

THE SENATE

Tuesday, November 29, 2011

The Senate met at 2 p.m., the Speaker in the chair.
Prayers.

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Baha'i People in Iran

Inquiry—Debate Concluded

On the Order:

Resuming debate on the inquiry of the Honourable Senator Jaffer calling the attention of the Senate to the deteriorating human rights situation of the Baha'i people in Iran.

Hon. Roméo Antonius Dallaire: Honourable senators, I want to present a case in support of Senator Jaffer's inquiry in respect of the Baha'is in Iran. The continuum of the situation is catastrophic, in my opinion, and I will make my argument to this effect.

I rise today to speak to the inquiry placed on the Order Paper by the Honourable Senator Jaffer. The human rights situation of the Baha'is in Iran is deteriorating, and we in Canada cannot simply turn our heads the other way. I will bring forward three recommendations at the end of my presentation.

Since the days of Baha'u'llah in the late 19th century, Baha'is have persistently been persecuted in Iran. They are targeted because they challenge the cultural orthodoxy of the ruling class. They have an elected leadership, not an ecclesiastical hierarchy, and their beliefs include equality of the sexes and harmony between science and religion — something that others could learn from. However, these are not the main reasons that the Baha'is are persecuted in Iran. The root of their persecution lies in the technical differences between their faith and that of the Shia majority, paramount of which is the Baha'i belief that Mohammed was not the last prophet sent by God. In Iran, this has marked the Baha'is as heretics and has subjected them to heinous persecution.

Previous to the 1979 Iranian revolution, the Baha'is were subject to informal bouts of violence. Local mullahs would whip mobs of their followers into frenzies of violence and unleash them on any Baha'is in the vicinity. Any

property belonging to Baha'is would be destroyed and any Baha'is who could not escape would be beaten and tortured to death.

The worst such recorded instance was the 1903 massacre in the city of Yazd, where over 100 Baha'is were killed in a single such mob attack. These attacks were informal in the sense that the state policy of Iran was not officially or systematically directed against Baha'is. Instead, the silent majority of the ruling Shah simply turned a blind eye to the abuses committed by the extremist facets of the clergy, which were usually carried out with the blessing of the Ayatollah.

This all changed with the Iranian revolution in 1979; in fact, it changed for the worse. Anti-Baha'i organizations such as the Hojratieh, a fanatical group created in the early 1950s with the blessing of the Ayatollah, gained access to state files and began targeting the Baha'is across Iran. Mobs scoured their neighbourhoods looking for Baha'is to massacre. They burned down their homes and businesses, and slaughtered Baha'is with impunity. They did not even spare the dead, as they even desecrated and demolished cemeteries.

(1650)

At the same time, between 1979 and 1983, the ruling powers undertook a systematic effort to rob the Baha'i community of the most respected members of its communities — Baha'is elected by their peers to the National Spiritual Assembly and their community counterpart. In 1980, the full membership of the National Spiritual Assembly was arrested. When new members were elected to the Baha'i National Spiritual Assembly, they too were arrested. On December 27 of that year, without receiving trial, they were executed. I repeat: They were executed.

During this difficult time, Canada took a leadership role in accepting Baha'i refugees from Iran. We also took an active role in advocating for the Baha'i cause internationally. We opened our doors to these people who were persecuted for their religion.

[Translation]

It is recognized that international pressure on Iran, by countries such as Canada and by the international Baha'i community, led to a decrease in direct violence on Baha'is in Iran. Unfortunately, this community continued to be repressed, just in new ways.

In earlier times, repression of the Baha'is was informal since, before the Iranian revolution, there was greater separation between the powers of the

state and the dominant Shia religion. After the revolution that was no longer the case, since Iran became an Islamic republic. Repression of the Baha'is became more generalized and could even have been considered policy.

However, the Islamic state does not automatically oppress all religious minorities. The Iranian Constitution of 1979 contains a list of recognized religions and allows their members to freely practice their religion, within the limits of Islamic law. The Baha'is, who are the largest religious minority in Iran, were excluded from the list and are thus not protected by the law. They are targeted specifically.

[*English*]

If Baha'is practice the tenets of their faith, they do so at their peril. In 1991, the implicit denunciation of the Baha'i faith, as illustrated in the constitutional exclusion, was reinforced by an explicit policy of targeted repression. This policy came in the form of a set of guidelines circulated internally by the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council. It is now policy to oppress the Baha'is. It is overt policy against a human right — the right to the free practice of your religion.

