

Iran Targets Its Baha'i Community With Arrests and Home Demolitions

Representatives of the religious minority said that the crackdown was the latest chapter in a long history of persecution. The authorities accused those detained of being spies with links to Israel.

By Farnaz Fassihi

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Iran has begun a sweeping crackdown on its Baha'i community, a long-persecuted religious minority, arresting dozens of people and destroying property belonging to members of the group, according to accounts this week from the government, residents and rights groups.

The Iranian Intelligence Ministry said in a statement on Monday that an unspecified number of people from the Baha'i community had been arrested, accusing them of being spies with links to Israel and of propagating the Baha'i faith by "infiltrating various educational sectors across the country, including kindergartens."

Bani Dugal, the United Nations representative of the Baha'i International Community, which advocates on behalf of the group worldwide, said that Iran had arrested 52 Baha'is in July, raiding dozens of homes, closing businesses and demolishing properties. She said that the reasons behind the timing of the actions were still unclear.

"We don't know why," Ms. Dugal said. "They are rolling out crackdowns and we are concerned that this is a new chapter in the persecution of Baha'is because the nature of the current attacks have been very systematic and cruel and violent."

The community has long faced persecution and discrimination in Iran because the government does not recognize the faith. The Baha'i belief that there was another prophet after Muhammad is anathema to Islam, and the fact that the headquarters of the Baha'i people is in Haifa, Israel, even though its roots are in what is today Iran, adds to the distrust Tehran has for the group.

On Tuesday, about 200 security and intelligence officers descended on the tiny village of Roshankouh, in northern Iran, where Baha'is have lived for more than a century, according to interviews with a resident, relatives of residents and rights groups. They closed off an access road, fired gunshots in the air and sprayed pepper gas at villagers, according to the accounts.

Bulldozers followed. Their target: Six houses and farmland belonging to Baha'i members.

A few days earlier, security agents arrested 13 Baha'is from four cities across Iran, including three prominent community leaders, Mahvash Sabet, Afif Naimi and Fariba Kamalabadi, who had all previously served 10-year prison sentences, according to Ms. Dugal, the Baha'i representative.

The attacks on the Baha'i follow a recent wave of wider repression in Iran that has included the arrests of prominent film directors, politicians from the reformist faction, activists and women challenging the mandatory hijab rule in public.

In Roshankouh, as well as demolishing houses, the bulldozers tore down fences protecting farmland that served as the backbone of the community's livelihood, according to witnesses, videos posted on social media, reports broadcast on state television and comments by Iranian officials.

One family's home was reduced to rubble, their furniture, clothes, toys and carpets thrown on the side of the road, according to witnesses. A farmer's land was seized and declared public property, the witnesses said, adding that an older man who had protested had been beaten up and that several residents who had raised their voices had been pepper sprayed, handcuffed and briefly detained.

Cellphones were confiscated to prevent documentation of the raid, one 58-year-old resident of Roshankouh said.

"They want to isolate our community, to choke us economically and disrupt our peace," the resident said in a telephone interview, who spoke on condition of anonymity out of fear of retribution. He added that he had won a court case to save his house but that some of his farmland had been confiscated on Tuesday.

The village has a total population of about 52 people, according to state television. Residents said that there were about 70 houses belonging to Baha'i families, with most being seasonal residents. There were less than a handful of houses belonging to Muslim families, residents added.

Local officials from Mazandaran, the province that includes Roshankouh, walked around the village flanked by security guards this week and gave interviews to state television on Tuesday in which they defended the actions as protecting the environment. They said that the demolished houses infringed on forests and that land had been illegally cultivated.



"The orders issued have nothing to do with a sect or a belief," said Mohamad Sadegh Akbari, a cleric who is chief prosecutor for Mazandaran, according to official news outlets.

Baha'i community members said that the government's actions amounted to collective punishment because of a legal battle over property rights that has simmered since 2016, when Roshankouh was mapped and officials ruled that parts of it were within forests owned and protected by the state.

Last August, the government demolished three small shacks in Roshankouh, saying that they had been built on protected land, according to residents and local news reports.

The State Department's Office for International Religious Freedom posted on social media that "the U.S. urges Iran to halt its ongoing oppression of the Baha'i community and honor its international obligations to respect the right of all Iranians to freedom of religion or belief."

Baha'is face widespread discrimination in Iran and are effectively barred from government employment and higher education. Sectors of the service industry involving food, hospitality and medicine, are also off limits to members of the group, according to Ms. Dugal and interviews with members of the faith inside and outside Iran.

"We have nearly 150 years of history in Roshankouh from the earliest days of the Baha'i faith," said Badi Daemi, a 64-year-old Iranian Baha'i who has relatives living in the village. Mr. Daemi was speaking via telephone from Andorra, the European country where he now lives.

"There are development violations all over Iran," he added, "so why are they bulldozing this tiny village in the mountains?"