



ONE COUNTRY

"The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens" – Bahá'u'lláh

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South Asian conference on education stresses rights of every girl and boy

Organized by the Bahá'í International Community with the support of UNICEF, a regional conference emphasizes the need for moral education, higher levels of government funding, better mechanisms for community participation, and public-private partnerships.

NEW DELHI — Perhaps the most moving speech at an international conference on education here came from a young student from Nepal.

In a presentation at the "Education: The Right of Every Girl and Boy" conference in December, ten-year-old Akansha Dhungyha told of the deep discrimination she faced as a girl in her home village of Bhaktapur.

"In my village, they send the boy to school thinking that he will take care of the parents when they get older, and that the girl will go to another home when she is married," said Akansha, explaining why girls are often held back from school.

If parents do send the girls to school, she added, they enroll them in lesser quality government schools, while the boys are sent to private institutions.

"And there are a lot of girls who leave the school because of the lack of toilets," she said. "Or the parents take the girls out of school and ask them to get water."

Akansha's experiences highlighted some of the main points made by adults at the conference, which was organized by the Bahá'í International Community with the support of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and other international agencies and organizations.

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Akansha Dhungyha, 10, of Nepal, speaks while Shireen Vakil Miller, an education advisor for Save the Children, UK, looks on, at the "Education: The Right of Every Girl and Boy" conference in December.

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Education: The Right of Every Girl and Boy

[Editor's note: The following Perspective editorial is adapted from an address delivered by Bani Dugal, the Principal Representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations, on 17 December 2003 at the "Education: The Right of Every Girl and Boy" conference, New Delhi. (See page one.) See http://www.onecountry.org/e153/Education_speech.htm for the full speech.]

Philosophers have a phrase — "enlightened self-interest" — which they apply to those situations where choosing the less obvious or even slightly more painful course makes us much better off in the long run.

We all face choices like this each day. Is it better to skip a tasty sweet and thus save money and prevent cavities in our teeth? What about purchasing a shiny new sports car instead of saving for retirement?

Governments and societies face similar choices. Do we spend on the army or agriculture (the old "guns or butter" dilemma)? In developing societies, where resources are especially short, the choices are even more difficult.

There is perhaps no better example of "enlightened self-interest" in the world today than the education of children. By every measure, every study, and every rational thought process, the investment made today in the education of girls and boys pays dividends that will last far into the future — and make the world a much better place.

Yet, according to UNICEF's latest "State of the World's Children" for 2004, some 121 million children receive little or no schooling.

This is a hard fact to reckon with, given not only the overall social benefits of education, but also the understanding that education is a basic human right.

The right to education is outlined in some of our most important and fundamental human rights agreements, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These and other treaties obligate governments to ensure that education is available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptable.

Education is not only a fundamental right, it also underpins the exercise of all other human rights. For without literacy and a basic education, how can people even be aware of their rights?

There is another important aspect to this picture: the gap between the education of boys and girls. According to UNICEF, of those 121 million children who receive little or no schooling, some 65 million — the majority — are girls. The so-called "gender gap" varies greatly from country to country, and so this statistic does not tell the entire problem. In Africa, and in some countries in Asia, the gap is much larger, hitting 20 percent in some cases.

Yet, it is through the education of girls that society's "enlightened self-interest" really comes through. For when the investment is made to educate girls, a number of significant benefits emerge.

These points are made in the UNICEF report. It says that when girls are educated, they are themselves as mothers more likely to send their own children to school. When girls are educated, their families are healthier and less likely to be poor. And when girls are educated, they are less likely to be drawn into exploitative work outside the home, or face sexual abuse or violence.

The Bahá'í International Community has long recognized the importance of educating girls. In its statements to the United Nations, the Community has advocated giving girls a priority in education — pointing out that by educating girls, future mothers are better equipped to educate both girls and boys in the next generation.

This understanding, which the new UNICEF report now presents as a matter of common sense, was stated in the Bahá'í writings more than 90 years ago. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said: "[T]he education of women is of greater importance than the education of men, for they are the mothers of the race, and mothers rear the children. The first teachers of children are the mothers. Therefore, they must be capably trained in order to educate both sons and daughters."

Of course, in the best of all possible worlds, everyone — girls and boys — would get the best possible education. But because of the gap in the educational opportunities presented to girls — and because of the long history of oppression against women and girls in general — it is important to reflect on the special importance of the girl child.

We must stop and ask ourselves: why do we not educate more girls? Why is the gap so large? What is holding us back from pursuing our enlightened self-interest? In other words, what is the gleaming bit of candy that diverts us from pursuing the best course?

UNICEF gives a number of reasons. The key issue is the failure of societies to allocate enough resources to education in general. As a result, when choices are made, girls are often left out. As well, policy makers, educators, and families simply don't understand the critical importance of educating girls in terms of society's overall development and/or their own family's best interest.

But these answers only scratch the surface. The reason girls are left out when such choices have to be made is, in fact, because of the underlying discrimination against women and girls that persists in many societies (some would say in every society).

Here, in India, one only need look at the practice of fetal selection to find just one example of the depth and persistence of discrimination against women. But almost every society faces similar inequalities at some level.

Education for all — and especially for girls — is not only a human right — it is also in the best interests of society as a whole. It is, indeed, perhaps the single best development strategy we have.

We must remember, however, that access to free education alone is insufficient to keep girls in school. What girls can do with their schooling determines the attractiveness of it. If women cannot be employed or self-employed, own land, open a bank account, or get a bank loan, if they are denied freedom to marry or not to marry, or if they are deprived of political representation, education alone will have little effect on their plight. The principle of the indivisibility of human rights necessitates looking at education in relation to all other rights and freedoms.

Yet, despite the signing of numerous international documents on human rights over the years, and the millions — if not billions — of dollars in international funding, much remains to be done to ensure education for all.

We must, then, look deep inside our-

selves and ask what are the real barriers that prevent the advancement of women and the proper and just education of girls.

On this score, we must examine those social and cultural issues that have, traditionally and historically, led the majority of people to value men and their contributions to society over women and their contributions.

It is these traditions and cultural factors that are that shiny bit of candy or gleaming sports car that prevent us from seeing our own best long-term interest.

