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CORRECTIONS

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BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

ists. It fits into that ideological attack on private health cover which we are starting to see more and more from this government.

I commend this motion, but I ask the House to note that the actions of this government are working completely contrary to the good recommendations that are contained here.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. DGH Adams)—The time allocated for this debate has expired. The resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.

Iran: Baha'i detainees

Debate resumed, on motion by **Mr Turnour**:

That the House:

- (1) notes with serious concern that:
 - (a) seven Baha'i community members in Iran have been charged with spying, insulting religious sanctities and propaganda against the Islamic Republic, and that these charges could attract the death penalty;
 - (b) the Baha'i detainees have not been given any access to legal representation and have not been subject to due legal process;
- (2) calls on Iran to respect rights to freedom of religion and the peaceful exercise of freedom of expression and association, in accordance with international human rights conventions; and
- (3) calls on Iran to release the seven Baha'i detainees without delay.

Mr TURNOUR (Leichhardt) (7.57 pm)—I rise tonight to support the seven Baha'is detained in Iran. In Australia, we live in the lucky country. We enjoy freedom of speech, freedom of religion and freedom of belief. We have a healthy democracy and we have legislation that protects these rights.

While we in Australia enjoy these freedoms, as do the citizens of many countries across the globe, those in Iran do not. Seven leading members of the Iranian Baha'i community have been detained since March and May 2008. They have been charged with spying for Israel, insulting religious sanctities and propagandising against the Islamic republic. More recently, I have been advised by the Australian Baha'i community that a new charge appears to have been levelled against the seven—that of spreading corruption on earth. I welcome the members of the Baha'i community here this evening and thank them for bringing these issues to the attention of both me and the parliament.

The Baha'i detainees have not been subject to due legal process. I understand that they have been waiting for over eight months to be notified of the charges and have been given no access to decent legal representation. The Australian government is concerned that these charges are part of a pattern of official discrimination against members of the Baha'i faith in Iran.

The Baha'i faith was founded over a century and half ago in Iran and has more than five million followers in more than 100,000 localities throughout the world. I am proud to say that we have got some of them in my electorate of Leichardt. Earlier this year, I met with Dr Ramin Zadeh, a local resident of my electorate and a member of the spiritual assembly of the Baha'is in Cairns. He was very concerned about the charges facing the seven Baha'i leaders, which could potentially attract the death penalty, and I thank him for initially bringing it to my attention. He talked to me about the Baha'i faith, about the horrific treatment of many followers in Iran and about the case of the seven leaders currently detained.

For 30 years, Iranian Baha'is have faced religious persecution. Between 1978 and 1998, over 200 Baha'is were executed by Iranian authorities, and many more were imprisoned and tortured. Through the 1990s, persecutions predominantly took the form of blocking Baha'is socially and economically—for example, not permitting Baha'i youth to attend university, not extending bank loans to Baha'is and vilification of Baha'is in the state-run news media.

More recently, a number of incidents indicate that there has been a resurgence of extreme religious persecution against the Baha'is, which is clearly disturbing. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights is a United Nations treaty based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is considered by many to be one of the most important human rights treaties in the world. Iran has signed and ratified this document. Article 18 of the covenant states:

Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

So, as countries throughout the world use the covenant as a collective vision for how governments everywhere should treat their citizens, Iranian Baha'is are facing circumstances that undermine this and other human rights, even though Iran is supposed to have ratified this covenant.

There are seven Baha'i leaders presently imprisoned in Iran. They have been there for a year now. It took eight months before they were advised of their charges. They do not have access to legal representation. They have minimal contact with their loved ones. It has also been reported that people who have worked closely with the seven have had their homes raided and items confiscated, and have been interrogated and even arrested. So Baha'is are being persecuted today in Iran. This motion brings that to the attention of the Committee and calls on the Iranian government to stop doing this.

I ask the Iranian authorities to release the seven Baha'i detainees and members of other religious minorities imprisoned for exercising their religious beliefs. The international community—the United Nations, numerous governments and parliaments, human rights groups and media outlets—have responded to the persecution of the Iranian Baha'i community. Today, I formally add my name to this list. The Australian government's firm position is that the right to freedom of religion and the peaceful exercise of freedom of expression and association must be respected in all countries in accordance with international human rights conventions.