Exposed in a 1992 UN report by the Special Representative of the Commission on Human Rights of the Economic and Social Council, they state:

The government's treatment of [the Baha'is] shall be such that their progress and development shall be blocked.

Any Iranian who identifies as Baha'i is barred from higher education, from holding a position in the government, or from partaking in the political process. The similarities with what I saw in Rwanda are absolutely unquestionable, equal, similar and in fact applied with seemingly the same verve.

Any promotion of the Baha'i faith is to be punished through exclusionary tactics. In a contradictory turn of phrase, the policy states that Baha'is are permitted the normal benefits of citizenry, but only to the extent that it does not constitute encouragement for them to persist in their status as Baha'is. In this case, we have not an ethnic but a religious situation of targeting a specific group to oppress them and ultimately, I would argue, to eliminate them. Insofar as you are Baha'i, you are to be excluded from the benefits of citizenry.

Honourable senators, there is a term for this type of systematic repression. We call it "ideological genocide." An essential element of ideological genocide is the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, the Baha'i community as a separate religious entity. It is this intent to destroy the Baha'i community as a separate religious entity that requires our urgent and deliberate attention.

As a country that values religious freedoms and the safeguarding of basic human rights, we must hold vigilant watch over the methods that the Government of Iran uses to achieve the goals of this policy. Whereas we should use whatever political and diplomatic means to try to steer Iran towards a greater respect for human rights and a more open and democratic society, it is absolutely imperative that we guard against the very real possibility that the ideological genocide will manifest itself through the widespread and systematic murder of Iranian Baha'is.

"Systematic murder of Iranian Baha'is" are similar words that I saw in the pre-genocide of 1994 in Rwanda.

[Translation]

Honourable senators, these are the reasons why I am speaking here today about the terrible situation facing Iran's Baha'i community. Faced with the remarkable resistance shown by that community, the Iranian government is losing patience, and there are more and more indications that this community will only be further repressed.

Senator Jaffer drew our attention to the arrest of seven local Baha'i leaders in 2008. Those individuals have committed no crime, at least not in any country that recognizes the fundamental right of freedom of religion. Their crime consisted of nothing more than supporting their religious community, yet they were sentenced to 20 years in prison. Once again, the prisons of Rwanda were filled with Tutsi people for almost the same reasons, except their crime was based on their ethnicity, rather than their religion.

[English]

It is bad enough that the Baha'is are forced to make do without state support, but the fact that they are not even permitted to provide for themselves is unacceptable. They are being punished for trying to survive. Nothing makes this clearer than the most recent example of state repression of Iranian Baha'is. The 1991 set of guidelines, which guides government policies still today, bar Baha'is from receiving higher education in a policy specifically designed to prevent the transmission of the Baha'i culture in Iran and the upward mobility of Iranian Baha'is.

In response to this policy, the Baha'is around the world have worked tirelessly to provide education for Iranian Baha'is. They created the Baha'i Institute of Higher Education, which was launched in 1987, to educate young Baha'is so they may receive the education the state has deprived them of. In spite of the many obstacles, they managed to provide university-level education to Iranian Baha'is.

We can proudly say that 63 of these educators received their degrees here in Canada. We have supported this effort that you would consider subversive if you were an Iranian government official. We consider it fundamental in the agreement that we believe in the human right to free religion.

Unfortunately, not only are their university degrees not recognized in Iran, whether from the Baha'i university, the University of Ottawa, or even Memorial University or UBC, from one end of our country to the other, but now the institution that was giving them their education has itself become the target of state violence.

In May 2011, the Iranian state police launched a set of coordinated raids on the homes of individuals associated with that institute. Personal belongings were confiscated, and 16 individuals were arrested. Seven of those individuals were sentenced to four to five years in jail and still remain there.

[Translation]

These attacks against the Baha'i leaders and teachers are troubling enough as human rights violations.

(1700)

However, they are even more disturbing because they took place in the context of the Iranian state's severe repression of the entire Baha'i community. A similar scenario played out in Rwanda where the Tutsi ethnic minority was not allowed access to higher education in their country. They had to leave the country in order to access higher education.