In some societies, for example, families see boys as future farm workers (and/or parental caretakers) — and so they value them more than girls. But the reality is that in our globalizing, information-based society, it is brain and not brawn that more reliably ensures a family's long-term prosperity.

On a societal level, too, boys are also often viewed as future leaders — and so more deserving of education. This is, of course, a warped view in which discrimination folds back on itself. Women are certainly equally capable of leading. In any event, however, studies show that even when boys become the leaders, they are better leaders if their mothers were better educated.

When you think about it, the idea of enlightened self-interest stems from what is essentially a spiritual faculty. The phrase itself stems from the word enlightenment — which invokes that power of vision that enables the human mind to see the future and imagine things in a different way, and then to act so as to bring about that transformation.

Again, the Bahá'í sacred writings state: "The world of humanity has two wings — one is women and the other men. Not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly. Should one wing remain weak, flight is impossible. Not until the world of women becomes equal to the world of men in the acquisition of virtues and perfections, can success and prosperity be attained as they ought to be."

It is through the power of spiritual insight and inspiration that we can reach deep into the roots of those wrong-headed and illusory ideas about women's inequality that prevent us as families and societies from achieving our full potential.

Only then can we collectively learn to see beyond those prejudices and traditions that have led us to shortchange girls. Only then can we collectively realize the long-term benefits that will come from providing all children with an equal and quality education.*

It is through the power of spiritual insight and inspiration that we can reach deep into the roots of those wrong-headed and illusory ideas about women's inequality that prevent us as families and societies from achieving our full potential.

The United Nations grapples with the idea of a global “information society”

Hailed as a major new direction for the United Nations, the World Summit on the Information Society focused not on a single issue area, but rather on emerging information and communications technologies that cut across many issues in the global arena.

GENEVA — Karanja Gakio saw early on that information and communications technologies held huge promise for development and advancement on his native continent of Africa.

In 1995, Mr. Gakio co-founded Africa Online, the first commercial Internet service provider in Kenya and a continuing Internet presence in eight African countries today. “We realized that this was a revolution that was going to happen whether or not we got involved, so we decided to jump in right at the beginning,” he said.

Curiously, he said, some African governments initially tried to block their service. “They were scared of the Internet and email and what it might do,” said Mr. Gakio. “They worried about competition with government-owned telephone companies, or about the transmission of information without their ability to monitor it.”

“But that has all changed now,” added Mr. Gakio. “Now Africans are worried they

are going to be left out.”

Mr. Gakio was among the thousands of Africans and other representatives from the developing world at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), a major United Nations conference on information and communications technologies held here 10-12 December 2003.

The Summit was hailed by participants and observers as a major new direction for the United Nations, inasmuch as it focused not on a single issue area, but rather on emerging technologies that cut across many issues in the global arena.

“This Summit is unique,” said UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in an opening address here. “Where most global conferences focus on global threats, this one will consider how best to use a new global asset.”

Some 176 governments sent delegations, as did more than 481 non-governmental organizations (NGOs), some 98 businesses and corporations, and 631 media outlets. In all, more than 11,000 delegates participated in the WSIS, and some 30,000 people visited an accompanying exhibition, known as the ICT4D (Information and Communications Technologies for Development) Platform.

At the Summit, governments adopted a major new Declaration of Principles and an accompanying Plan of Action. While paying homage to the principles established in the great UN global conferences of the 1990s, such as the “universality, indivisibility, interdependence and interrelation of all human rights” and the “achievement of sustainable development,” the Declaration also sought to establish a new vision for a global “information society” that is “people-centered, inclusive and development-oriented.”

“We recognize that education, knowledge, information and communication are at the core of human progress, endeavour and well-being,” states the Declaration. “Further, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have an immense impact on virtually all aspects of our lives. The rapid progress of these technologies opens com-



The Bahá’í International Community’s delegation to the WSIS. Left to right: Michael Quinn of the United States; Bahiyiyh Chaffers, permanent representative of the Bahá’í International Community to the UN; Laina Raveendran Greene of Singapore; and Karanja Gakio of Botswana, one of the founders of Africa Online.

pletely new opportunities to attain higher levels of development.

“The capacity of these technologies to reduce many traditional obstacles, especially those of time and distance, for the first time in history makes it possible to use the potential of these technologies for the benefit of millions of people in all corners of the world.”

Used properly, the Declaration said, these new technologies “can be a powerful instrument, increasing productivity, generating economic growth, job creation and employability and improving the quality of life of all.”

However — and this point summarizes perhaps the main reason for holding the Summit — the Declaration also acknowledged that currently “the benefits of the information technology revolution are today unevenly distributed between the developed and developing countries and within societies.”

The “Digital Divide”

This is the so-called “digital divide” and its implications and impact were hotly discussed, both at the Summit and in the preparatory meetings that led up to it.

“The digital divide is essentially a development disparity and a gap impeding the dialogue of civilizations,” said Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, in the Summit’s opening session.

Zambia’s minister of communications and transport, Bates Mamuyamba, said Africa was particularly affected by the digital divide. “We are struggling to provide for the basic needs of our people who are affected by poverty and social problems, such as HIV/AIDs, and underdevelopment,” said Mr. Mamuyamba.

Mr. Mamuyamba indicated that the problem is social and structural. “Many of our people have never made a phone call despite being within easy walking distance of a telephone,” he said. “Universal access to information and knowledge cannot be obtained without the building of the relevant technological infrastructure.”

To close the divide, Mr. Mamuyamba and others called for the establishment of a “digital solidarity fund,” whereby developed countries would pay into a special fund to finance infrastructure improvements in poor nations.

Some Western nations, however, said there was no need for a special fund for ICT, given the many other sources of international development assistance.

“We do not believe that a new international fund could tackle the real underlying



problems,” said Stephen Timms, minister of energy, e-commerce, and postal services in the United Kingdom. “It might indeed divert funds away from other areas of poverty reduction which developing countries have themselves identified as priorities.”

In the end, the idea of such a fund was put off until the second session of the Summit, scheduled to be held in Tunisia in November 2005. (In a unique feature for a UN summit, the WSIS is split into two segments.)

Another unresolved issue, also put off until the Tunisian Summit session, concerned whether the United Nations should have more to say about how the Internet is governed. Currently, the Internet is managed by a loose network of non-profit corporations and boards. These various agencies set technical standards for the Internet and parcel out domain names. In terms of content, however, there is no governance over the Internet. At the Summit, some countries indicated they want more control.

