



# ONE COUNTRY

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

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International Community  
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## In Iran, a renewed persecution aims at “cultural cleansing”

*In its ongoing persecution of the Bahá'í community, the Iranian government shifts to softer targets – destroying cultural landmarks and depriving youth of education – in an apparent effort to avoid international attention while smothering the country's largest religious minority.*

NEW YORK – The Iranian government has recently stepped up its ongoing persecution of the Bahá'í community of Iran, destroying a major cultural landmark associated with the Bahá'í Faith and acting to deprive some 1,000 young Iranian Bahá'ís of promised access to higher education.

In June, authorities demolished an historic house in Teheran that had been designed and owned by the father of the Faith's founder. The house was not only significant to Bahá'ís but was also considered to be a sterling example of period architecture of historic importance to Muslims.

In August, it was learned that the government had reneged on its promise to allow young Bahá'ís to attend public universities. After being banned from higher education for more than 20 years, Bahá'í students were told by the government earlier this year that they would be allowed to take university entrance exams and attend if they passed.

However, in a move that seems calculated to continue the higher education ban while evading the scrutiny of international human rights monitors, the government is forcing

*Iran, continued on page 11*



*Even during its demolition by the Iranian government last June, the distinctive architectural features of the house of Mirza Abbas Nuri – a cultural landmark – are strikingly evident.*

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## The moral challenge of Beijing + 10

While statistics give the big picture, the individual stories about the everyday burdens that women face around the world are often what touch the soul and stir the conscience.

*New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof recently told one such story, about a woman in rural Pakistan who was gang-raped on the orders of the village council. As bizarre as it might seem, the action was a punishment meted out to her and her family because of an accusation that the woman's brother had had an affair with a high-status woman in the village. (Even worse, Kristof reported, the accusation was false and the brother had in fact been sexually abused by members of the high-status woman's tribe.)

He described the scene this way in a 29 September 2004 Op-Ed piece: "As members of the high-status tribe danced in joy, four men stripped her naked and took turns raping her. Then they forced her to walk home naked in front of 300 villagers."

That and other such incidents he has reported on led Mr. Kristof to conclude: "I firmly believe that the central moral challenge of this century, equivalent to the struggles against slavery in the 19th century or against totalitarianism in the 20th, will be to address sex inequality in the third world."

Kristof's observation offers a good starting point as the world approaches the 10th anniversary of the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women. Held in Beijing, the Conference seemed to mark a high point in the ongoing fight for the advancement of women.

In the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the countries of the world committed themselves to the "full implementation of the human rights of women and of the girl child." Moreover, they identified 12 "critical areas of concern" that stood as barriers to the full equality of women.

Among those 12 critical areas were the "persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women," "unequal access to education and training," "inequalities and inadequacies" in access to health care, economic resources, and the media, and "inequality

between men and women in the sharing of power and decision-making at all levels."

Another area of concern was violence against women. In the Platform, governments and civil society were also called on to address the "long-standing failure to protect and promote those rights and freedoms in the case of violence against women.... In all societies, to a greater or lesser degree, women and girls are subjected to physical, sexual and psychological abuse that cuts across lines of income, class and culture."

In March 2005, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women will devote its 49th session to reviewing the implementation of the Platform for Action, in a high-level session that has been dubbed "Beijing + 10."

The UN Secretary General is preparing a report to the Commission that is expected to outline areas of progress and failure. However, early reports from United Nations regional commissions, analysis by non-governmental organizations, and a look at the statistical record indicate that there are many areas of shortfall.

According to *The World's Women 2000*, a report of the UN Statistics Division, for example, women still remain far behind men in terms of decision-making power and influence. In 1999, the report said, women represented only about 11 percent of parliamentarians worldwide, up from 9 percent in 1987.

Likewise, although the gender gap in education is closing, in many countries in Africa and Asia primary school enrollment ratios for girls are only about 80 percent of that for boys, according to the report. Nearly two-thirds of the world's illiterates are women.

Other pressing issues are emerging. In April, at a UN Regional Commission meeting in Lukasa, Zambia, experts said that the HIV/AIDS pandemic is hitting women and girls the hardest, in large part because they are not economically empowered to opt for safe sex. Others at the Zambia meeting noted that the effects of poverty also fall most heavily on African women, who likewise have unequal access to health care and education. And in many parts of Africa, it was

reported, customs remain that make women subject to male guardianship.

Last but not least, violence against women remains a worldwide problem. In Europe, domestic violence is thought to be the major cause of death and invalidity for women between 16 and 44 years of age, ahead of cancer, road accidents and even war, according to a 2002 report of the Council of Europe.

War and civil conflict rage in many countries as well, and they often have a disproportionate impact on women. Women and children make up the bulk of refugees in war. And, increasingly, rape is being used as a weapon of war, according to reports from the former Yugoslavia, Sudan, and elsewhere.

When governments gather for the high level segment of Beijing + 10, there should be no shirking of accountability. Having adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, not to mention numerous human rights covenants and treaties that implicitly and explicitly uphold the rights of women, governments retain the primary responsibility for protecting the rights of women.

On the same line, governments must not even entertain the idea of rolling back any of the hard-won commitments agreed to in Beijing. While there have been calls in some quarters for a reconsideration of the Declaration and Platform for Action, the march of history is moving steadily towards more rights for women, not fewer, and no one should be fooled into thinking otherwise.

At the same time, it must also be acknowledged that governments can only do so much in the face of entrenched social attitudes that give the lion's share of power, authority, and status to men in most cultures and societies.

And here is where organizations of civil society — especially faith-based communities — must play a special role.

In many, if not most, of the world's societies and cultures, the chief vehicle for the transmission of values is religion and religious belief — a fact that must be reckoned with by the representatives of governments, international agencies, and civil society organizations that gather for Beijing + 10.

Too often, of course, religious belief and/or the interpretation of religious belief have been used to reinforce the supremacy of men and the subjugation of women. Indeed, recent UN Conferences have seen an increasing participation by groups that cling to such ideas.

Bahá'ís believe, however, that the underlying truth of all of the world's religions up-

holds the moral and spiritual equality of women and men. And the Bahá'í Faith itself, an independent religion founded in our own age, quite explicitly endorses women's equality.

“In the estimation of God there is no distinction of sex,” said ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. “One whose thought is pure, whose education is superior, whose scientific attainments are greater, whose deeds of philanthropy excel, be that one man or woman, white or colored, is entitled to full rights and recognition; there is no differentiation whatsoever...”

