

Baha'i faithful pray for their own

BY DAWN BAUMGARTNER VAUGHAN : The Herald-Sun

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DURHAM -- Local members of the Baha'i faith are praying for seven imprisoned Baha'i leaders in Iran who are expected to be tried this week by the Islamic government. One is the brother-in-law of a Chapel Hill resident.

Local Baha'is held two prayer vigils Sunday at the Baha'i Center in Durham and more are planned through the weekend.

Over the past few days, the charges and impending trial of Baha'is have been condemned by the U.S. Department of State and the European Union. The U.S. House of Representatives has drafted a resolution "condemning the government of Iran for its state-sponsored persecution of its Baha'i minority and its continued violation of the International Covenants on Human Rights."

The Baha'is are charged with espionage for Israel, insulting religious sanctities and propaganda against the Islamic Republic.

Azadeh Perry of Chapel Hill fled Iran in 1987 -- one of 15 Baha'is who escaped to Pakistan. It is her brother-in-law, Saeid Rezaie, who is being held with six others in Iran. She knows three of them well. It is not the first time Rezaie has been arrested -- he was also imprisoned in 2006, held in solitary confinement, then released on bail. Her two adult nieces were also arrested and released. The women were required to take classes about Islam for three years as part of their punishment.

Perry has been in contact with her sister in Iran for short phone conversations. She said even the prisoners don't know when they will be tried.

"It is so difficult, especially since last week when they announced the trial. There shouldn't even be a trial," Perry said. The imprisoned Baha'is are represented by Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi, though she has not been able to meet with them.

"My heart is in Iran. It is very hard," Perry said. She and her husband will host a prayer vigil Friday. She said that the Iranian government has already killed so many Baha'is, that if her brother-in-law and the others are convicted of the false charges, they could be executed.

Perry hopes that United Nations pressure on Iran will foster the release of the prisoners. Local Baha'is will keep praying for the safety and protection of the Iranian prisoners until they receive word, said Durham Baha'i spokeswoman Kathy Lee. Baha'i is not recognized as a religion in the Islamic country, and Baha'is claim that hundreds have been executed and more persecuted for their faith since the Iranian revolution in 1979.

Lee said that anyone interested in religious freedom and human rights is welcome at the vigils.

Prayer vigils for Iranian Baha'is

Today

7 p.m. -- Hosted by the Nourani family, 307 Westbrook Drive, Carrboro. (919) 968-8983

7 p.m. -- Hosted by Nahal Badiian-Farahani, 20027 Roark Hoey Loop, Chapel Hill. (843) 327-1772

Friday

7:30 p.m. -- Hosted by the Perry family, 2525 Booker Creek Road, Apt. 15E, Chapel Hill. (919) 928-9767

7 p.m. -- Hosted by the Mostaghimi family, 9 Rose Brook Road, Durham. (919) 490-8984

Saturday

7:30 p.m. -- Durham Baha'i Center, 5103 Revere Road, Durham. (919) 251-8085.

Who are the Baha'is?

Baha'is believe that all world religions are part of the same one religion and all worship the same God. Their message is one of unity, equality and peace. Baha'is believe that their prophets -- Bahauallah and the Bab -- were the last in a line that includes Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Christ and Muhammad.

The faith was founded in the mid-1800s in Iran, and many of the world's 5 million Baha'is are Iranian, though the Baha'i faith has spread across the world to 190 countries. There are more than 153,000 Baha'is in United States. About 500 live in the Triangle.

Bahauallah -- born Mirza Husayn Ali in Tehran in 1817 -- was the founder of the faith.

Baha'is also believe that the Bab, born in Iran in 1819, was an independent messenger of God whose writings paved the way for Bahauallah. The Bab was executed in 1850 by Islamic clergy. Bahauallah spent 40 years in exile for his teachings and writings. He died in 1892.

The Baha'i Center of Durham and Orange counties is located at 5103 Revere Road,
Durham.

For more information, visit www.bahai.us and www.bahai.org.

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