We have already raised the issue of discrimination against the Baha'is at the United Nations, including in Australia's statement to the eighth session of the Human Rights Council in 2008. We have co-sponsored a resolution on the human rights situation in Iran at the 63rd UN General Assembly in 2008. We will maintain close interest in this case and will continue to raise our concerns with the Iranian government. I have had a chance to speak to the foreign minister about this. I know that many other members would have liked to speak on this motion tonight—not enough of us could do so but I know that many others would have liked to. I commend this motion to the Committee.

Mr SIMPKINS (Cowan) (8.02 pm)—It is an honour to speak on this motion tonight as the member for Cowan and represent the Wanneroo Baha'i community within my electorate. On 25 February this year I spoke in the House regarding this very issue, being the persecution of the practitioners of the Baha'i faith and other religious minorities by the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran. On that occasion I spoke specifically about the Baha'is and the struggles they face in their homeland. In particular this matter is about the imprisonment of the seven main Baha'i leaders in Iran. Those leaders are Mrs Mahvash Sabet, Mrs Fariba Kamalabadi, Mr Jamaloddin Khanjani, Mr Afif Naemi, Mr Saeid Rezaie, Mr Behrouz Tavakkoli and Mr Vahid Tizfahm.

On 14 May, just a week ago, the seven Baha'i leaders in Iran had spent a full year in detention. I would like to be able to say that there has been some progress since I last spoke on this issue, but the cause of justice in Iran has only gone backwards in the last few months. It has recently been publicised that the Baha'i seven may face another charge, that of spreading corruption on earth, which is in addition to the other charges reportedly laid. It is my firm view that all these charges have no validity and remain inconsistent with the teachings of the Baha'i faith.

I would now like to turn my attention to the latest charge of 'spreading corruption in the world'. This was apparently the charge by which the Iranian government after the 1979 revolution executed many Baha'is. No doubt it is a thin veil for the intent to eliminate dissent in Iran. It is a trumped-up, catch-all excuse with a single purpose, and that is for an illegitimate and paranoid regime to maintain control over an increasingly sceptical general population. My point is that this charge has nothing to do with offences, and everything to do with political control and religious persecution.

It would, however, be wrong of me not to speak of this charge in more detail. This charge goes to religious intolerance and it is clear that in Iran tolerance seems to be a very rare value at this point. While I believe that such a charge is primarily about exerting political control, we cannot ignore the religious intolerance at the core. I am not Baha'i; I worship at the Church of Christ and it is there through faith that I seek strength, support and guidance. I believe in Christianity. But that does not mean I consider any other faith corrupt.

What I do find reprehensible is that the Islamic leadership in Iran think themselves so high and significant that they can determine the followers of another faith to be spreaders of corruption. The whole world should be concerned about such a base fundamentalist belief. Any religion that finds justification in its holy books to authorise executions and exercise judgments that another faith is a corruption on the world should be of great concern to the followers of all faiths and religions. The Christian world has moved on in the last 800 years since the Crusades. Clearly, Islam in Iran has not moved on. What is happening in Iran to the Baha'is stands as a warning to all of us—nonbelievers in Islam are all called 'infidels' and that is not a term of respect and we should be on guard. In Iran there are more than 300,000 followers of the Baha'i faith. It is worth noting that the persecution of the Baha'is has continually occurred over the 150 years since its origin. They have been a convenient scapegoat for the failures of the Iranian government and the Iranian economy.

In February I wrote to the Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to inform him of my view that the arrest of the seven leaders was wrong and that their treatment whilst in custody has been unfair, unreasonable and inhumane. I also asked for the charges to be dropped and if that was not possible then a fair and open trial be conducted in front of international media. As expected, I have not received a reply. But I can assure the Islamic Republic of Iran that I have no regard for their actions and will continue to be critical of them for as long as I am here or until fundamental reform takes place.