The incarceration of Baha'is in Iran is rising at an alarming rate. In the past 18 months, the increase has been exponential. In 2004, only four were incarcerated. In 2010, there were 48. In 2011, there are more than 100. More Baha'is were arrested in the past year than in the previous six years combined. In addition, Baha'is serve disproportionate sentences without the right to be freed on bail. Incarcerated Baha'is are a very small portion of those whose homes were plundered, whose goods were confiscated and who were arrested and detained for no other reason than their religion. These are

signs that the situation of Baha'is in Iran is deteriorating rapidly. This situation resembles the situation in Rwanda 17 years ago.

I have in my hand a report entitled, *Inciting Hatred: Iran's Media Campaign to Demonize Baha'is*.

This study, published in October 2011, shows the increasingly ferocious propaganda campaign directed by Iran against the Baha'i community. This tactic was also used in Rwanda where the media demonized the Tutsi minority.

I will ask for five more minutes.

[*English*]

The Hon. the Speaker *pro tempore*: Honourable senators, is leave granted for five more minutes?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

[*Translation*]

Senator Dallaire: I still have a lot to say about this. Nonetheless, since I am short on time, I will have to go straight to the recommendations that I would like to bring to your attention for the benefit of our government.

We must consider the tools at our disposal for dealing with this situation and the national and international spheres affected by our actions. We are witnessing a slow-motion rehearsal for genocide, the preparation for genocide in a country where the targeted population is obvious. It is happening right in front of us and we are fully aware of the situation. No one can claim not to realize that these acts are being committed. In 1994, we had our eyes closed. This time we are fully aware.

What should our government do? First, we must welcome all Iranian Baha'is seeking refugee status in Canada. We must ensure that Canada remains a refuge for those seeking to flee religious extermination. We did that for the Vietnamese and for other groups as well. This group is being specifically targeted for elimination by its government. We recognize that government as a major human rights violator. This situation meets the United Nations criteria that arose from the work done after the genocide in Rwanda to prevent such a tragedy from ever happening again.

Second, we must use the new tool that the government has established — the Office of Religious Freedom. It has a significant role to play in the situation of the Baha'is in Iran. The religious persecution of Baha'is in Iran is the first situation that this office should consider. As Senator Segal recommended, the office should work with similar organizations at the international level in order to end the repression of the Baha'is, free those who have been imprisoned and encourage political change so that this religion is recognized and its members are able to enjoy the same rights as other Iranians. These efforts should be combined with our bilateral and multilateral strategies and with the action taken by the human rights branch of the Department of Foreign Affairs and parliamentary groups such as the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Prevention of Genocide and Other Crimes Against Humanity, which I have the honour to chair. This is not the first time that this issue has been raised before this committee, which represents both chambers and all parties.

Third, we must ensure that our approach to Iran in the area of foreign affairs is consistent and coherent. The problems of terrorism, repression of minority groups and the conflict with Israel must be taken into consideration in order to get a comprehensive view of the situation.

More action must be taken against this country, which not only oppresses people but also puts the rest of the world at risk through its desire to arm itself with nuclear weapons. We must ensure that our response is proportional to the existing threat.

We used the fact that we were unaware of the situation as an excuse for not taking action in 1994. This time, we are aware of the situation. We therefore have no excuse. On the contrary, we have the tools to be able to respond to the problem reasonably and responsibly.

[English]

Honourable senators, we know the genocidal intent of the Iranian state. It seeks to destroy the Baha'i community as a separate religious entity. We have been witnesses to the systematic classification of Iranian Baha'is as an outgroup identified for persecution, elimination and genocide. Baha'is have been excluded from constitutional protection and are subject to discriminatory guidelines that not only withhold the benefits of Iranian citizenry but also are, in fact, a policy within their government to oppress them.

We are now confronted with the growing body of evidence that illustrates, in painful detail, the relentless attacks on Baha'i communities and their

leadership, the dehumanization of Baha'is and their polarization from Iranian society. The alarming increase in incarceration among the Baha'is and, most particularly, among their leadership, the disproportionate sentences and unreasonable bail and the vile propaganda that paints Baha'is as cultish and part of a Zionist conspiracy to undermine the Islamic state of Iran is all bull. It is all false. It is all an instrument to excuse the deliberate actions by that government to destroy that religion within their boundaries.

Make no mistake, these are not only indices of past and present persecution; they are warning signs of mass atrocities, of genocide. Let us not witness another one, fully conscious of what the consequences are.

The Hon. the Speaker *pro tempore*: If there is no further senator wishing to participate in this debate, this matter shall be deemed debated.