



**Australian Bahá'í Community**

## **Submission by the Australian Bahá'í Community to the Inquiry into the Partial Suspension of Sanctions against Iran**

The Australian Bahá'í Community welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee Inquiry into the partial suspension of sanctions against Iran.

The Australian Bahá'í Community was established in 1920 and its membership reflects the diversity of modern Australia. As members of the Bahá'í Faith—a worldwide religion, founded over 170 years ago, with more than five million members around the globe—we work to promote and apply principles derived from Bahá'í teachings which contribute to thinking about current challenges facing humanity. Our efforts are focussed on the development of a peaceful, just and sustainable civilisation, in which the human rights of all individuals are upheld, and all are empowered to recognise and develop their capacities and to channel their collective energies towards service to humanity and the betterment of their communities.

The purpose of this submission is to put forward our view that the struggle to protect human rights, and in particular the rights of religious minorities, must not be abandoned in the pursuit of better relations between Australia and Iran.

Although the Bahá'í community takes no position on the question of sanctions and relations between governments, we believe the treatment of minorities must be given serious consideration alongside any potential economic development within Iran. In fact, in these times, the actions and statements of the Australian Government could well have even greater effect than previously.

For more than 35 years, members of the Bahá'í Faith, who form the largest non-Muslim religious minority in Iran, have been subjected to a systematic, government-sponsored campaign of persecution that seeks to eliminate their community as a viable entity in that country. The reality of the persecution has been well-established by the United Nations and its human rights agencies, and has been the subject of expressions of concern by governments around the world, including the Australian government, for many years.

Within the Australian Bahá'í Community, there are individuals who have experienced persecution in Iran or whose close relatives are currently undergoing unconscionable persecution solely because of their religious beliefs. They can provide compelling first-person testimony.

There has been no decrease in the persecution against the Bahá'ís living in Iran since President Hassan Rouhani came to power, and there is no sign of it abating. In fact, in some respects it has worsened. Since his inauguration in August 2013 at least 108 Bahá'ís have been arrested, 22 Bahá'ís have been expelled from university and more than 200 Bahá'í-owned businesses have been shut down or threatened. More than 7,000 pieces of anti-Bahá'í propaganda have been disseminated in the Iranian media during his administration.

More than 80 Bahá'ís are currently in prison in Iran, all on false charges related solely to their religious belief. The recent case in which 24 individuals in the small city of Gorgan received combined sentences of 193 years' imprisonment for their provision of moral education to children up to the age of 14 provides a striking example of the extreme and unthinking prejudice towards the Bahá'ís that is allowed expression in the Iranian judicial system.

Economic pressure on Iran's Bahá'í community is also acute, with both jobs and business licenses being denied to them. Government jobs, not only in the public service but also in such fields as education and law, have been denied to Bahá'ís since the years immediately following the 1979 Revolution. In the private sector, Muslim employers are often pressured to fire Bahá'ís. Since 2007, the Bahá'í International Community has documented more than 780 incidents of economic persecution against Iranian Bahá'ís including shop closings, sealing of business premises, dismissals, the revocation of business licenses, confiscation of property and assets without compensation, and other efforts to block them from earning a livelihood.

We believe the situation of the Bahá'í community can be viewed as a litmus test for human rights in Iran. The human rights situation remains dire for many groups in that society. The violations of human rights are in breach of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is a signatory, and of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. International pressure continues to be an effective way to prompt consideration of human rights. Expressions of concern about the plight of religious minorities, including the Bahá'ís, convey a powerful message to the Iranian government. They are also a source of hope to the Bahá'ís in Iran and to those human rights lawyers, activists, and intellectuals inside the country who put their lives at risk in order to fight the injustices meted out to minorities.

To decrease the international pressure on the Iranian government over the human rights situation in its country at this time, when there has been no documented improvement in conditions on the ground, may well give credence to the false view, often put forward by Iranian representatives, that past expressions of concern have been politically motivated. It would give a signal to Iran that it will no longer be held accountable for its treatment of its citizens and thus has a free hand to continue, and possibly increase, its human rights abuses.

As well as denying the existence of the well-documented persecution, Iranian authorities and their diplomatic representatives routinely present spurious allegations against Bahá'ís, none of which are accompanied by credible evidence, because there is none. At its root the persecution is driven by the view that a religion founded subsequent to Islam is not valid and must be eradicated. The Bahá'ís of Iran pose no threat to their government: they adhere strongly to their religious beliefs that require them to be good citizens, to obey the law of the land and to abstain from political activity.

In light of these considerations, we put forward the following recommendations to the Committee:

1. That the Australian Government continue to take every opportunity to maintain scrutiny of human rights abuses in Iran, both in its bilateral relationship with Iran and in multilateral fora, including but not limited to its continued support for the passage of the resolution on the human rights situation in the Islamic Republic Iran at the 71st Session of the United Nations General Assembly later this year.
2. That the Australian Government make clear to the Iranian Government its expectation that the economic benefits arising from the suspension of sanctions and increased trade with Australia should flow to all segments of the Iranian population, including minority groups such as the Bahá'ís, who experience systematic exclusion and discrimination in many sectors of the Iranian economy.

3. That systematic measures be put into place to ensure that those Australian corporations seeking to do business in Iran are made aware of the environment in which they propose to operate.

Australian businesses with high standards of governance with respect to human rights will surely not want to become unwitting partners with those perpetrating human rights abuses. Without appropriate briefing, however, Australian companies could easily find themselves complicit in the systematic and insidious exclusion of Bahá'ís from the economic life of their nation, and deprived of trading or working with Bahá'ís, among whom were once many significant, highly respected and ethical contributors to the business and professional communities in Iran.

We are grateful to Minister for Foreign Affairs the Hon Julie Bishop MP, to her predecessor Senator Bob Carr, to the Federal Parliament, and to individual Senators and Members of the House of Representatives for their forthright denunciations over recent years of the persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran and their calls for the human rights of all Iranians to be upheld by the government of that country. We are also grateful to the Australian media for their coverage of this issue.

The Australian Bahá'í Community thanks the Committee for the opportunity to make a submission to this Inquiry.

We would be pleased to attend in person if invited, and to arrange for the presence of members of our community who have experienced persecution or whose relatives are currently undergoing persecution to give evidence or answer any question the Committee may have.

We look forward to the outcomes of the Committee's deliberations.

Australian Bahá'í Community  
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