“Measures should be taken to actively and effectively prevent the use of information technologies and resources for pornographic, violent and terrorist purposes as well as for criminal activities endangering national security so as to ensure the healthy development of information and networks,” said Wang Zudong, minister of information industry for the People’s Republic of China.

Other countries stressed freedom of expression. “We want the global information society to be based on universal respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms,” said Sergio Marchi, Canada’s ambassador to

Yoshio Utsumi, Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union and the World Summit on the Information Society, addresses the closing plenary session of the Summit on 12 December 2003.

“This Summit is unique. Where most global conferences focus on global threats, this one will consider how best to use a new global asset.”

– UN Secretary General Kofi Annan

Civil Society innovates for influence at WSIS

GENEVA — As has been the case at every recent United Nations global conference, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and representatives of civil society played an active and influential role in the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

Indeed, some observers said civil society had its largest impact yet at a major UN conference, thanks to several major innovations in the procedures for interaction with governments at the WSIS. By one count, some 60 percent of the language and/or ideas in the final documents originated with civil society.

“This was the beginning of a new process,” said Renate D. Bloem, president of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Status with the United Nations (CONGO). “We had a consistent influence and we can see the handwriting of our contributions in the final documents.”

Ms. Bloem and others said among the most important innovations was the establishment of a Civil Society Bureau, which is designed to serve as an organizing agency for ideas and proposals from civil society and a conduit for transmitting them to governments.

Indeed, for the first time at a United Nations conference, civil society representatives were allowed into government negotiating sessions at preparatory committee meetings and given a chance to address items under discussion on a paragraph-by-paragraph basis.

“This has never occurred before at any other UN conference on the global level,” said Ms. Bloem, who also served as president of the Civil Society Bureau during the WSIS.

Louise Lassonde, coordinator of the Civil Society Division of the WSIS Secretariat said governments were willing to allow civil society representatives into their negotiating sessions because of a de facto compromise, underlying the Bureau’s creation, that defined civil society as collaborators instead of critics in the Summit’s process.

“What we tried to do is invent a new rule of the game, which moved from conflictual relationships with governments and the other stakeholders to a common understanding of the specific role and responsibility of each,” said Ms. Lassonde. “Governments accepted that civil society has expertise and knowledge and a hands-on approach [that can help solve problems]. And civil society acknowledged that governments were going to make the final decisions about issues before the Summit.”

Further, said Ms. Lassonde, the mechanics of the Bureau forced civil society to refine its comments and present them as an operational consensus. Among the new mechanisms was the creation of a “content and themes” group that coordinated input from the civil society caucuses into

the government negotiating sessions.

“For governments, instead of 3,000 interlocutors, they had one,” said Ms. Lassonde. “And so the governments were more willing to say to civil society that we recognize you as a partner, that we recognize that you have good advice, and so we accept that you can sit in the governmental meeting.”

Ms. Lassonde noted, however, that the arrangement was a “de facto” one, and that official conference rules of procedures were not actually changed. “That would have set a precedent for other UN conferences,” she said, and governments were not willing to go that far.

Ms. Bloem said civil society interactions with governments were the key to changing the Summit from its initial focus on the technical issues related to information and communications technologies to a focus on how such technologies can be used to advance social and economic development.

“We completely turned the Summit around from a technology basis to putting the human being at the center of the whole thing,” said Ms. Bloem. “The information society is not just about creating markets for software companies, but it is about the well-being of human beings.”

Guillaume Chenevière, president of the World Radio and Television Council (WRTVC), agreed that civil society had a huge impact on changing the Summit’s perspective from technical to social.

“At the end of the day,” said Mr. Chenevière, “the fact that the United Nations is now tackling the issue of the ‘information society’ in the broad definition that has been agreed in Geneva — ‘information’ meaning information and knowledge, not only wires and bytes — can usefully contribute to the necessary redefinition of the UN mission in a globalized world.”

Another innovation at the WSIS was the absence of a separate non-governmental forum. Instead, NGO and civil society delegates focused all their energies on lobbying and interaction at the Summit venue itself. At previous UN conferences, there has nearly always been a separate NGO forum; at the same time, such forums have usually been physically separated from the main governmental conference, thus limiting access in many respects.

“Such forums were often a fantastic playground for civil society to come together and bring great ideas forward, but not always in a way that made a real impact,” said Ms. Bloem.

Ms. Bloem also stressed that the interactions between civil society and governments were not perfect at the WSIS. “There were and remain a lot of questions,” she said. “But I would take this as a process that can be developed and applied at any upcoming UN summit.” ❁

the United Nations in Geneva, in Canada's statement to the Summit. "Among those, freedom of opinion and freedom of expression are clearly fundamental and underlie the creation, communication, and use of information and knowledge."

Among other things, the Plan of Action adopted by governments at the Summit seeks to encourage governments, in partnership with the private sector and civil society, to connect villages, health centers, and educational institutions with ICTs. "The effective participation of governments and all stakeholders is vital in developing the Information Society, requiring cooperation and partnerships among all of them," states the Plan.

The Power of Information

John Gage, Chief Researcher for Sun Microsystems Laboratories, a major US computer manufacturer, said the WSIS was in many ways less contentious than other major UN conferences because it focused mainly on a set of technologies, rather than an issue area, and there was general agreement that those technologies could be important in solving a wide variety of problems.

"Everyone agrees on the fundamental power of information to transform society," said Dr. Gage, even if they have slightly different perspectives. "Businesses think about creating these powerful tools and getting paid for them; ministers think about using these powerful tools to transform health and education; and NGOs and civil society see these same tools as transforming the interaction of their citizens with their governments and with businesses."

Mr. Gakio, co-founder of Africa Online, likewise said ICT has a tremendous capacity for stimulating social change. "There is something different about it from other development tools," said Mr. Gakio, who is now director of Cyberplex Holdings, Ltd., in Gaborone, Botswana, an Internet consulting company. "It has a multiplier effect. And it can bring people together to create their own knowledge and do their own research."