Just as governments must begin to shoulder their responsibilities for implementing and enforcing the human rights outlined in the Beijing documents and elsewhere, it is time for the leaders of the world's religious communities to advocate for the full advancement of women.

Many religious leaders, representing the world's major religions, have come forward in support of equality for women and men.

Others, however, have hung back, enmeshed largely in man-made interpretations and timeworn customs — captives of poorly considered theological understandings.

Those who argue that their own religious teachings do not support the emancipation of women would do well to look at the analogy offered by Nicholas Kristof: that of slavery. In the past, at various times and places, religious leaders have given all sorts of theological reasons to support the keeping of slaves, and/or to justify the enforcement of unequal treatment between the races.

Today, however, every credible authority utterly rejects slavery and its antecedent, racism. And those who once sought to make theological arguments in support of slavery have been utterly discredited, relegated to the famous dustbin of history.

In the same way, there can be no doubt that those who continue to argue for the repression of women will likewise end up on the wrong side of time's forward march.

In a sense, the governments of the world have already recognized this. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, now nearly 10 years old, reflect the widespread realization by the majority of the world's peoples that the time has come for full equality between women and men.

As the world prepares for Beijing + 10, governments should ponder this. So should those who would marshal any kind of theological argument against the continuing advancement of women.\*

***Those who once sought to make theological arguments in support of slavery have been utterly discredited... In the same way, there can be no doubt that those who continue to argue for the repression of women will likewise end up on the wrong side of history.***

## In the United Kingdom, Bahá'ís promote a dialogue on diversity

In London, participants in a 6 July 2004 seminar on “The Family and Social Cohesion” gather for a small-group discussion, following a presentation by Ceridwen Roberts, a senior research fellow at the University of Oxford and former director of the Family Policy Studies Centre, who is sitting in the foreground, right. The seminar was sponsored by the Institute for Social Cohesion, an agency of the Bahá'í community of the United Kingdom.



**Against a backdrop of national concern, the Bahá'í community of the United Kingdom has taken a leading role in promoting a wider discussion of how to heal the divisions that have arisen as Great Britain has grown more diverse.**

HACKNEY, United Kingdom — Once known as the home of Britain's down-and-out working class, this borough in London's East End stands today as one of the most diverse places in England — if not the world.

According to the 2001 census, only 38 percent of the population in the ward of Hackney Central can claim a traditional British “white” ethnic background. The other 62 percent can trace at least part of their heritage to Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, or elsewhere.

This kind of diversity is an increasing feature of life in the United Kingdom — not to mention the rest of Europe. The effects of globalization, with accompanying trends towards greater immigration and cross-border openness, have given rise to considerable debate here about what it means to be “British” — and how to confront the challenges that inevitably come with a more diverse society.

In the summer of 2001, for example, dis-

turbances broke out in several towns in northern England. Scores were injured in clashes between groups of youth of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin and groups from a white British background. While much of the blame was laid on racial tensions, there was also a religious dimension to the disturbances. *The Economist* magazine noted at the time: “Islam and hopelessness are a dangerous combination.”

The unrest set off a period of considerable reflection on the part of the British government. The government launched a series of investigations into what it means to create “social cohesion,” a term that was new at the time but has since become part of the specialized vocabulary in official policy documents.

About a year before the riots, some members of the Bahá'í community of the United Kingdom had begun their own process of reflection. Their goal was to consider how best to contribute to the well-being of British society at large.

The result was the creation in 2000 of the Institute for Social Cohesion, an agency of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United Kingdom. Its mandate, simply put, is to assist British society at large to create a greater sense of unity amidst growing diversity.

“Our concern was balance in society,” said Nazila Ghanea, who is a member of the board of the Institute and an early participant in the discussions that led to its founding. “And the idea of promoting social cohesion encapsulated our general concerns. Now the term is very much used by the government.”

With about 5,000 members in the United Kingdom, the Bahá'í community is among the smaller religious groups here. And its members have not been identified with the social unrest in any way. But the community has nevertheless taken a leading role in efforts to promote a wider discussion of what will be needed to heal the divisions that have arisen as Great Britain has grown more diverse.

More specifically, the Institute for Social Cohesion has sponsored a series of seminars and workshops that have sought to bring together community leaders and policy makers from all sides, in an effort to facilitate greater dialogue all around.

These efforts have been appreciated by government leaders. In an interview with ONE COUNTRY, British Home Secretary David Blunkett remarked:

“I think because of the very special position of the Bahá'í Faith — it isn't seen as a threat by anyone — and because it does incorporate and bring together — as perhaps you would say — the best of what faith has to offer, it is possible for the Bahá'í community to be called to do that in a way that other people would cooperate with.”

### Launched in 2001

The Institute for Social Cohesion was publicly launched at the House of Commons on 31 January 2001, at a seminar hosted by the All Party Parliamentary Friends of the Bahá'ís and chaired by Ian Stewart and Peter Bottomley, both Members of Parliament.

The launch featured a panel discussion by a diverse group of experts on the issue of social cohesion, including Gurbux Singh, then Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, and Yasmin Alibhai Brown, a well-known writer and broadcaster. Mr. Singh spoke on the effects of ethnic discrimination in the UK educational system on young

people, while Ms. Brown critiqued current views about multiculturalism and made a plea for a more inclusive sense of identity.

Since then, the Institute has held five more Parliamentary seminars, two major conferences, and a specialized workshop. Each has drawn together a diverse range of speakers and participants. The topics have focused on issues relating to social cohesion, from models of justice to gender equality, immigration, and citizenship. The Institute has also issued a series of position papers on topics related to social cohesion.

“What we bring to the table is an ability to bring people from a wide range of backgrounds together, and to have them talk together,” said Barney Leith, Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United Kingdom.

“For example, our colloquia have brought together people from the central government, from local government, from voluntary organizations, from activist organizations, from faith communities, and from the business arena,” said Mr. Leith. “These are people who would not necessarily talk to each other, or have an easy time of talking to each other.”

By applying Bahá'í principles in the organization of such events, however, a new level of dialogue can be facilitated, said Mr. Leith and others.

