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## **Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l**

### ***Newsletter "Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief"***

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**20 March 2014**

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## **IRAN**

# **Freedom of Religion or Belief in Iran**

**By Dr Mark Barwick, *Human Rights Without Frontiers International***

HRWF (18.03.2014) - UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon was speaking recently to the Human Rights Council, where he expressed his frustration with Hassan Rouhani's presidency thus far. He said that Mr Rouhani has failed to implement reforms that he had promised during his election campaign. The rights to free speech and assembly, the freedom of expression, all continue to be severely restricted. Activists, lawyers, journalists and others continue to be in prison for having done nothing more than exercise their right to free speech. Hundreds of people were executed last year and scores already have been executed in this present year.

Even still, Iran persists in refusing access for UN rights investigators to visit the country, despite repeated requests since 2005. Such is life in Iran today.

Human Rights Without Frontiers has monitored with increasing concern the situation in Iran, particularly in regard to the country's religious minorities. Iran - at least statistically and publicly - is a fiercely Shia Muslim nation. And despite its legal provisions for the respect of minority faith groups, it is still extremely difficult to be anything but Shia in Iran today. And no progress can be noted under Mr Rouhani's presidency toward alleviating the harsh repression under which these groups live.

Now today is the official launch of our 2013 World Report on Freedom of Religion or Belief. This is also an eventful day for our organisation, because we are celebrating the 25th anniversary of the founding of Human Rights Without Frontiers in 1989. Willy Fautré will tell us more about that in a moment.

The World Report on Freedom of Religion or Belief tracks a number of violations in countries of particular concern, one of which is Iran under President Rouhani. On some occasions, Mr Rouhani has tried to portray Iran as a land where religious minorities enjoy freedom to practice their faith. However, there is a serious disconnect between the government's official rhetoric and the harsh realities that many Iranian

citizens experience on a daily basis.

Iran has historically been home to various faith and cultural traditions. And Iranians in general have been an intellectually open and tolerant people. But in our time, the space for free expression and the free practice of one's religion or belief has closed significantly. In Iran we witness the sadly paradoxical situation where an authoritarian regime exerts power over a largely tolerant society.

The report chronicles very worrying trends of targeted acts of repression against Christian groups and their leaders, Baha'is, Zoroastrians and minority Muslim communities. There are also harsh penalties reserved for those who try to convert from Islam to another faith or to no faith at all.

Of course, the freedom to adopt or change one's religion is protected by article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, freedom of thought, conscience and religion includes the 'freedom to change one's religion or belief, if one so chooses, and freedom to manifest that religion or belief in teaching, practise, worship and observance.'

I am free to believe as I choose, and I am also free to believe differently or not to believe at all. Article 18 was intended to also protect a person's right to renounce religion altogether.

This freedom is blatantly disregarded by Iran's government. One mechanism for the suppression of this right has been the establishment of laws that forbid changing one's religion or belief system or forsaking one's religion, more commonly known as apostasy. This is the case for several countries in the world today, including Iran. Iran is one country that has actively prosecuted its citizens for apostasy with penalties that can go as far as extended prison sentences and even the death penalty.

One recent example has been the case of Youcef Naderkhani, who was sentenced to death in 2010 for offenses related to apostasy. Mr Naderkhani had renounced his faith as a Muslim, one that he had never actually practised anyway, and had openly become a Christian. This was regarded as a capital offense.

Mr Naderkhani was finally acquitted of the charges and released just last year.

However, his case is illustrative of the nefarious nature of laws in Iran, which are routinely applied arbitrarily as a means of intimidation, instilling fear, restricting free speech, exerting control and effectively squelching any sort of social or political dissent.

In the end, these laws are evoked as one way to protect those who hold power. The current regime, established after the Shah was overthrown in 1979, has always lacked widespread legitimacy. To a large degree, these repressive measures have very little to do with religious conviction and much more to do with preserving power.

Just a cursory look at the kinds of charges that are issued against members of religious minorities is revelatory of what we're talking about here. Baha'is are serving 20 year sentences for such things as espionage and endangering national security. Sufis are convicted of propaganda against the state, insulting the Supreme Leader and disturbing public order. Christians are sentenced for propaganda against the state and threatening public order.

Mr Rouhani presides over a very complex system that is dedicated above all to protecting the interests of the country's ruling elite. This is accomplished by systematically ensuring the continuation of the regime's supposed Islamic Revolution and by suppressing any opposition voices, including those of minority religious groups.

There are, in fact, small openings for affecting change in Iran under Rouhani's administration - but these are really quite small. Mr Rouhani already knows well the system in which he works. To a large degree, he is a product of this system. He knows how to navigate it. He knows its limitations and points of resistance. It would be quite remarkable to see any significant change under Hassan Rouhani's watch.