Mr. Gakio was present at the WSIS as part of the Bahá'í International Community's delegation to the Summit. He, along with several other Bahá'ís from around the world with expertise in ICT issues, came to showcase the possibilities for inclusiveness when ICTs are properly used at the global level, said Bahiyyih Chaffers, a permanent representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations.

"Our delegation was composed of people who are both highly regarded experts in information and communication technologies — and active members of a religious community that promotes world citizenship," said Ms. Chaffers.

She noted that in addition to Mr. Gakio, the Bahá'í delegation was composed of a top-ranked entrepreneur and Internet consultant from Singapore and a vice-president with CISCO Systems who is of Native American origin.

"Bahá'ís believe that the emergence of a global information society is merely one aspect of the inevitable coming together of humanity in the construction of a just and peaceful global civilization," said Ms. Chaffers.

"We see information and communication technologies as an important mechanism for communication and consultation among all peoples, groups and governments, especially at the global level," said Ms. Chaffers.

Other Bahá'í groups and organizations also participated in the Summit.

The European Bahá'í Business Forum (EBBF), for example, sponsored a workshop at the Summit titled "Toward a Knowledge-based, Sustainable World Information Society: The Role of Good Governance and Business." It featured a panel composed of Dr. Augusto Lopez-Claro, chief economist and director of the World Competitiveness Program of the World Economic Forum; Dr. Arthur Lyon-Dahl, president of the International Environment Forum and a former senior advisor to the United Nations Environment Programme; and Dr. Ramin Khadem, chief financial officer of Immarsat, London.*

"We see information and communication technologies as an important mechanism for communication and consultation among all peoples, groups and governments, especially at the global level."

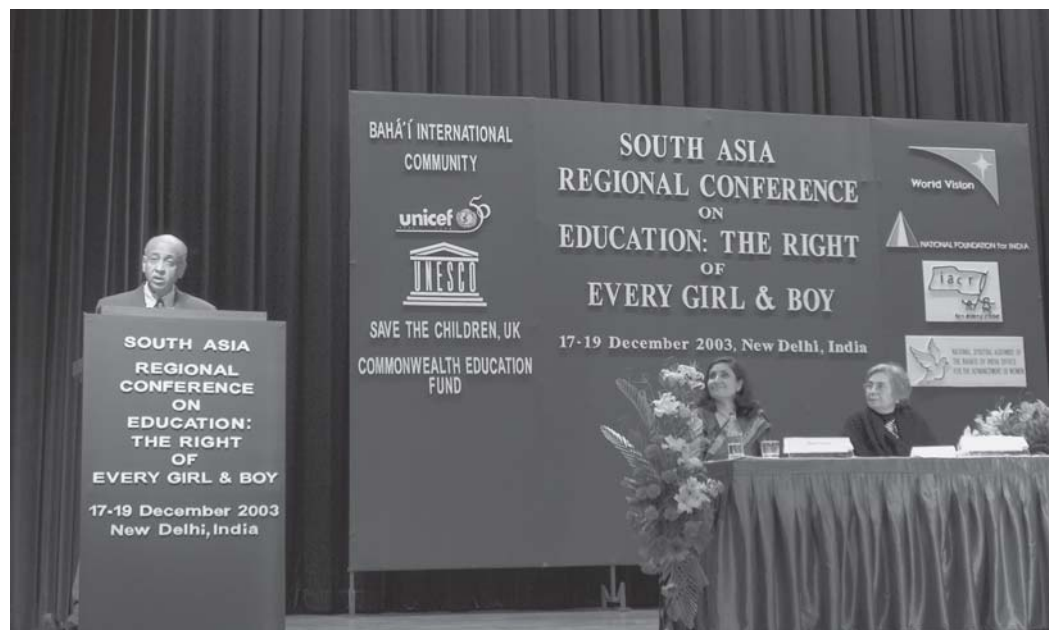
**– Bahiyyih Chaffers,
Bahá'í International
Community**

One distinctive feature of the WSIS was the participation of the news media as "stakeholders" rather than merely as observers. Here, at the International Federation of Journalists' "Press Corner," journalists discuss their point of view in relation to the issues before the Summit.



South Asian conference on education stresses rights of every girl and boy

Dr. Sadig Rasheed, UNICEF's Regional Director for South Asia, left, gave the inaugural address at the "Education: The Right of Every Girl and Boy" conference, held in New Delhi, 17-19 December 2003.



Education, continued from page one

The aim of the conference was to strengthen and establish networks and partnerships among organizations in South Asia that seek to accelerate the provision of universal quality basic education to all children, and especially to girls.

Some 150 governmental officials, international agency representatives, non-governmental activists, academics, and other civil society representatives participated in the event, which was held 17-19 December 2003 at the Bahá'í National Center (known as Bahá'í House) in New Delhi.

In speeches and panel discussions, they recommended a series of reforms in the educational systems of South Asia. Among other things, participants stressed the need for a stronger emphasis on moral education, higher levels of government funding, better mechanisms to increase community participation, and greater efforts to ensure local control over schools.

The aim of the conference was to strengthen and establish networks and partnerships among organizations in South Asia that seek to accelerate the provision of universal quality basic education to all children, and especially to girls.

"We here in South Asia are challenged by high numbers of children out of school," said Erma Manoncourt, a deputy director for

the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), India, noting that some 43 million children are out of school in the region, and that the majority of those — some 26 million — are girls. "It is only by increasing the enrollment and retention of girls that we can reach the goal [of universal education]."

In that context, participants engaged in a wide discussion of the cultural and economic barriers that prevent both girls and boys in South Asia from going to school. They also discussed the kinds of models and practices that were proving successful at increasing the number of school enrollments — as well as the quality of education that students receive.

Indeed, one of the key points to emerge from the conference was the idea that "quantity" and "quality" go hand in hand in efforts to achieve education for all.

"When we talk about access to school, unless there is good quality schooling, the demand for education will not be there, especially for those whose participation in education we are most concerned about," said Geeta Gandhi Kingdon, an economist from Oxford University who has studied the

education system in India extensively.

Participants discussed a number of ways of improving educational quality. Among the steps that were identified were updating primary school curricula, increasing community participation, and giving localities more control over schools.

Another recurring theme was the importance of moral education. “We really need to keep in mind: What is the purpose of education, what are we sending children to school for, and what kind of society do we want to create?” said Shireen Vakil Miller, an education advisor for Save the Children, UK.