“The main Bahá'í principle in operation is the process we call consultation, which is a non-adversarial, non-confrontational process that attempts to synthesize and build on the various contributions that each participant makes,” said Mr. Leith. “It applies

**“What we bring to the table is an ability to bring people from a wide range of backgrounds together, and to have them talk together.”**

**– Barney Leith,  
Secretary of the  
National Spiritual  
Assembly of the  
Bahá'ís of the  
United Kingdom.**

*Below: Dan Wheatley, right, of the UK Bahá'í Institute for Social Cohesion, addresses a workshop on “Bahá'í Principles for Social Action in the Community” at the launch of the Faith-based Regeneration Network UK on 30 September 2002 in London. The event is one of many interfaith activities the Institute has been involved in as it seeks to promote social cohesion.*





*A group of Bahá'ís gather for a small prayer meeting in Hackney, East London. Hackney is one of the most diverse boroughs in London. The local Bahá'í community of Hackney is likewise quite diverse, and it offers a model for social cohesion.*

***“The Bahá'í community has been instrumental in and part of this process of establishing on-going [interfaith] groups.”***

**— David Blunkett,  
UK Home Secretary**

critical thinking to the process, but without the kind of critique that destroys. It is instead a building process.”

That building process was evident at the most recent Institute event, a specialized one-day seminar held at the Bahá'í National Centre offices on 6 July 2004, focusing on “The Family and Social Cohesion.”

The featured speaker was Ceridwen Roberts, a senior research fellow at the University of Oxford and former director of the Family Policy Studies Centre. In attendance were representatives from Christian, Buddhist, and Islamic faith communities, as well as from the Bahá'í community.

Ms. Roberts discussed trends in changing family composition, such as decreasing family size, increasing cohabitation, and rising divorce rates. Underlying all these trends, she said, are changing values.

“The question is really up for grabs: How explicit, how intervention-oriented, how proactive should government policies towards children and families be?” Ms. Roberts asked.

### **Role for religion**

After her remarks, participants broke into two discussion groups, where they concluded that faith groups, rather than the government, were best equipped to promote positive family values.

“We should focus on faith-based organizations because they have closer links to the family,” said Jenny Engstrom, a training specialist at Conflict and Change, a London-based non-governmental organization focusing on community mediation.

The importance of faith-based organizations in promoting social cohesion has indeed been recognized by the government, which launched a series of high-level studies after the 2001 riots.

One of those studies, entitled “Community Cohesion,” which was conducted by an independent review team in 2001, concluded that in many British towns and cities the establishment of separate educational arrangements, community and voluntary bodies, employment, places of worship, language, and social and cultural networks had led to a high degree of polarization. “That means that many communities operate on the basis of a series of parallel lives,” the report said.

In July 2004, a second review team, the Community Cohesion Panel, issued a report titled “The End of Parallel Lives?” The report made a series of recommendations about how the government and others could rectify the sense of social polarization identified in the 2001 report.

Among other things, the Panel recommended that government agencies give support to interfaith efforts. “Faith communities need to be much more involved in all aspects of social policy and, in particular, in helping communities to understand each other and to assist the statutory agencies to work across faith boundaries,” the Panel said.

The importance of interfaith and inter-religious cooperation in promoting social cohesion has likewise been recognized by the Home Office, the governmental department with overarching responsibility for internal social affairs.

Home Secretary David Blunkett said social cohesion is the “underpinning” issue in terms of promoting stability and security in the UK. Faith groups can play a key role, he said, in helping people to promote respect for different faiths and different views, and also to help people see “what they hold in common.”

“The government has done everything we can to play our part in this, to support the development of interfaith groups,” said Mr. Blunkett.

“The Bahá'í community has been instrumental in and part of this process of establishing on-going [interfaith] groups” at the local and national levels, Mr. Blunkett added.

### **The experience in Hackney**

Here in Hackney, the local Bahá'í community in many ways mirrors the diversity

of the community at large. For administrative purposes, the Bahá'í community divides London into six "clusters," and the London City East cluster is composed of five boroughs: City of London, Hackney, Haringey, Islington, and Tower Hamlets.

There are some 100 Bahá'ís currently registered in the London City East cluster and, by one count, they come from more than 16 nationalities, from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and various parts of Europe.

The London City East cluster recently sponsored an interfaith event in which a message urging tolerance among religions was presented to local religious leaders.

As well, over the last few years, the London City East cluster has been active in a program of "study circles," built around a series of workbooks created by a Bahá'í-inspired non-governmental organization known as the Ruhi Institute. The program is designed to build human capacity and solidarity, among other things.

The project here, which is also being used in other communities around the United Kingdom, has greatly increased the sense of cohesion among Bahá'ís — and those from other religions who have participated.

"Before studying the Ruhi books, people didn't necessarily know each other well," said Saman Rahmanian, a 22-year-old Austrian-Iranian Bahá'í who is currently studying in London. "But once you have done a Ruhi book, you really know the person. Bonding



and friendships take place on a level that didn't exist before."

Helena Hastie, a 25-year-old British-born marketing professional, likewise said the study circles have helped increase the sense of unity among Bahá'ís, which was strong even before. Asked to list some of the ethnic roots of other Bahá'ís in the community, she had trouble at first, adding: "I think the fact that we have difficulty remembering that our friends are from different countries is quite a good indicator that we don't notice nationalities."\*

*Stephen Lovelock, left, head of the London Metropolitan Police Diversity Unit, and Barney Leith, Secretary of the Bahá'í Community of the United Kingdom, spoke at a colloquium on "What Makes a Society Cohesive?" Sponsored by the Institute for Social Cohesion, the colloquium was held 7 May 2002 at Westminster Central Hall.*

## In Ghana, Bahá'í development efforts are praised

**A**CCRA, Ghana — The principles of the Bahá'í Faith "could shed light on what steps our society should take to improve our social and economic life," a senior government official told participants at the Bahá'í jubilee celebrations in this West African nation.

The theme of the 27-29 August 2004 celebrations, which commemorated the establishment of the Faith here 50 years ago, was "Spiritual Solutions for Social and Economic Problems."

"I sincerely believe that the theme chosen for this celebration is to engender our whole society to reflect on the principle that human nature is fundamentally spiritual," said Kwaku Agyeman Manu, the Deputy Minister of Finance and Economic Planning.

"I urge the rest of us who are non-Bahá'ís to exhibit some of the good principles of religious humility, to examine the noble principles of the Bahá'í teachings," said Mr.

Agyeman Manu.

During the past 50 years, the Bahá'ís of Ghana have been active in social and economic development programs. For example, the Olinga Foundation for Human Development has been promoting literacy and moral education classes in rural Ghana, reaching more than 5,000 children in some 150 primary and junior secondary schools.

The Bahá'í teachings were first brought to Ghana (then under British rule and called "the Gold Coast") in 1951 when Ethel Robertson Stephens, an African-American Bahá'í from the USA, came to Accra.

