

Iranian woman survives torture through faith

By Michelle Quillen

Alligator Writer

A woman who was tortured and imprisoned in Iran for her religious beliefs said Thursday evening the experience was the most painful and the most beautiful experience of her life.

Ruhiyyih Jahanpour, a member of the Baha'i religion, spoke to more than 40 people in the Reitz Union about life in prison.

Baha'i is a religious faith that has no clergy and considers men and women to be equal.

Jahanpour said that in 1979 Baha'is were persecuted by Moslem fanatics and their high holy places were destroyed or confiscated. Baha'is also were dismissed from universities and high schools.

When she was in prison, Jahanpour remembers being tied to a bed, blindfolded and beaten on the soles of her feet with a wire or rope lash.

"The torturer would say, 'If you don't deny

your faith I'm going to beat you,' " she said. "Because you can't see, you don't know when it will hit you so your body is so tense."

She said the torturer would stop after a few lashes to let her feet become more sensitive, and prisoners would get more than 74 lashes at a time.

"Gradually, I felt my body was here but my soul was somewhere else. You remember that you are innocent and the torture is only because of your faith.

"Having that spiritual power that you don't feel physical pain anymore is spirituality," she said.

Jahanpour said she refused to deny her religion to the torturer.

"By denying what you believe, you deny your own reality, you deny your existence," she said. "How could you live with yourself after that?"

Baha'is were called "untouchables" in prison and forced to eat from separate plates and to use separate blankets, she said. They

were not permitted to pray aloud and were allowed to see their families for less than eight minutes every two weeks.

But the torture created unity and love among prisoners, she said.

"If one of us was tortured, it felt like all of us were tortured."

Jahanpour said she was imprisoned twice before she escaped from Iran with her family in 1983. She traveled seven days through desert and over mountains to bordering Pakistan. She then immigrated to Canada and now lives in Alabama and travels around the country telling of her ordeal.

To one audience member, Jahanpour's story was inspiring.

"For me she's an inspiration," said Lynne Schreiber, a member of the Gainesville Area Baha'is. "I like to hear her story about personal transformation."

Schreiber said the Baha'i religion, which is 150 years old, centers around Baha'v'llah, a prophet who died 100 years ago and spent

40 years in prison himself.

"At the time in Iran, no one knew who was going to be arrested or executed. They did it to terrorize everyone," Jahanpour said.

But she said that since the death of radical Moslem leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989, the persecution has declined.

"The more they persecute, the more it is going to spread and grow," she said.

Gainesville resident John Craig, who has been a Baha'i for 15 years, said Jahanpour's speech made him wonder if he would have had as much courage as she did.

"She's really good at transmitting the spirit of what happened," Craig said. "If they wanted freedom they could have had it. It's through this sort of sacrifice that the world will see peace and justice."

Jahanpour said Baha'is are willing to sacrifice their lives because of their faith.

"When we are confronted with death we are asked to die or deny our faith. We will willingly die with joy and happiness."