On 12 June the Iranian presidential elections will take place. I believe that the President seeks to shore up his position by blaming and persecuting the Baha'is as a political tactic. After the election, talks between the US and Iran are due to take place. I wait to see if the government's attitude to the Baha'is then changes; I also wonder whether the seven Baha'i leaders will be used as political pawns and may be tried and executed as part of the President's re-election campaign. This issue is about politics and persecution, and it is about the withdrawal of the right to freely practise religion. It is about religious intolerance and it is about the extreme practice of politics. The seven Baha'i leaders should have their charges dropped and they should be released immediately. The Iranian government should also restore the rights of Baha'is and withdraw discrimination and religious intolerance towards the Baha'is. That should happen now.

Mr GEORGANAS (Hindmarsh) (8.07 pm)—I rise today to speak in support of this motion and I do so because it is such an important motion and because seven Iranian Baha'i leaders have been jailed in Iran for a year. Firstly, there were no formal charges for eight months. After eight months they were charged with trumped-up charges of espionage, insulting religious sanctities and propaganda against the Islamic republic. The detainees have not been given any access to legal representation and have not been subject to due legal process. They are facing charges that could attract the death penalty.

The Australian government is deeply concerned about the situation of the seven members—five men and two women—of the Baha'i community. The Australian government is concerned that these charges constitute official discrimination in Iran against members of the Baha'i faith. On 17 April the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Stephen Smith, conveyed the Australian government's serious concerns directly to the Iranian foreign minister. Over the past year the Australian government has regularly raised its concerns about the seven Baha'i detainees with the Iranian authorities and will continue to do so. At the very least, Iran should ensure that any trial is fair, transparent and meets international standards.

The government has also raised the issue at relevant international meetings, including the June session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva. Australia also co-sponsored a resolution on the human rights situation in Iran at the 63rd UN General Assembly in 2008, which expressed the international community's strong concern about the current situation of the Baha'is in Iran.

Others who have spoken out this year in condemnation of the actions of the Iranian authorities against the Baha'is include the European Union and the governments of Great Britain and the United States, as well as many parliamentarians in Brazil, Canada and Germany. Australia is home to people from a diversity of countries and faiths, where mutual respect and tolerance are the tradition. The right of citizens to maintain their own religious and cultural beliefs, to freedom of religion and to the peaceful exercise of freedom of expression and association must be respected in all countries in accordance with international human rights conventions. By refusing these people of the Baha'i faith access to a lawyer, the Iranian government has denied them the human rights to which they are entitled under international law.

The Baha'i faith was founded in Iran in 1844 and now has more than five million followers in 236 countries and territories. The Baha'is come from nearly every national ethnic background. The Baha'i faith has been present in Australia since 1920. I am very proud that they are represented in my electorate of Hindmarsh. And Laird Varzaly does a very good job in representing the Baha'i community in the electorate of Hindmarsh. The importance of peace and the responsibility of each of us to work towards its attainment and continuation is demonstrated more by the Baha'i community than by what some other communities have demonstrated over a millennium.

I support this motion. I call on Iran to respect the right to freedom of religion and the peaceful exercise of freedom of expression and association in accordance with international human rights conventions. I call on the government of Iran to release the seven Baha'i detainees without a single minute of delay. I also call upon the government of Iran to allow, at the very least, for a fair and open trial that meets international standards of justice.

Mr TUCKEY (O'Connor) (8.12 pm)—This is an important motion which, above all else, deals with religious freedom and the prevention of persecution, particularly on religious grounds. From my own reading and also from representations made to me over time in my electorate, I have found people who practice the Baha'i faith to be people of peace and good will. I find it ridiculous to suggest that, in a place like Iran, they would want to be spies. One might further ask just what that spying would achieve. There has been another case in Iran recently involving

a woman broadcaster. She was suddenly dragged into a secret court, found guilty of spying and incarcerated. When the international community protested as to the injustice of these arrangements, the woman was taken back to court and a plea bargain was arranged. The result was not an eight-year term of incarceration but a two-year suspended sentence. That is like a nothing.