Another feature of the jubilee celebration was the awarding of prizes in a student essay competition organized by the Bahá'í community. Students throughout Ghana were asked to discuss four principles shared by at least four of the world's main religions.\*

— Bahá'í World News Service

## Interfaith relations in the post-9/11 world are examined in Barcelona

*Sufi dancers were among the performers at a Sacred Music Concert held 10 July 2004 at the famous Sagrada Familia Temple in Barcelona as part of the 2004 Parliament of the World's Religions.*



Photo by Steve Rohrbach

***At perhaps the largest interfaith gathering ever held, the 2004 Parliament of the World's Religions considers the richness of diversity and the "Pathways to Peace."***

**B**ARCELONA, Spain — Without doubt, there was a distinct shadow over the 2004 Parliament of the World's Religions — a major interfaith gathering held here in July 2004.

The shadow was cast by the growing concern worldwide about religiously inspired terrorism and violence, as exemplified by the 11 September 2001 attack on the World Trade Center in New York.

In response, organizers, presenters, and participants of the Parliament sought to highlight the possibilities for peace and reconciliation among the religions — hoping to shine a light into the darkness.

Taking the theme "Pathways to Peace," the Parliament was attended by nearly 9,000 people from more than 75 countries — making it one of the largest interreligious meetings in history. Participants were mostly lay people, from every major world religion. Many sects and sub-groups were also represented.

In more than 400 workshops, panel discussions, and plenary sessions, participants

addressed a wide range of issues relating to peace and interfaith understanding.

"We are resolved to sustain long-term intercultural and interfaith understanding and cooperation," said Federico Mayor Zaragoza, former director-general of UNESCO and president of the Peace Culture Foundation of Spain, in the Parliament's closing plenary. "Diversity is not a threat. It is our richness to be united."

Organizers of the Parliament said the peaceful and all-embracing nature of the event itself stands as a model for interreligious cooperation in the post-9/11 world.

"Just holding a Parliament of this size and scope, with this kind of diversity, after September 11th, portrays a different image of religion than we have tended to see in the newspapers for the last few years," said Dirk Ficca, executive director of the Chicago-based Council for the Parliament of the World's Religions (CPWR), which organized the Parliament. "So I think that is significant."



Held 7-13 July, the 2004 Parliament was designed to build on previous Parliaments in 1999 in Cape Town, South Africa, and in 1993 in Chicago — all of which have sought to promote dialogue and cooperation among the world's religions. All three modern-day Parliaments trace their lineage to the historic 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, also held in Chicago, which is widely considered the dawning place of the modern worldwide interreligious movement.

The 2004 Parliament, which was also sponsored by the UNESCO Centre of Catalonia and Forum Barcelona 2004, specifically sought to encourage religious groups worldwide to make concrete commitments to have "faith transform the world" by focusing on four specific issues areas: creating access to clean water, eliminating international debt in poor countries, supporting refugees worldwide, and overcoming religiously motivated violence.

The conference program was also designed to increase the discussion within each religious group about the need for religious pluralism, by setting aside a number of program slots for "intra-religious" dialogue.

"Most religious communities have a kind of internal rationale for who they are, and how they relate to each other," said Dr. Ficca, explaining that one goal of the Parliament was to get religious groups talking internally. "We feel one key to the interreligious movement is the intra-religious conversation. So we set this as a major category for our programs."

## Focus on dialogue

Nevertheless, interreligious dialogue remained the focus of the Parliament. And many speakers made specific references to, or even focused on, the September 11 event and the unfolding tension over religious violence since that time.

In one well-attended session entitled "The Battle for God," author and theologian Karen Armstrong said she believed that religious fundamentalists from all traditions are essentially rebelling against the apparent triumph of the modernist, secular view of the world.

"Every single fundamentalist movement that I have studied is rooted in a profound fear — whether Christian, Jewish, or Muslim — that modern secular society wants to wipe out religion," said Ms. Armstrong, who is the author of *A History of God*, among other works.

This fear of modernity has led fundamentalists to distort the religious traditions they are trying to preserve, said Ms. Armstrong. "They

downplay those passages [in their holy writings] that speak of tolerance and compassion and respect for the rights of others.... This was clear even before September 11."

At a workshop entitled "The Responsibility of the Global Muslim Community in the Post 9/11 World," a panel of prominent Muslims sought to analyze and address how the Islamic world can change both its own attitudes and the perception of others in the context of interfaith understanding.

"Now there are serious questions about Islam, about the Quran, about the Prophet Muhammad, about jihad, about violence," said Zahid Bukhari of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University. "And they don't need the type of answer that 'Islam means peace' and 'There are five pillars.' There need to be serious answers from Islamic leaders and Islamic scholars."

William Leshner, Chair of the CWPR, said the 9/11 event and broad concerns about religious violence raised the profile of the Parliament and the interfaith movement in general. He said, for example, the Barcelona event was the first to have a significant degree of involvement with the international business community.

The Ford Motor Company, he noted, sponsored a workshop about a company-supported interfaith network aimed at reducing religious tensions on the factory floor. As well, Iberdrola, Spain's second-largest power company, is the first corporate entity

***"Every single fundamentalist movement that I have studied is rooted in a profound fear — whether Christian, Jewish or Muslim — that modern secular society wants to wipe out religion."***

**— Karen Armstrong, author**

*Karen Armstrong, author of A History of God, speaks at a panel discussion on "The Battle for God" at the 2004 Parliament of the World's Religions.*