At the same time, the people of Iran have longed for much better than the current regime has so far offered. Much international attention has been focused on Iran's nuclear programme. While securing a nuclear-free future for the region is undoubtedly important, it is also in the interest of the EU to give

strong support to Iran's growth in democracy. Protecting the rights and well-being of faith and belief minorities are an integral part of this longer project. And it is something that cannot wait.

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## IRAN

### Freedom of Religion or Belief Prisoners in Iran

**By Willy Fautre, Human Rights Without Frontiers International**

HRWF (19.04.2014) - In Iran non-Muslims may not engage in public religious expression, persuasion or try to convert Muslims. Proselytizing of Muslims by non-Muslims is illegal and can be punishable by death. The government enforces this prohibition by closely monitoring the activities of Evangelical Christians and discouraging Muslims from entering Church premises. Christians of all denominations report the presence of security cameras outside their churches, allegedly to confirm that non-Christians do not participate in services. Worshippers are also subject to identity checks by authorities posted outside places of worship.

Last year, **Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF)** published its first Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) Prisoners List for the year 2012. The 2013 report, comprises hundreds of prisoners that were behind bars on the ground of laws forbidding or restricting their basic rights to freedom of religion or belief: (1) freedom to change religion or belief, (2) freedom to share one's religion or beliefs, (3) freedom of association, (4) freedom of worship and assembly, or (5) conscientious objection to military service.

This Prisoners List has been expanded over the previous year to document FoRB prisoners in 24 countries.

As far as Iran is concerned, we have documented about 120 individual cases of believers who were in prison last year on the purely religious grounds I have mentioned before. **34 members of Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches** are on our list. They were prosecuted for the following activities: personal conversion from Islam to Christianity - missionary activities aiming at converting Muslims to Christianity - attending a house church meeting - Christmas celebrations in private with Muslim guests - distributing Bibles

The official charges were however very different and somewhat frightening: propaganda against the regime - threatening the national security - affiliation to an anti-security organization - gathering with intent to commit crimes against the Iranian national security - being in contact with foreign organisations - carrying out anti-Islamic propaganda.

**12 members of the Church of Iran** are also in prison on the official ground of apostasy, propaganda against the regime, action against the national security or missionary activities.

**35 Baha'i prisoners** are listed in our report but the US Commission on International Religious Freedom has identified more than 100. Prison sentences range from one to twenty years and can include a year or more of forced resettlement once the prisoner is released. They serve prison terms for a wide range of official charges such as espionage, propaganda activities against the Islamic order, the establishment of an illegal administration, cooperation with Israel and acting against the security of the country, membership of a perverse sect, plotting the overthrow of the government. These frightening accusations usually mask quite a normal activity such as carrying out community activities or teaching the Baha'i faith.

A number of Baha'is are just lecturers or work for the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education, an organisation that aims to provide higher education to Baha'is, as they are often barred from attending Iran's other universities. Baha'is are *de facto* considered apostates from Islam. The right to believe in the Baha'i faith and to profess it individually or in community is denied to them.

Our report also documents the cases of **14 Dervishes** for allegedly insulting the Supreme Leader, disturbing the public mind, enmity against God, membership in a deviant religious group or affiliation to a sect endangering national security.

A number of Sunni and Shia Muslims are also in prison because of their voicing of dissenting opinions.

In August 2013, an Iranian court sentenced **17 Sunni Muslim**, including religious scholars, to death because of their religious beliefs.

The condemned have been in Gohardasht Prison, west of Tehran since early June last year, awaiting execution. They were convicted of "acting against national security," and "enmity against God".

A **Shi'a Muslim**, Ayatollah Mohammad Kazemeni Boroujerdi, was first sentenced to death and then to 11 years in prison for advocating the separation of religion and state and speaking out in favor of the rights of religious minorities. The official charges were: enmity against God and spreading propaganda against the regime.

**4 Zoroastrians** are also in prison for being members of the Iran Zoroastrian Committee.

Mojtaba AHMADI , he was sentenced to 6 years in prison: blasphemy (3 years), conspiracy and anti-regime propaganda (3 years).

Mohsen SADEGHIPOUR was sentenced to four and a half years in prison, 74 lashes and a fine. The official charges were: anti-regime propaganda favoring the Zoroastrian faith; insulting Islamic practices, insulting the Supreme Leader and promoting activities against the Islamic Republic through the propagation of Zoroastrianism.

Abolfazl (Pouria) SHAHPARI was sentenced to 2.5 years in prison and 74 lashes.

Mohammad Javad (Dariush) SHAHPARI was sentenced to 2 years and 4 months in prison and 74 lashes.

Capital punishment or sentences to multiple lashes are not uncommon in Iran as it can be seen with these examples.