Why do you attack people for spying when, in your eyes, their only fault is that they draw attention to an alternative faith? I have not had people come to me and criticise the Muslim faith, the Islamic faith because they are Baha'i. The Baha'i just say, 'Can we please have the freedom to act in accordance with our faith?' To me, this is extremely important. Previously, when representations were made to me that were not as specific as those in this situation where a group of people are in detention on account of charges for which there has been no proper process, I found myself making representations to the then Iranian ambassador. He came to my office to assure me that the Iranian constitution guarantees religious freedom. Yet, after my being told that, I am now confronted with the circumstances that the member for Leichhardt has drawn to the attention of the chamber. This situation is wrong and, what is more, it is unsustainable in terms of any logical response.

You cannot be a spy unless you have someone to whom you pass the information. Would that be because the economy of Iran is in dreadful shape, it has huge inflation and most people find it extremely difficult to survive on the income available to them? That is public knowledge. So why is it a sin if somebody has commented on that? As I said, when people have visited me they have come not to tell me what is wrong with Islam but to seek protection for their faith under international law.

I think we can welcome with considerable commitment this particular motion. The Iranian government is wrong because it alleges the activity of people but there is no attempt to prove it. That makes the following point to me: why would someone involved in a dominant religion have to be so brutal towards others who have a different point of view? If you are right, if you know that you are right and if you believe that you are right, why do you worry about the other fellow? It is just silly and yet we have this ridiculous situation, frequently tolerated by Western countries. The attitude is: 'Don't you say that about them. Don't you publish a cartoon.' It would be pretty tough if we politicians had to worry about cartoons, wouldn't it? Suppose we said, 'You published a bad cartoon. I'm going to shoot you.' In my mind, it is a religion under attack when Islamists have to use brute force to sustain their religion. It has happened in Christianity historically. SBS has just run a series on the Catholic religion—(*Time expired*)

Mr DREYFUS (Isaacs) (8.17 pm)—I rise today to support the motion urging Iran to respect the human rights of its Baha'i community. I acknowledge the members of the Baha'i community in the gallery today who are part of the Australian Baha'i community, which has flourished here since 1920. The world watches with increasing apprehension at the deterioration of religious freedom in Iran. The religious fanaticism of the Iranian regime has led to the execution of untold numbers of journalists, writers, trade unionists, gays and lesbians and other minority groups. Not least among these are the Baha'i, whose progressive traditions, such as the equality of women, do not sit well with authoritarian theocracy.

The Baha'i emphasise the spiritual unity of all humankind and speak the common language of human rights. In modern Iran, to be a member of the Baha'i faith or any other minority is to live with the fear of state sanctioned abuse hanging over your family and your community. The arrest of the seven Baha'i leaders in May 2008, which this motion refers to with serious concern, is just one example of this. The lawyer for the seven Baha'i leaders, Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi, has been refused access to their case files and has been personally intimidated since taking on their case. These arrests are only one matter in a long catalogue of oppression and mistreatment stretching back many years. In 1980, all nine members of the National Spiritual Assembly of Baha'i in Iran were abducted and are presumed dead. In 1983, 10 Baha'i women were hanged for the innocuous act of teaching religious classes to Baha'i youth. The youngest teacher, Mona Mahmudizhad, was 17 years old.

The ugly character of the current Iranian regime has been greeted with horror by many Iranians overseas. A petition by over 500 actors, writers, journalists and artists and other Iranian expatriates living around the world has apologised to the Baha'i community, expressing their dismay that the once great nation of Iran has deteriorated to this.

All the evidence suggests that the repression of the Baha'i emanates from the highest Iranian authorities. In 1991, an ominous memorandum on the 'Baha'i question' issued by the office of the Ayatollah Khomeini detailed a systematic effort to expunge all trace of the Baha'i people from the cultural fabric of Iran. Children who identified themselves as Baha'i were not allowed to be enrolled in schools; all Baha'i were to be expelled from universities. This memorandum on the Baha'i, issued by the office of the Ayatollah Khomeini, also included the following statement:

A plan must be devised to confront and destroy their cultural roots outside Iran.