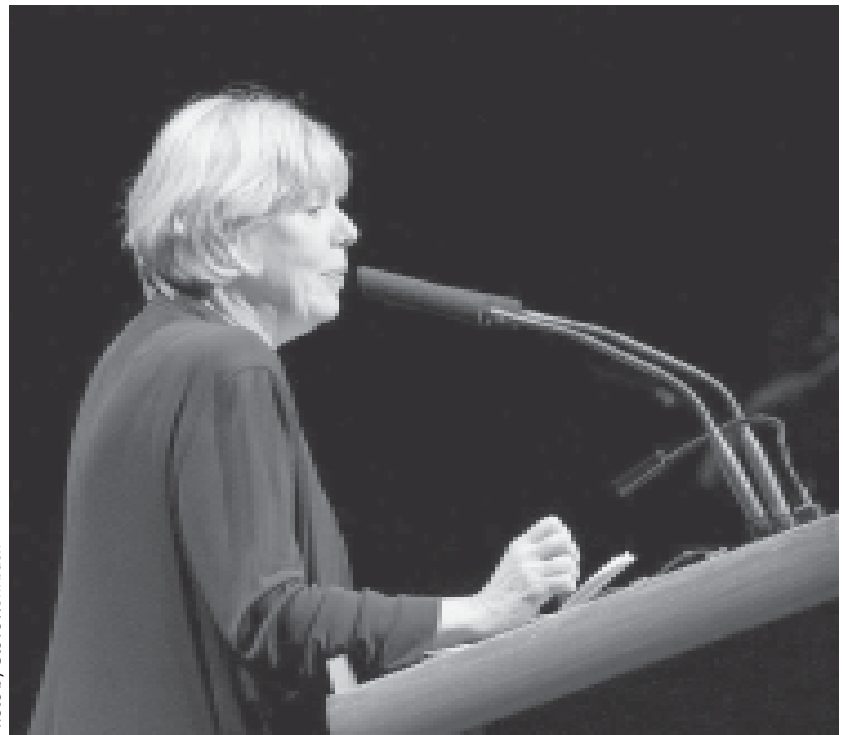


Photo by Steve Rohrbach



More than 100 Bahá'ís from at least a dozen countries participated in the 2004 Parliament. Shown above, left to right, are Robert Bennett of the United Kingdom, Jan Saeed of the USA, Ali Merchant of India, Badi Daemi of Andorra, Denise Belisle of Canada, and Miguel Gil of Spain.

to give money to support a Parliament, said Rev. Leshner.

“Four or five years ago, you could not talk to a corporation about funding an interreligious event,” said Rev. Leshner. “But there is a growing awareness in the international corporate world that they’ve got interreligious issues in their workforce.”

Chris Hamilton, a professor of comparative politics and world religion at Washburn University, USA, said the Parliament reflected a trend towards “horizontal” integration among the peoples of the world, who often now bypass traditional “vertical” institutions — including churches — to promote global change.

“You have lay people who are deciding on their own that other religions are sources of meaning and possible allies in the achievement of various world goals, like peace,” said Professor Hamilton, who is a Bahá'í. “This Parliament is really about a growing, significant, transnational non-governmental movement, like the environmental movement, that may well mark a change in the fate of the planet.”

### Bahá'í Participation

For its part, the Bahá'í International Community and its national affiliate, the Bahá'í community of Spain, offered a number of panel discussions, presentations, and activities in support of the Parliament and its theme of peace.

More than 100 Bahá'ís attended the Parliament, coming from Andorra, Botswana, Canada, France, Germany, India, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

“The goal for Bahá'ís at the Parliament is to help further understanding among the dif-

ferent religions,” said Miguel Gil, who represented the Bahá'í community of Spain at the Parliament. “We want to help smooth the misunderstandings that divide the religions and to address issues of common concern.”

Moreover, many of the Bahá'ís at the Parliament were acting not so much as representatives of the Bahá'í Faith, but rather as representatives of various interfaith and/or academic organizations in which they have become prominent. Some, in fact, had their way paid in full or part by sponsoring organizations.

Lally Lucretia Warren of Botswana, who is a Bahá'í and also a member of the Parliament’s international advisory committee, said she believes Bahá'ís have been effective in promoting interreligious dialogue in part because their belief system encompasses all of the world’s major religions.

She noted that Bahá'ís believe in the divine missions of Christ, Muhammad, Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Krishna, and Zoroaster, among others, in addition to Bahá'u'lláh.

“We are accepting of other people’s religions because we truly believe in the truths of these other religions,” said Ms. Warren, whose journey to the Parliament was largely sponsored by the Lutheran World Federation, in part because of her participation in the Continuation Committee of Interfaith Action for Peace in Africa, which was initiated by the Lutherans.

Moojan Momen, a Bahá'í scholar from the United Kingdom, gave a talk on “The Bahá'í Theological Basis of Interreligious Dialogue.” The Bahá'í belief system defuses those elements of religion that tend to produce conflict, said Dr. Momen.

“In Bahá'í theology, God is unknowable and unknown,” said Dr. Momen, who has written numerous books on religion. “So all of these different views that religions have of the Ultimate Reality are seen as limited viewpoints. They are all to some extent correct. And they are all to some extent incorrect. So in effect, what the Bahá'í Faith does is remove the whole question of ‘What is God?’ and to move to a place where individuals are able to create their own understanding.

“This allows us to move from doctrinal issues, where religions tend to disagree, to more practical issues, like the area of ethics, where, in fact, religions are in broad agreement,” said Dr. Momen. “All religions, for example, have some form of the Golden Rule, all say we should detach ourselves from the material world, and all stress attributes of love, brotherhood and justice.”\*

## In Iran, a renewed persecution aims at “cultural cleansing”

*Iran, continued from page one*

Bahá'í students who want to enter university to declare themselves as Muslims. Such a declaration is something that Bahá'ís are forbidden to do as a matter of religious principle and runs counter to human rights covenants upholding freedom of belief.

“Over the years, the government’s strategy has changed from outright killing to methods that are less likely to attract international attention, such as the destruction of holy sites and the deprivation of soft rights like education,” said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations.

“But the end goal is the same: to completely destroy the Bahá'í community of Iran, along with its history and heritage,” said Ms. Dugal.

The house that was destroyed in June was owned by Mirza Abbas Nuri, the father of Bahá'u'lláh. Its destruction prompted an outcry by Bahá'ís around the world.

In six nations, Bahá'í communities coordinated the publication of a statement in major newspapers that decried the house’s destruction as part of a campaign of “cultural cleansing” against the minority Bahá'í community in Iran.

Noting that the house was an “historical monument, a precious example of Islamic-Iranian architecture, ‘a matchless model of art, spirituality, and architecture,’” the statement compared Iran’s extremist Muslim leadership to the Taliban of Afghanistan.

“The hatred of the extremist mullahs for the Bahá'ís is such that they, like the Taliban of Afghanistan who destroyed the towering Buddhist sculptures at Bamian, intend not only to eradicate the religion, but even to erase all traces of its existence in the country of its birth,” said the statement.