Added Mervyn Fernando, the director of SUBODHI, Institute for Integral Education, in Sri Lanka, “School education does not prepare a child to live. It prepares a child for a job with certain skills. But even after grade 12 or 13, the child goes into society very ill-equipped to live life as a mature, successful citizen, because a lot of important things have been left out of our education system.”

A focus on girls

The conference opened on Wednesday, 17 December with prayers and readings from many of the world’s religions at the Bahá’í House of Worship here. Afterwards, in the House of Worship’s visitor center, prominent officials and experts outlined the challenges and benefits of achieving education for all.

Dr. Sadig Rasheed, UNICEF’s Regional Director for South Asia, gave the inaugural address, stressing the overall strategy of putting girls first as a means of increasing educational access for everyone.

“We know that some of the things that can be done to keep a girl in school, such as better sanitation, a friendlier protective environment, and secure, violence- and harassment-free, surroundings, also benefit boys,” said Dr. Rasheed. “By looking after the most vulnerable, we make conditions better for all. By reaching those who have the most difficulty in accessing education, we assist the path for everyone.”

Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá’í International Community to the United Nations, talked about the importance of education — especially for girls — as something that is in the “enlightened self-interest” of society as a whole.

“Education for all — and especially for girls — is not only a human right — it is also in the best interests of society as a

whole,” said Ms. Dugal. “It is, indeed, perhaps the single best development strategy we have.”

Ms. Dugal noted that the Bahá’í sacred writings stress the importance of educating girls — a point she said had been confirmed by recent educational and sociological research. Educated girls are healthier and more prosperous, and their families and children are likewise healthier and more prosperous.

“By every measure, every study, and every rational thought process, the investment made today in the education of girls and boys pays dividends that will last far into the future — and make the world a much better place,” Ms. Dugal said.

On Thursday, 18 December, in panel discussions and workshops, participants agreed that a focus on educating girls has many advantages.

“We need girls’ education because it is right and it is the key to social well-being and economic development,” said Ms. Manoncourt of UNICEF. “We know from hard, empirical evidence that girls that are educated have healthier and better educated children.”

Participants came from a wide range of organizations. They included not only NGOs and government representatives, but also representatives of teachers’ unions and private industry. Speaking at center is Dr. Medha Nanivadekar, director of the Centre for Women’s Studies at Shivaji University, Kolhapur, India.





Razia Sultan Ismail of the Global Network of Religions for Children, left, and Bani Dugal, UN representative of the Bahá'í International Community, at the conference's closing session.

"In much of South Asia, parents ... visualize the girl as a housewife and any economic return to the parents does not accrue to them – it accrues to the in-laws, when the girl is married and goes to live with them."

– Geeta Gandhi Kingdon, Oxford researcher

Participants also discussed the cultural barriers to educating girls. "In much of South Asia, parents continue to envisage a strict division of labor between girls and boys," said Dr. Kingdon of Oxford. "They visualize the girl as a housewife and any economic return to the parents does not accrue to them — it accrues to the in-laws, when the girl is married and goes to live with them."

Any investment in education also leaves the household when the girl is married, said Dr. Kingdon. "This is compounded throughout South Asia by the existence of the dowry system, where the girl's parents must accumulate a dowry for the girl's marriage."

Sheila Dikshit, Chief Minister of Delhi, said that India must work harder to overcome cultural preconceptions that cause discrimination against girls and prevent their education.

"We are supposed to be a country of wise men, and yet we are one of the most illiterate countries in the world," said Ms. Dikshit. "We have states where the girl fetus is still killed. Why are families choosing to kill the girl child even before she is born?"

"Despite the fact that my vegetable seller has a cell phone around his neck, he still does not think the girl at home needs to be educated," said Ms. Dikshit. "We must make education a habit."

There were five South Asian countries represented at the conference — Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka — and participants representing those governments said all had a strong commitment to the goal of ensuring adequate basic education for all

children in their societies, while acknowledging their shortcomings.

"Education is a fundamental human right for all people," said Jaskaur Meena, Minister of State for the Department of Women and Child Development in India's Ministry of Human Resource Development. "Nonetheless, we have a long way to go."

Ms. Meena said that in the South Asia region some 40 percent of all children in primary school drop out before reaching grade 5, that half the population in the region lives in severe poverty, causing a low enrollment rate, and that rural schools are often remote and poor in quality.

She said that India was nevertheless committed to providing education for all, and, to that end, has recently launched a major program, *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*, which aims to provide quality basic education for all by the year 2010 by turning schools over to community ownership.

But some NGO representatives at the conference questioned the ultimate commitment of the governments, given the high rates of illiteracy and unschooled children in the region.

"It boils down to a matter of political intent," said Sanjiv Kaura, national convenor of an Indian-based NGO, the National Alliance for the Right to Education and Equity. "We need to try to put pressure on the government to increase resources for education."

Emphasis on collaboration

Others stressed the importance of partnerships between governments, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector.

"What we need are partnerships," said S. P. Bhagwat, associate director for government and media relations for World Vision, India. "None of us can really do it alone. We need partnerships between governments and civil society and NGOs, and corporations."

Amit Kaushik, director of the Department of Elementary Education and Literacy in India, said NGOs could be especially effective at reaching un-enrolled children on the margins of society.

"Most of the children who are out of schools are in groups that are socially marginalized or in scheduled castes," said Mr. Kaushik. "They are working children, children in the streets, children in very difficult circumstances, and so forth."

Mr. Kaura and others also said one of the

best ways to improve educational access and quality is to increase community participation and to speed up the process of turning control of schools over to localities.

"It has been our experience that those schools work the best which are owned by the local community," said Mr. Kaushik, of the Department of Elementary Education and Literacy in India.

"The involvement of the community is vital," said Harun Ur Rashid, deputy director of the Universal Education Program at Proshika, a large Bangladesh-based development NGO. "If the community understands it is their school, the motivation to drop out is less."

One significant feature of the conference, said participants, was its attempt to bring together educational specialists and activists

from a wide range of organizations, including not only NGOs and government representatives, but also representatives of teachers' unions and private industry.

"This is a very diverse group of people," said Dr. Kingdon. "This is the first time, for example, that the teachers' unions have been invited to a conference like this." In many parts of South Asia, teachers' unions are seen as resistant to change — and private industry is seen as out only for profit.

