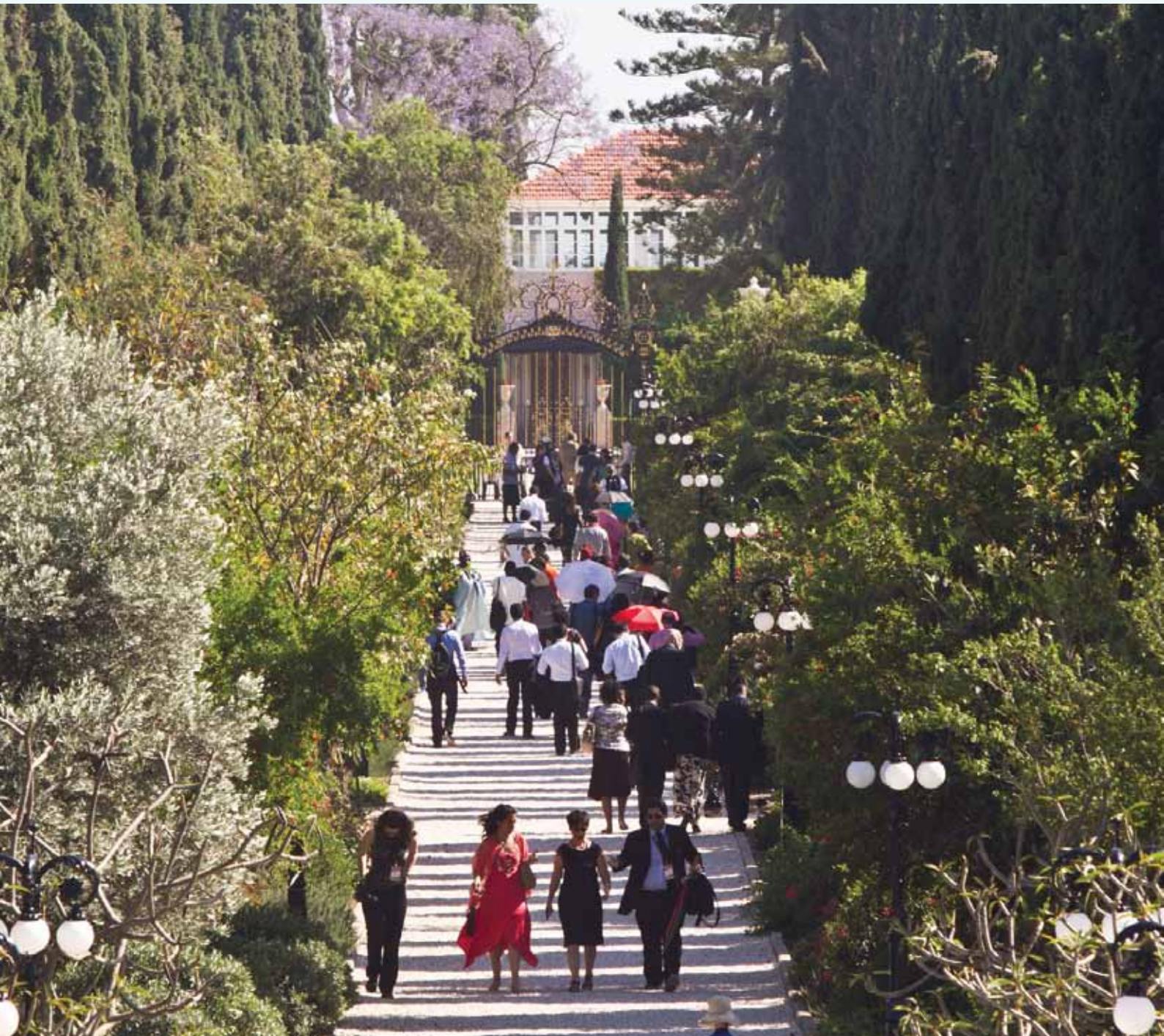
Dr Bhatti is the brother of the late Shahbaz Bhatti, Minister for Minority Affairs in Pakistan until his assassination in 2011.

The discussion was attended by a wide range of human rights activists, clerics, members of the Pakistani diaspora, civil servants, and journalists. Gordon Campbell, the Canadian high commissioner, restated Canada's commitment to the work of freedom of religion and belief around the world – and welcomed the collaboration with the Bahá'í community and other groups.

Ambassador Bennett and Dr Bhatti discussed several questions on the freedom of religion: the need to balance this essential right with others; the wisdom of removing theology from any consideration of the freedom of religion; the universality of this and other human rights; the ways in which international partners can, despite cultural and contextual differences, find common ground to pursue the freedom of religion and belief agenda.

Questions from the floor, and further reflections from the two distinguished guests, centered on the long-standing issue of the blasphemy law in Pakistan; the central importance of education in dealing with infringements on freedom of belief; and the crucial interplay between the freedom of religion and belief, and the freedom of expression.





Delegates to the Eleventh International Bahá'í Convention visit the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, at Bahji, near Acre, Israel.

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