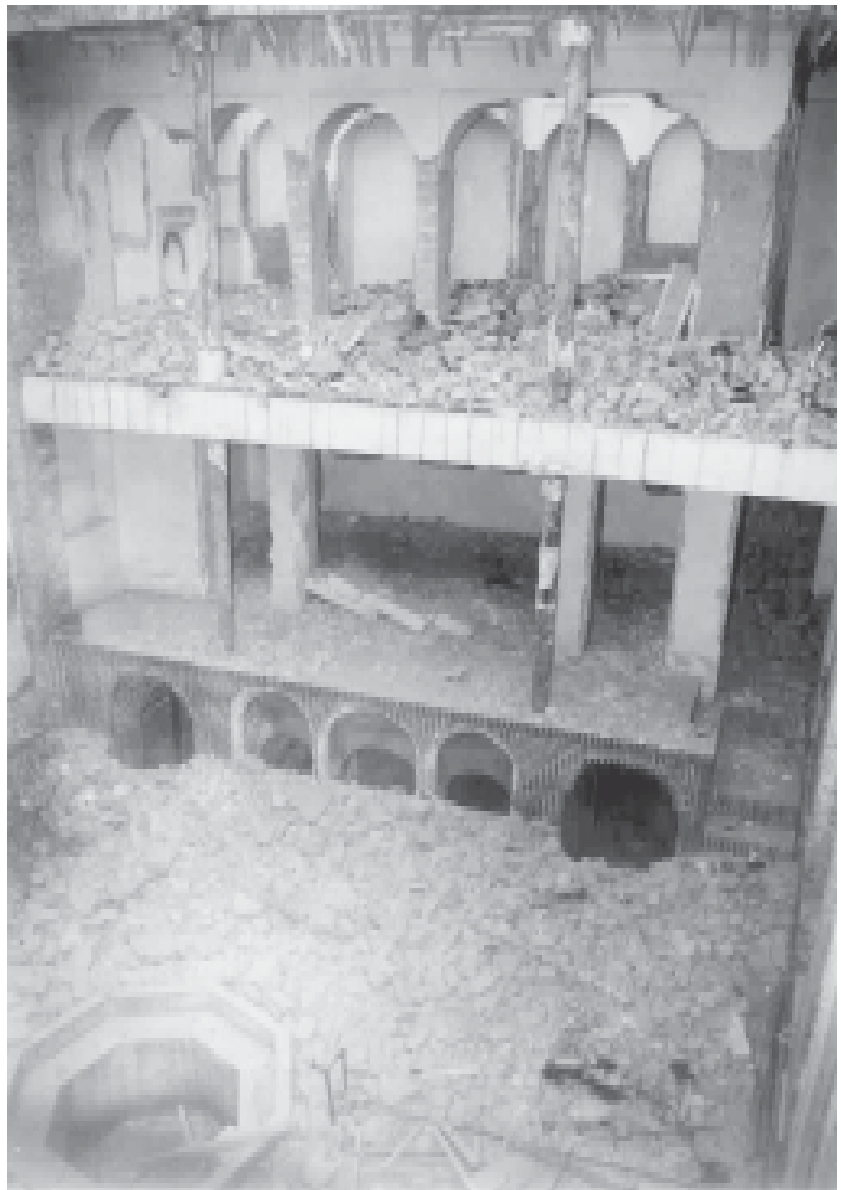
“In their determination to rid Iran of the Bahá'í community and obliterate its very memory, the fundamentalists in power are prepared even to destroy the cultural heritage of their own country, which they ap-

pear not to realize they hold in trust for humankind,” the statement continued.

### Students denied access

The move to prevent Bahá'ís from enrolling in university without declaring themselves as Muslims seems designed to appease Western human rights monitors, said Ms. Dugal, noting that Iran is currently engaged

*Demolition underway. In June 2004, this image captured the in-process destruction of the house of Mirza Abbas Nuri by government authorities in Teheran.*





In April, another Bahá'í holy place was destroyed. This house-like structure in Babol, Iran, shown here partially damaged, was razed. It is the resting place of Quddus, who was an important early disciple in the Bahá'í Faith.

***“Now, in what amounts to a devious ‘Catch-22,’ the government is saying ‘You can come, but you must pretend you are a Muslim.’ But that is something Bahá'ís cannot do. And the government knows that.”***

**– Bani Dugal, Bahá'í International Community**

in a “human rights dialogue” with Europe.

“For more than a year, the government has held out the promise that Bahá'ís would, for the first time in some 20 years, be allowed to attend national institutions of higher education,” said Ms. Dugal. “Now, in what amounts to a devious ‘Catch-22,’ the government is saying ‘You can come, but you must pretend you are a Muslim.’ But that is something Bahá'ís cannot do. And the government knows that.”

“So this latest action is nothing but a ploy, designed to make it appear as if Bahá'ís themselves are refusing to attend university. The fact is, however, that Bahá'ís could always have attended university if they had been willing to lie about their faith on application forms. This new move is an underhanded attempt to force Bahá'ís into such a position,” Ms. Dugal said.

Representatives of the Bahá'í International Community learned in August about the action, which involves pre-printing the word “Islam” in a slot listing a prospective student's religious affiliation on national college entrance examination results, mailed to students over the summer.

In the past, entrance forms required that applicants list themselves as followers of one of the four officially recognized religions in Iran — Islam, Christianity, Judaism, or Zoroastrianism. Those were the only choices and Bahá'ís, who refused to lie about their affiliation, were excluded from university.

This year, as a result of pressure from within and outside Iran, examination forms had no such slot for religious affiliation. Instead, university applicants were merely

asked to designate which of four approved religious subject examinations — Islam, Christianity, Judaism, or Zoroastrianism — they chose to take as part of overall university entrance examinations.

Nearly all Bahá'í students chose “Islam” for the religious subject examination — a move that would not compromise their principles, since Bahá'ís accept Islam as divine, along with all other major world religions, and would have no problem answering questions about it. And many young Bahá'ís in Iran eagerly anticipated finally being able to join their fellow Iranian youth at university this year.

Now, according to reports from Iran, officials are saying that that choice amounts to a de facto declaration of faith in Islam. In response to questions from Bahá'ís, one government official said that “belief in Islam is the same as responding to the choice of taking specific religious studies examination.”

Further, upon learning of the forced religious declaration, a group of Bahá'í students complained to officials at the National Organization of Testing and Training (NATT), asking if they could return the exam results with corrected information. A footnote in the letter conveying examination results said that incorrect names and addresses could and should be corrected and returned.

However, no mention was made about correcting religious information. Indeed, Bahá'ís were told by NATT officials that “incorrect religion would not be corrected” on the forms since the Bahá'í Faith is not among the officially recognized religions in Iran.

### **Largest religious minority**

These two events reflect the ongoing nature of the persecution by the government, said Ms. Dugal, which has sought for more than 25 years to eradicate Iran's 300,000-member Bahá'í community — the country's largest religious minority. Since 1979, more than 200 Iranian Bahá'ís have been killed, hundreds have been tortured and/or imprisoned, and thousands have lost jobs, pensions and/or access to education, all solely because of their religious belief.