Ramesh Joshi, deputy general secretary of the All India Federation of Teacher's Organizations, said he appreciated the inclusive nature of the December conference. "Teachers' organizations are powerful instruments of change and they should be taken into the partnership rather than taken as opponents," said Mr. Joshi. *

UN again expresses concern over human rights in Iran

UNITED NATIONS — For the 16th time in 19 years, the United Nations General Assembly expressed concern over continuing human rights violations in Iran, also making specific mention of the "continuing discrimination" faced by Bahá'ís and other religious minorities there.

By a vote of 68 to 54, with 51 abstentions, the General Assembly approved on 22 December 2003 a resolution calling on Iran to abide by its obligations under international human rights instruments, such as the International Covenant on Human Rights.

The resolution specifically expressed "serious concern" over "continuing discrimination against persons belonging to minorities, including against the Bahá'ís, Christians, Jews and Sunnis, including cases of arbitrary arrest and detention; denial of free worship or publicly carrying out communal affairs and disregard of property rights..."

Bani Dugal, the Principal Representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations, expressed gratitude to those nations that cosponsored and voted in favor of the resolution, which also calls on Iran to "eliminate all forms of discrimination based on religious grounds."

"We laud those countries that recognize the importance of continued pressure on Iran and that have taken a principled stand," said Ms. Dugal. "International support remains the key to protecting the long oppressed Bahá'í community of Iran."

Since the Islamic Republic of Iran was

established in 1979, the 300,000-member Bahá'í community of Iran has faced ongoing and systematic persecution. In the early 1980s, more than 200 Bahá'ís were killed, hundreds were imprisoned, and thousands were deprived of jobs and education, solely because of their religious belief.

Although killings and imprisonments have abated in recent years — in large part thanks to international pressure — Iran's Bahá'ís remain victims of systematic oppression. Bahá'ís continue to be deprived of employment, property, education, and the right to freedom of assembly and worship.

Two years ago, for the first time in 19 years, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights failed to pass a resolution expressing concern about human rights in Iran, an event that ended UN-sponsored monitoring of the Iran's human rights situation.

"Since the end of international monitoring, the situation of the Bahá'í community has not improved — as was hoped by those countries that urged a 'dialogue' with Iran on human rights," said Ms. Dugal. "Indeed, if anything, the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran has deteriorated, with an increase in short term arrests and detentions, the confiscation of more properties, and continued harassment of Bahá'í teachers and students.

"For Iran's beleaguered Bahá'ís," she said, "a resolution from the United Nations is a sign of hope and a source of comfort, confirmation that the international community indeed stands behind its words on human rights." *

"For Iran's beleaguered Bahá'ís, a resolution from the United Nations is a sign of hope and a source of comfort, confirmation that the international community indeed stands behind its words on human rights."

– Bani Dugal, Bahá'í International Community

In Canada, a start-up festival highlights creativity of Bahá'í filmmakers

EDMONTON, Canada — As film festivals go, the “Cause and Effect Bahá'í Film Festival” was certainly not among the largest, most famous, or even best publicized of such exhibitions.

But for what it says about the state of artistic creativity in the worldwide Bahá'í community, the November event is noteworthy in many respects.

Organized by three Canadian Bahá'ís, CEBfest 2003, as it was called, was the first film festival known to have showcased films that focus on Bahá'í-oriented themes.

“The number of filmmakers who are out there making Bahá'í films, or who are making films influenced by the Bahá'í Faith, has surprised everyone,” said Tobin Smith, one of the organizers of CEBfest and a filmmaker himself.

Tobin Smith, one of the organizers of the CEBfest event, and a film director himself. He is shown here giving directions to a film crew during a recent shooting session.



“We thought there was a chance we would be getting, maybe, five or six submissions,” he said. “We ended up getting 15 or 20.”

What's more, said Mr. Smith and others, the range and depth of the submissions were surprising. “The diversity of the films was quite inspiring,” said Tara Rout, another of the Festival's organizers. “The Festival defied our own expectations in terms of the caliber of the art that was shown. The films were truly thought-provoking and entertaining.”

More than for entertainment, however, the Festival was organized with a distinct purpose: to try to promote positive values in filmmaking.

“The goal of religions is to better the world, and the only real way of doing that is through changing the hearts of people,” said Ms. Rout, a lifelong Bahá'í. “And perhaps the best way to reach people's hearts is through art. And film is currently the most accessible art medium for the general public. So in terms of enlightening and spiritualizing the planet, we think film is an ideal means.”

Most of the submissions were documentaries. “They are all in some way about the history of the Faith or a personal journey within the Faith,” said Mr. Smith. They document that “Bahá'ís put a lot of time into our beliefs, that Faith for us is not a one-day-a-week kind of thing.”

Gretchen Jordan-Bastow, who submitted a film about Navajo sand painting, said that the event provided a rare opportunity for people to see in one place films that demonstrate moral, social, and spiritual values.

“Today the media are full of news of murder, war, and various violent acts — this beats down society and is a discouragement to the human spirit,” said Ms. Jordan-Bastow, who has worked as a producer and director for more than 16 years.

“Bahá'í films can bring to the forefront all the good work that is being done, and demonstrate the triumph of the human spirit,” said Ms. Jordan-Bastow.

“From my understanding, the Bahá'í concept of art is inclusive rather than exclusive,”

said Angela Rout, 26, who presented a film at the festival. "It is inspiring, useful, a part of everyday life. It enhances our world, reminds us of our true purpose and of our noble character.

"The spiritual nature [of the festival] is quite different from mainstream festivals and this is a unique opportunity," said Angela Rout, who is Tara Rout's sister.

Another participating filmmaker, Ramin Eshraghi-Yazdi, said films can be tools for social advancement. "Art must have a purpose and function beyond itself — either to provoke thought, encourage consultation or elevate the spirit through aesthetic form," he said.

Tara Rout said that about half of the films presented received funding from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Canada Film Board, and/or Vision TV, Canada's leading multi-faith and multicultural television network. Among these, some also received funding from the Bahá'í community of Canada. Others were low-budget, "personal" films, shot mostly with small digital video cameras and edited on desktop computers.

