

ONE COUNTRY

“The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens” – Bahá’u’lláh

Newsletter of the
Bahá’í International Community
March 2012-May 2012
Volume 22, Issue 2

HUMAN RIGHTS

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Iran’s justice system deeply flawed, says UN special investigator

GENEVA — Last year, the UN Human Rights Council decided to appoint a new independent investigator to monitor human rights in Iran, after nine years without one.

This March that investigator made his first full report to the Council, offering not only a sharp critique of Iran’s failure to meet international human rights standards, but also a stern indictment of the country’s justice system.

“Violations of due process rights are chronic, reducing the likelihood of a fair trial,” wrote Ahmed Shaheed, the new Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran. “A number of vaguely defined security provisions within the Islamic Penal Code are applied in ways that contravene international human rights law and unduly limit freedom of expression, association and assembly,” he said.

About two weeks later, on 22 March, the Council voted overwhelmingly to extend Dr. Shaheed’s mandate, by a vote of 22 to 5, with 20 abstentions.

“This result is a clear indication of the Council’s concern over Iran’s abysmal record on human rights,” said Diane Ala’i, the Bahá’í International Community’s representative to the United Nations in Geneva.

As the new Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, Dr. Shaheed’s opinion carries considerable weight with the international community. The former Minister of Foreign Affairs for the Maldives, Dr. Shaheed has been a strong advocate for human rights throughout the world.

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Ahmed Shaheed, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran. A former foreign minister of the Maldives, Dr. Shaheed was appointed to his post in June 2011. (UN photo/Rick Bajornas)

Review: *Iranian Taboo*

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he is banned from entering Iran, he managed to get his friends to film deep inside the country, risking their own safety — and presumably the safety of their subjects. Among the emotionally fraught stories they discover is that of a Bahá'í mother and her 14-year old daughter leaving their homeland because of the persecution, despite their love for — and preference to remain in — Iran. The film documents what awaits Bahá'í refugees arriving in Turkey — cramped and unsanitary living conditions, uncertainty about their future, and a longing for the land they loved but had little choice but to leave. A visit to Bahá'í graves in the city of Kayseri in central Turkey reveals that pneumonia, poisonous fumes and tragic accidents have prematurely claimed the lives of others who fled Iran, seeking freedom from persecution.

Allamehzadeh has also succeeded in getting interviews with a number of prominent Iranian politicians, authors and academics.

Allamehzadeh has also succeeded in getting interviews with a number of prominent Iranian politicians, authors, and academics. These include Abolhassan Banisadr — who served as the first president of Iran after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. He recalls one episode in particular in which a banner was displayed in the main hall of the presidential palace that contained allegations about the “Bahá'í network... of foreign spies.” “So, let's say they have a network,” Banisadr tells the director. “Mullahs in Iran also have a network. This does not mean that they are spies.”

Nobel Peace Prize-winning human rights lawyer Shirin Ebadi has spoken out vociferously on behalf of Bahá'ís, acting as their defense lawyer. In the

film, she recounts reading the case files of the then seven Bahá'í leaders — who were arrested in 2008 — and realizing that there was nothing in the files to support the prosecutor's allegations against them. “If this case was brought before an impartial judge, he would surely have released them on the first day,” she says.

Recently, adds Mrs. Ebadi, her daughter has even been “branded” a Bahá'í in the media as a riposte to her mother's efforts to defend human rights.

Allamehzadeh ends his film by reflecting that anyone in Iran who steps out of line is accused of being a Bahá'í, a word that carries the same weight, he suggests, as the word “communist” did during the United States' “McCarthyite” witch hunts. Former president Banisadr points out the irony of the fact that the former Shah's secret police at one time even branded the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini a Bahá'í.

“To turn the name of a religion and a faith into an insult in my opinion is the biggest blow the Shiite clergy has delivered to a part of our society,” concludes Allamehzadeh.

Iranian Taboo does not set out to explain the history and beliefs of the Bahá'í Faith, nor its extraordinary geographic spread in the 20th century, nor the positive impact its teachings today have on the lives of millions of adherents, their friends and neighbors around the world. Neither does it attempt to uncover the roots of the persecution or unpack the numerous falsehoods and misconceptions by which Iran justifies its relentless campaign of oppression. Rather, Reza Allamehzadeh focuses on the scale and scope of this ongoing and often undiscussed violation of human rights. In doing so he is — along with the increasing numbers of his compatriots both inside Iran and abroad — beginning to break the taboo that is the film's premise. His only regret, he has said in interviews, is that he did not do it sooner.



ONE COUNTRY is published quarterly by the Office of Public Information of the Bahá'í International Community, an international non-governmental organization which encompasses and represents the worldwide membership of the Bahá'í Faith.

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© 2012 by The Bahá'í International Community / ISSN 1018-9300

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soy-based inks
on paper from
sustainable
forests.



The “most personal” and “most difficult” film the director has ever made

Iranian Taboo: a documentary film

By Reza Allamehzadeh

IN BRIEF

- A new documentary film by exiled Iranian filmmaker Reza Allamehzadeh explores the long running persecution of Iran’s Bahá’ís.
- The film’s title comes from the director’s realization that even those Iranians who believe Bahá’ís should be granted their rights often choose to remain silent.
- Because of this “taboo” surrounding the subject matter, he calls it one of the “most personal” and “most difficult” films he has ever made.

In his 40-year career, Reza Allamehzadeh has never shied away from exploring the darker side of life in Iran, making documentaries that have resulted in considerable personal risk for the filmmaker. In 1979, his film *Speak up, Turkmen* exposed the violent conflict between the army of the new Islamic Republic and poorly organized Turkmen tribesmen. After fleeing to Europe where he still resides, Allamehzadeh made *The Guests of Hotel Astoria* (1988), the story of a group of Iranian asylum seekers escaping to Turkey. It was selected for the Venice, Moscow, Montreal and Chicago film festivals. *The Night after the Revolution* (1989) reviewed Iran’s history of censorship, while in *Holy Crime* (1994), he investigated a wave of murders of Iranian opposition figures in Europe.

With his latest feature-length documentary, the director’s commitment to exposing subjects the Iranian regime would rather gloss over shows no sign of abating. In *Iranian Taboo*, he focuses his attention on the history of persecution faced by Iran’s Bahá’í minority, puzzling over the fact that even those Iranians who believe Bahá’ís should be granted their rights often choose to remain silent about the matter — hence the film’s title. The documentary, which is in English and Farsi with subtitles, has so far been screened in major North American cities and some European venues.

Describing it as the “most personal” and “most difficult” film he has ever made, the director ranges widely across seven decades during which sporadic outbursts of state-approved persecution culminated in the relentless oppression of Bahá’ís now meted out by the Islamic Republic. Among the incidents he recounts are: the

brutal murder in 1942 of a highly respected Bahá’í doctor, whose killers walked away free men, later hailed as heroes; the 1955 wave of violence against Bahá’ís instigated by a populist preacher with the permission of the Shah; years of attacks on the villagers of Ivel, where even the Bahá’í-owned cows were separated from those reared by Muslim farmers; the early days



of the current regime when the false charge that Bahá’ís were Zionist spies resulted in some 200 executions; the 2008 arrests of seven Iranian Bahá’í leaders, now each serving a 20-year jail term on trumped-up charges; and the recent attacks on the Bahá’í Institute for Higher Education, a community initiative to assist young Bahá’ís barred from university because of their religion.

The courage of Allamehzadeh and his associates in making this film is to be applauded. In spite of the fact that

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