In 2005 another letter from the Chairman of the Command Headquarters of the Armed Forces in Iran was sent to a number of governmental agencies, including the Revolutionary Guard, the armed forces and the police, ordering those agencies to identify adherents of the Baha'i faith and 'monitor' their activities. This is the sort of behaviour we have seen from totalitarian regimes before, and we must recognise it for what it is. The classification of minorities in this way has been the awful precursor to ethnic and cultural cleansing in the past across the world. Dehumanising any group of people and denying them rights because of their beliefs or race or religion has all too often been the first step towards physical attacks on or the murder of people in that group.

Amid this ongoing oppression, the 350,000-strong Baha'i community in Iran survives. In the face of dawn raids on their homes, the desecration of their cemeteries with bulldozers, the vilification of Baha'i children in their classrooms, the disbaring of Baha'i from designated professions and threats against Muslims who associate with Baha'i, the community has shown substantial bravery. There is no doubt that the treatment of the Baha'i community is impermissible and unacceptable by all known standards of human rights. I should mention, too, that three of the seven Baha'i leaders arrested recently have close relatives in Australia. I extend my support to all the detained Baha'i leaders and their families. (*Time expired*)

Mr SULLIVAN (Longman) (8.22 pm)—As you will be aware, Madam Deputy Speaker Vale, I was not scheduled to speak in this debate but I heard a few moments ago that there was a vacancy, so I am very pleased to be able to take this opportunity to support the motion put forward by my colleague the member for Leichhardt in respect of the circumstances that the Baha'i community find themselves in in Iran at the moment. I must apologise to Erica Cole, the secretary of the local spiritual assembly at home in Longman, as I had indicated to her that I was not going to have an opportunity to speak, so perhaps she will not be glued to the radio or the television to hear the contribution I am about to make. I welcome the members of the Baha'i community who are here today to listen to us support them in what are very troubling times for them. As my colleague has just said, a number of the people in prison, particularly the seven Baha'i that we are concerned about, have relations in Australia. It is important that we as Australians support our fellow Australians of the Baha'i faith.

These folk have been imprisoned for 12 months, essentially without charge. There have been charges levelled but no charges made—a circumstance that we just would not tolerate in our own country. I am not particularly interested in trying to force our standards onto the entire world, but in any part of the civilised world this would be intolerable. I think we have in Iran a country on the cusp, a country that ought to be doing more to look after its community, because it does want to be, I understand, a player in the world situation. Essentially what it is doing is marginalising itself as a country. We have seen other countries come from this situation in the past by recognising the error of their ways. I would hope that the error of Iran's way in relation to the treatment of the Baha'i's, not just in 2008 but for many years previously, is something that they will change.

I had the privilege—and it was a privilege—to act on behalf of a Baha'i member of my community: a fellow whose first name is Hamid, which is not an unusual first name for somebody from Iran. He is, I can stand here and say, one of the most delightful men I have met in my life. He was facing a grave injustice; he still faces it, but he faces it with great stoicism. I guess that is part of what he has learnt as a Baha'i person who escaped from Iran and came to our country via New Zealand as a refugee.

As has been said, the Baha'i people are a wonderful, brave, peace-loving people. They do not deserve for anybody to find fault. That somebody does and that somebody does it repeatedly, serially and incessantly, with great unfairness in terms of the penalties that are imposed, is something we need to stand up and talk about. The fact that so many beyond the seven who are the focus of the current campaign are currently in prison or have been in prison over recent years is something we should regret a great deal. The international Baha'i community is right to bring this campaign to us, as members of this chamber. We are right, as was the British Prime Minister, in saying to Iran that they must bring forward charges and they must give the imprisoned people the opportunity to answer those charges which, as we know, are best described as 'trumped up'. The purpose for them is hard to see other than as a form of genocide. A religious cleansing of Iran could be the only context we could be looking at. As I think the member from the opposition mentioned earlier, who are they spying for? What are they going to tell them? (*Time expired*)

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. DS Vale)—Order! The time allotted for this debate has expired. The debate is adjourned and the resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.

GRIEVANCE DEBATE

Debate resumed from 16 March.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. DS Vale)—The question is:

That grievances be noted.