Most submissions came this year from North America. And not all came from Bahá'ís. The organizers hope to draw from a global field next year, as word of the Festi-

val spreads.

Every new religion has, of course, stimulated a flourishing of the arts. Whether in the paintings inspired by Christianity, the architecture developed under Islam, or the statues of Hinduism and Buddhism, every new revelation has inspired in its followers some kind of artistic expression.

Bahá'í artists have established international reputations in painting (Mark Toby), pottery (Bernard Leach), and, certainly, music (Dizzy Gillespie, and Seals and Crofts, among others). CEBfest organizers hope that the Festival — which they hope to organize on an annual basis — can help to spur a new movement for Bahá'í-inspired cinema.

"What we want to do is try to encourage a change in filmmaking in general, so that there are more films that are inspiring and aimed at changing the world," said Tara Rout, who calls herself simply a "film enthusiast" and who is also a 25-year-old law student at the University of Alberta.

"I think all of the films here have something to offer in terms of education or insight or hope," Ms. Rout said. "It is not one film that is going to change everything, but maybe these little films can spark something that hasn't been thought about before."*

"The best way to reach people's hearts is through art. And film is currently the most accessible art medium for the general public. So in terms of enlightening and spiritualizing the planet, we think film is an ideal means."

— Tara Rout, CEBfest organizer

Films presented at the Cause and Effect Bahá'í Film Festival 2003:

- *The Trials of Eve* by Gretchen Jordan-Bastow — Myth and story-telling combine Canadian West-Coast imagery with the Adam and Eve story to create a positive vision of change and transformation for both women and men.

- *Morning Stars: A Profile of Kevin Locke* by Shar Mitchell — Kevin Locke, an internationally renowned hoop dancer from the Sioux Nation, says that the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith are the fulfillment of his people's traditional prophecies. His flute music, hoop dancing and oral traditions express some aspects of his culture.

- *What Hath God Wrought!: A History of the First Century of the Bahá'í Dispensation* by Joel Cotten — This documentary tells the story of the fulfillment of 19th century expectations and reveals a connection among the messianic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá'í Faith.

- *Seasonal Soil...Singing Stones* by Jennifer Maas — The story of a diverse neighborhood in Seattle where a park to commemorate Cesar Chavez, the Latino civil rights leader, is being built.

- *Navajo Sand Painting: The Healing Tradition* by Gretchen Jordan-Bastow — Native American Bahá'í Mitchell Silas takes the viewer on a journey into the ancient world of the Navajo healer and demonstrates the connection of native traditions with the Bahá'í revelation.

- *'Abdu'l-Bahá: Glimpses of Perfection* by Faramarz

Rohani — Visuals and narration depict stories about 'Abdu'l-Bahá's trip to North America in 1912.

- *A New Faith is Born* by Faramarz Rohani — An account of the growth of the Bahá'í community from a small, persecuted band of believers into a vibrant, international body.

- *Sherbrooke Bahá'í Youth Congress* by Tobin Smith — In 2001, more than 1,000 Bahá'í youth from all over the world gathered in Sherbrooke, Quebec, to celebrate the international Bahá'í Youth movement. This film communicates the spirit of that event and of the youth movement itself.

- *I Think You'll Like It Here* by Angela Rout — A young Bahá'í volunteers for a year of community service and faces a number of challenges.

- *Skowak: The Bribri of Mojoncito, Costa Rica* by Shar Mitchell — A look at the Bribri people and their success at maintaining their traditions in the face of modern development.

- *Zamir: Red Grammar in the U.S.S.R* by Shar Mitchell — Just before the fall of communism, a Bahá'í children's performer tours the Soviet Union promoting the principles of world unity and love for all humanity.

- *When Your Spirit Goes Wandering* by Ramin Eshraghi-Yazdi — The film deals with the cause and effect of our spiritual actions and the consequences of attempts to escape from or deny our responsibilities.*

In Finland, an emphasis on diversity leads to human rights award

HELSINKI, Finland — Just after the birth of her fourth child, Melody Karvonen made a somewhat unusual career change.

While still on maternity leave, Ms. Karvonen decided to end her 10-year career in architectural drafting and instead moved into human rights. She first participated in a project aimed at the elimination of racism.

In that campaign, organized by the Red Cross and the Mannerheim's Child Protection League, she led groups of youth and children in discussions on racial tolerance in society and the beauty of human diversity.

Fourteen years later, after her initial steps had broadened into a career devoted to the protection of human rights, Ms. Karvonen, 51, was named the Human Rights Worker of the Year by the Finnish League for Human Rights.

Dr. Pentti Arajärvi, a member of the League's board of directors and husband of the President of Finland, Tarja Halonen, was the keynote speaker at the award ceremony on 27 September 2003. Also present was

Mikko Puumalainen, the Finnish Ombudsman for Minorities.

In her acceptance speech, Ms. Karvonen said that the principles of the Bahá'í Faith provided a basis for her work.

"Today there is a lot of emphasis in the world on diversity and coexistence, but less on how we can work better together," she said.

"People often concentrate on the differences of culture, but in my work I try to focus on how human beings can live together. As Bahá'u'lláh said: 'The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens.'"

Ms. Karvonen was born in Iran — her maiden name was Naghmeh Izadi — and moved to Finland in 1973. She is married to Finnish-born Jarmo Tapio Karvonen and has four children. She has served as a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Finland since 1997.

After her initial two years as a volunteer in human rights work, she accepted a position with the Red Cross as a refugee adviser for the newly established Center for Asylum Seekers in Joensuu, in the east of Finland.

For five years she represented the Police of Joensuu as an educator for tolerance and cross-cultural understanding.

Other projects she has been involved with include a program to reduce violence and racism among youth; the establishment of a school curriculum that encourages world citizenship; an evaluation and development of an international meeting center in Joensuu; and the "Be Equal, Be Different" project, shared by Finland, Holland, Italy, and Ireland, which seeks to reduce discrimination in the workplace.

Ms. Karvonen often accepts invitations from throughout Finland to address groups on topics such as cross-cultural understanding, tolerance and understanding, and the equality of women and men.

Ms. Karvonen is currently working as an immigration counselor for a project funded by the European Social Fund, under the auspices of the European Union.*

Melody Karvonen with her husband, Jarmo, at an award ceremony naming her Finland's Human Rights Worker of the Year.