“In many different localities in Iran, Bahá'ís are still subjected to arbitrary arrest, short-term detention, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination,” said Ms. Dugal. “Officials continue to confiscate Bahá'í homes, deny them their rightfully earned pensions and inheritance, block their access to employment, or impede their private busi-



At left, Bahá'í International Community United Nations representative Bahiyyih Chaffers moderates a panel discussion on "How Poverty Separates Parents and Children: A Challenge to Human Rights." The panel was sponsored by the International Movement ATD Fourth World and held 14 October 2004 at the Family School, near the United Nations, in New York. Left to right are: Ms. Chaffers; Alain du Bois Péan, General Secretary for the French Delegation to the 59th UN General Assembly; José Antonio Ocampo, UN Undersecretary General for Economic and Social Affairs; and Thierry Viard, Executive Secretary, International Movement ATD Fourth World. The panel was held as part of a program to recognize the International Day to Eradicate Poverty.

ness activities, and all attempts to obtain redress in such cases are denied."

Ms. Dugal added that Iranian authorities interfere with classes given to young members of the community in private houses and persist in banning the sacred institutions that, in the Bahá'í Faith, perform most of the functions reserved to clergy in other religions. As of September 2004, she said, one Bahá'í was still being held in Iran under a sentence of life imprisonment for apostasy, solely because of his religious beliefs.

The destruction of the house of Mirza Abbas Nuri followed the razing in April of another historic Bahá'í property, the gravesite of Quddus, an early disciple of the Bahá'í Faith. The action came after demolition work started in February and then halted temporarily in the face of protest at the local, national, and international levels.

Placing a statement in newspapers around the world to call attention to the destruction of Mirza Abbas Nuri's home is part of a coordinated effort by Bahá'ís outside Iran to call attention to the destruction of cultural landmarks that are part of the heritage of the entire world, said Glen Fullmer, Director of Communications for the Bahá'í Community of the United States.

"The places that are being demolished are significant to all humanity," said Mr. Fullmer. "They reflect unique elements of Iran's cultural history. So we are calling on Iranians around the world to protest the destruction of their own culture."

In France, the statement was placed in

*Le Monde*, that country's premier newspaper, said Brenda Abrar, a spokesperson for the Bahá'í community of France.

"There are a great many Iranians in France," said Ms. Abrar. "We want to alert them that their own cultural heritage is in danger. The house that was demolished in June actually represents a great work of Islamic architecture."

Mirza Abbas Nuri himself was widely regarded as one of Iran's greatest calligraphers and statesmen. In July, the Iranian newspaper *Hamshari* published a lengthy article about his life and the architecture of his house.

"As he had good taste for the arts and for beauty, he designed his own house in such a style that it became known as one of the most beautiful houses of that period," wrote Imam Mihdizadih in *Hamshahri* on 13 July. "The plasterwork and the tile-work in the rooms as well as the verdant veranda, the courtyard with its central pool, and the trees planted in the flowerbeds, all created a tranquil atmosphere in this house."

The house was destroyed over the period of about one week in June. The demolition order was issued in April by Ayatollah Kani, director of the Marvi School and the Endowments Office of the government, ostensibly for the purpose of creating an Islamic cemetery. When the demolition started on 20 June, officials from the Ministry of Information were present, and by 29 June more than 70 percent of the structure had been destroyed.\*

***"Officials continue to confiscate Bahá'í homes, deny them their rightfully earned pensions and inheritance, block their access to employment, or impede their private business activities, and all attempts to obtain redress in such cases are denied."***

**– Bani Dugal, Bahá'í International Community**

## “Spirit and Intellect” the theme of annual Bahá’í studies conference

CALGARY, Canada — Spiritual ideas are an essential component in solving the world’s complex problems, according to the opening speaker at the annual conference of the Association for Bahá’í Studies-North America, held here 3-6 September 2004.

“The global problems of the contemporary world make interdisciplinary research a necessity,” said Harold Coward, founding director of the Centre for Studies of Religion and Society at the University of Victoria in Canada.

Dr. Coward, who is not a Bahá’í, said the Centre was established to ensure “that the wisdom of the religious traditions is included alongside the best that science, social science and the humanities have to offer when major global problems are addressed.”

“While narrowly focused disciplinary work has produced much valuable knowledge, today’s problems, such as the environmental crisis, are so complex in nature that a team interdisciplinary approach is required,” he said, making clear that the religious and spiritual realms are part of such an approach.

Contributions by the other 58 major presenters addressed various aspects of the theme of the conference — “Spirit and Intellect: Advancing Civilization” — to the more than 1,200 participants. It was the association’s 28th annual conference.

In an address titled “The New World Disorder: Obstacles to Universal Peace,” W. Andy Knight outlined how insights from the Bahá’í teachings could help in developing solutions to conflict and other problems affecting the planet.

Although the world yearns for peace, an exercise of volition and action is required to bring it about, said Dr. Knight, the McCalla Research Professor of International Relations in the Department of Political Science at the University of Alberta.

“It is not ephemeral, it won’t fall from the sky into our laps because we hope for it — it requires extraordinary effort and it will require fundamental change to the present world order,” said Dr. Knight, who is a Bahá’í.

The Bahá’í writings, said Dr. Knight, provide the most comprehensive view of the requirements for peace to be established. Primary among them is the recognition of the unity of the human race.

“We have to reach out to the non-Bahá’í world, not to proselytize, but to let them know what is possible in terms of world order,” said Dr. Knight.

Other speakers and sessions covered a wide range of issues, including the arts and architecture, issues affecting indigenous peoples, spiritual and moral principles, and community in the workplace.

Siamak Hariri, a partner in Hariri Pontarini Architects in Toronto, spoke of the process involved in designing the first Bahá’í Temple of South America, to be located in Santiago, Chile.

Mr. Hariri described how the concept for the temple emerged from a broad collaboration among a team of Bahá’í and non-Bahá’í designers. The process was in marked contrast to the norm in contemporary architecture, which he said fixates on deconstruction and frenetic experimentation.

“We tried to abandon what we knew. We wanted a structure that is whole, with a sense of its completeness that leaves exploration of disharmony to others, without going back to pastoral expression,” said Mr. Hariri.\*

— With reporting by Paul Hanley

**“The global problems of the contemporary world make interdisciplinary research a necessity.”**

– Harold Coward,  
Centre for Studies  
of Religion and  
Society

W. Andy Knight, the McCalla Research Professor of International Relations in the Department of Political Science at the University of Alberta, delivered an address titled “The New World Disorder: Obstacles to Universal Peace.” Dr. Knight is co-editor of *Building Sustainable Peace*, reviewed on page 16.



Photo by Omid Rahimzadeh

## Sustainable Peace

*Review, continued from page 16*

much consideration. In his essay “Commodification, Compartmentalization and Militarization of Peacebuilding,” Kenneth Bush suggests that the introduction of outside military forces to help stop a conflict — and also to provide security and reconstruction efforts afterwards — often creates as many problems as it solves.

“[T]here are instances where so-called peacebuilding initiatives have had negative peacebuilding consequences,” writes Dr. Bush, an assistant professor at St. Paul University in Ottawa. As one such example, he offers the US\$456 million UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), which in his view displaced indigenous efforts to rebuild Kosovar society with an overbearing footprint of foreign military forces and international aid.

“[R]econstruction would have been put on a more solid footing if it had been built around civil society instead of humanitarian commodities and services,” he writes, noting that Kosovar doctors, teachers, and police officials could earn up to ten times more money by working as drivers, guards, or interpreters for international agencies than they could at their own professions. “The ultimate net impact was a contribution to the incapacity — rather than capacity — of civil society to rebuild itself on a foundation of tolerance and respect.”

A number of authors also pointed out that Western-led humanitarian intervention is sometimes seen as an extension of Western imperialism and/or neocolonialism.

“[M]ost peacebuilding interventions by Western (or Northern) actors can be accused of being ethnocentric and ‘top-down’ in the sense that they try to impose external values on the target society within which the peacebuilding initiative is being undertaken,” writes co-editor W. Andy Knight.

This leads many of the authors to a second common theme: that successful peacebuilding must rely more on the South.

Jean Daudelin writes that if countries such as Brazil, Mexico, Nigeria, South Africa and others were more involved, “the anticolonialist/anti-imperialist argument would lose much of its force, and the truly global meaning of intervention would be emphasized. Without them, the legitimacy of interventionary regimes would be flimsy and their ultimate sustainability doubtful.”

And while force may sometimes be nec-

essary, it cannot be the only tool for peacebuilding, say many of the authors. The stress the need for an integrated, holistic approach, one that includes participation by both international and local civil society organizations and seeks to address underlying social problems such as poverty, which so often lie at the root of conflict.

Sumie Nakaya, in her essay “Women and Gender Equality in Peacebuilding,” analyzes the impact of women’s participation in peace-making and reconstruction efforts in Somalia and Mozambique, and concludes that women’s groups have much to offer in peacebuilding efforts. “They form support groups, generate environments conducive to reconciliation, and lead community development,” writes Ms. Nakaya.

Another theme that emerges: countries and international organizations participate in peacebuilding when it suits their national interest, while disregarding conflicts that do not.

Mr. Daudelin recounts, for example, the desperate request for more troops made in 1994 by General Romeo Dallaire of the UN force in Rwanda. General Dallaire said he could stop the genocide then with 5,000 men, according to Mr. Daudelin. But the UN Security Council instead reduced his contingent from 2,548 men to just 270 men, leaving General Dallaire to stand by helplessly while some 800,000 men, women, and children were killed.

Satya Brata Das suggests that a number of structural changes at the United Nations might help boost international unity of action in peacebuilding. Among other things, he calls for the establishment of a UN High Commissioner for Peace and a permanent global fund (based on an international tax on defense spending) to be used for post-conflict reconstruction.

“Under the aegis of a UN High Commissioner for Peace, the international presence should be diverse and multilateral enough to banish any taint of imperialist intent,” writes Mr. Das.

For Bahá’ís, who have long advocated the establishment of a genuine international force that could be used to keep or build the peace, the book will be of some interest. In the Bahá’í view, the only long-term guarantee of peace is a united international system that is committed to and willing to act on the principle of collective security. The book’s somewhat fractured picture of the present state of international peacebuilding and its shortcomings supports this view.\*

**Countries and international organizations participate in peacebuilding when it suits their national interest, while disregarding conflicts that do not.**

## Good intentions, complex realities

When the Cold War effectively ended some 15 years ago, there was great hope that the world would soon move into a new era of peace and prosperity.

The superpowers, it was reasoned, would spend less on nuclear arms and other weapons, freeing funds for peaceful development. Moreover, it was felt, they would also be less likely to instigate and fuel the proxy wars that raged in many parts of the world as ideological tensions were played out.

But the post-Cold War era “has proven to be the world’s most violent period since World War II,” according to David Beer. He counts some 93 armed conflicts in the last decade and a half, and some 5.5 million deaths from them — of which 75 percent were civilians.

Mr. Beer, a superintendent with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police who did extensive peacekeeping work in Haiti, is one of 19 contributors to a new book titled *Building Sustainable Peace*. (Many of the other contributors are also Canadian, a fact which reflects Canada’s historic contribution to peacekeeping. Peacekeeping was first proposed in 1956 by Canada’s then Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Lester B. Pearson, who won the Nobel Peace Prize for that effort. Since then, Canada has participated in virtually every major UN peacekeeping mission.)

Edited by Tom Keating and W. Andy Knight, both professors of political science at the University of Alberta, *Building Sustainable Peace* takes a broad-brush look at the challenges of dealing with the kinds of regional, civil, and/or “brushfire” conflicts that have arisen in such numbers around the world since the United States and the Soviet Union ended their conflict.

Scholarly in approach and prescriptive in tone, the book considers the entire regime of what has become known as “peacebuilding” — which is an evolution from peacekeeping and includes those activities related to rebuilding war-torn societies such as disarming warring parties, decommissioning and destroying weapons, repatriating refugees, creating or rebuilding justice systems, training police forces, strengthening civil society, and reconstituting

governance systems.

The essays in the book examine both specific aspects of this process, such as humanitarian intervention and/or strengthening civil society, and specific case studies, such as efforts to build peace in Haiti, Kosovo, Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and East Timor, among other places.

While the essays offer diverse viewpoints, a number of themes nevertheless emerge.

First, many authors take it as a given that in many instances, international efforts to build peace in a specific region or country will require military action or force. “Even



in the most forward-looking operational frameworks of conflict prevention and peacebuilding, the option to employ preventive action in the form of military or armed humanitarian intervention will inevitably be featured,” writes Melissa Labonte in “Humanitarian Actors and the Politics of Preventive Action.”

That said, the problems accompanying such use of force in peacebuilding receive

*Review, continued on page 15*

**Building  
Sustainable Peace**

*Edited by Tom  
Keating and W.  
Andy Knight*

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