Photo by Martin Heslop

Review: Human rights and religion

Review, continued from page 16

Dr. Ghanea notes, for example, that the whole notion of human rights arose largely as a secular movement, and that the international discussion of it has come mainly in the last half of the 20th century, in the post-World War II environment.

And because of the secular beginnings of human rights theory, she writes, questions about how religious intolerance and persecution fit into it have in many ways been problematic and/or pushed to the sidelines in the development of international human rights law.

She notes that, historically, religious conflict has been a source of violence and “human rights” violations, often when one religion has asserted itself as morally superior to another. Accordingly, the idea of human rights has been “put forward as a unique language of morality, to be contrasted sharply with the self-referential subjectivities of specific belief systems,” Dr. Ghanea writes. “The assumptions underlying this perspective seem to be that the only way human rights norms and standards can ever hope to be ‘universalized’ is through such secularism.”

Yet, she suggests, in today’s complex world of “believers and non-believers, and a variety of cultures, religions and races,” it is virtually impossible to sever human rights law and theory from the question of religion and religious belief — and it is, in fact, counterproductive.

Instead, she writes, religions “should be encouraged to pour their visions and moral resources into the progression of human rights, whilst allowing ‘room for neutral norms and values independent of such traditions.’ If either a human rights ideology or religious commitments are interpreted in a totalizing manner, they will exclude one another — to the detriment of both projects in the long term.”

Moreover, she writes, at the heart of the intersection between human rights and religion is the question of “how religions expect to be treated and how they treat others.”

“The most interesting dilemma that emerges is that of new religions that emerge from the midst of previous religions,” she writes. “Such groups perceive themselves as having established a new belief community

whereas the ‘parent’ community sees them as a distortion and blasphemous offshoot of their group. Human rights are thus often critically denied them as they epitomize the most threatening and dangerous form of the ‘other.’”

And in this regard, the Bahá’í case in Iran takes on special significance as “a fascinating yet brief insight into passionately held but fundamentally opposed cleavages between the cultural revolution in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the international human rights community.”

Her chapters charting the back-and-forth between international human rights experts and Iranian diplomats in various UN forums make this point in a way that is at times almost comical, were it not for the seriousness of the issue.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Iranian representatives sought to dismiss the Bahá’í case as anything but an example of genuine religious persecution. At various points, they accused Bahá’ís of being Zionists (because the Bahá’í World Centre, through historical circumstance, is located in Israel), of being criminals (falsely accusing Bahá’ís of immorality and drug-abuse), or simply of being so small as to be irrelevant.

In 1991, for example, the Iranian government issued a statement saying that the number of Bahá’ís in Iran came to “less than one thousand” (despite well-acknowledged figures putting the Bahá’í population of Iran at over 300,000), while at the same time, apparently to rebut charges that Bahá’ís were denied access to education, noting that some “500 Bahá’í applicants” took the entrance exam for higher education in 1990.

“According to this statement,” writes Dr. Ghanea, “over 50 percent of Iran’s Bahá’í community had taken part in the 1990 university entrance examinations! If the purpose of these moves had been to reassure the international community about the situation of the Bahá’ís, it seems that it fell short of its objectives.”

Ultimately, then, Dr. Ghanea’s book offers a fascinating glimpse at some of the core issues regarding religion and human rights and how they are currently playing out on the world stage. The lessons it offers will be of increasing importance in a world that is at once so rich in its religious and cultural diversity — and so divided in its understanding of how it is possible for all to live together in peace.*

Religions “should be encouraged to pour their visions and moral resources into the progression of human rights... If either a human rights ideology or religious commitments are interpreted in a totalizing manner, they will exclude one another — to the detriment of both projects in the long term.”

– Nazila Ghanea

A case study on religion and human rights

**Human Rights, the
UN and the
Bahá'ís in Iran**

by Nazila Ghanea

**George Ronald /
Kluwer Law
International**

**Oxford / The
Hague**

The coming of the new millennium has also brought a surprising upsurge in religious feeling around the world. Secularism, once thought to be the rising tide of modernism, seems to have been only a cresting wave.

Sadly, one side effect of the surge in religiosity has been an accompanying magnification of religious intolerance and even violence. The list of problem countries is too large to enumerate here, but the manifestations of this intolerance and violence can be seen on virtually every continent — and on a global level extend to the much-discussed “clash of civilizations.”

In this context, the recent book *Human Rights, the UN and the Bahá'ís in Iran* by Nazila Ghanea takes on heightened significance. Not only does it carefully examine the specific “case” of religious persecution faced by Iran's Bahá'í community, it also insightfully analyzes how the international community has dealt with the difficult intersection of human rights and religion.

The situation of Iran's Bahá'ís has been well-covered, both in these pages and in the news media worldwide. It is widely known that since the Islamic Republic of Iran was established in 1979, more than 200 Bahá'ís have been killed, hundreds have been imprisoned, and thousands have been deprived of jobs and education — all solely because of their religious belief.

However, the case of the Bahá'ís also represents one of the most successful examples of international intervention in the arena of human rights. In 1982, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights passed the first of some 19 consecutive annual resolutions expressing “concern” over the situations of human rights in Iran with specific mention of the Bahá'ís. These were followed with similar resolutions in the UN General Assembly.

Although the Iranian government has never directly acknowledged the impact of these declarations — or the accompanying international outcry in the media and in national parliaments and legislatures — the rate of killings dropped sharply within a few

years, as did the number of Bahá'ís in Iranian prisons. Sadly, other manifestations of the persecutions against Iran's Bahá'ís continue to this day, including restrictions on access to education, the expropriation of property, denial of employment, and limitations on the rights of worship and assembly.

Dr. Ghanea, a lecturer in International Law and Human Rights at the University of London, meticulously analyzes the course and substance of these UN resolutions from 1980 to 2002. (Nearly one third of the book's 628 pages is devoted to appendices that document, year-by-year, each UN resolution on Iran and the situation of the Bahá'í com-



Nazila Ghanea

munity there.) On this score alone, the book is a valuable document for anyone concerned with how international human rights machinery can be made to function successfully.

But perhaps of wider interest are the analysis and conclusions offered by Dr. Ghanea as she considers what the Bahá'í case means to the entire international human rights regime as it relates to religious intolerance.

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