

# Friends of local Baha'i face spy charges in Iran

Ruhi Hiebert asks community to pray for men, women

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In Shiraz, Iran, the City of Roses, Ruhi Hiebert remembers Saeid Razaie as a teenager laughing and smiling and playing his guitar. She remembers Afif Naimie, a little older and a little more serious, carefully teaching children Arabic.

This week, those memories will be going through her mind as she says prayers for the safety of her old friends: Both men are among a group of seven Baha'i believers in Iran who face trial for spying for Israel. At this point, their friends around the world fear they will be executed.

Local Baha'is invite the community to join their prayers Sunday, 10:30 a.m., at the Baha'i Center, 3209 Pulaski Pike.

The espionage charges are manufactured as a cover for a government desire to eradicate all Baha'is in Iran, says Hiebert, a Montessori teacher and director of the Montessori School of Madison. As a teenager in Iran, Hiebert endured imprisonment and beatings in Iranian jails for attempting to teach Baha'i children who had been expelled from school.

Baha'is in Iran are accused of spying for Israel, she says, because their world headquarters, established in Haifa long before that city was part of Israel, is now in the Jewish state.

But the newspapers in Iran are detailing how the arrested were caught possessing highly sophisticated communications equipment and other incriminating evidence — telephones, a global positioning system, a suitcase full of money, says Aziz Setayesh of Huntsville who grew up in Iran and visited family there last month.

"I don't think they would execute them if the government didn't know they were spying," Setayesh said. "They had to have been paid by Israel to do something."

The group is in danger of being assumed guilty without being able to defend themselves, said Hiebert. Baha'is are not allowed legal counsel, she said, a claim Setayesh disputes. Hiebert said that the two times she was arrested, she simply had to stay in jail until she was re-



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**Ruhi Hiebert is concerned about two friends who are among a group of seven Baha'i believers in Iran who face trial for spying for Israel.**

leased and was not allowed either attorney or trial.

Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi, who was a judge in Iran before the Islamic Revolution forbade women to be judges, and is now a lawyer, has offered to defend the group. But she has not been allowed to speak with them, according to a news release from Tim Tyson, a member of the Huntsville Baha'i Center.

The Baha'i faith, which began in what was then Persia in 1844, declares that the Twelfth Imam, whom Shiite Muslims declare will return with Jesus to establish a reign of peace, already returned in the prophetic mission of the Baha'u'llah, the founder of Baha'i.

For these reasons, most Muslims consider Baha'i to be a false religion, much as many Christians consider the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to be a false religion because of its addition to recognized biblical prophets and its extra-biblical sacred writings. Baha'i is not recognized as a religion in Iran, Setayesh confirmed, adding that most Iranians believe that both their religious

and cultural teachings undermine the peace and security of the Iranian Islamic state.

Baha'is emphasize that all religions that work toward peace and justice are true, that religions must conform to science and reason, and that men and women and people of all races are equal. With about 5 million members, it claims members in nearly every country of the world.

The U.S. State Department has issued a statement defining the arrests as religious persecution, as has the European Union.

U. S. House Resolution 175 was introduced Feb. 14 to urge Iran to grant a fair trial to the accused. Updates and background on the situation are posted at <http://iran.bahai.us>, [www.bahai.us](http://www.bahai.us) and [www.Iran-PressWatch.org](http://www.Iran-PressWatch.org). Hiebert said that it would be helpful if her neighbors would contact U.S. Rep. Parker Griffith to ask his support of the bill.

"We don't respond to violence with violence," Hiebert said. "When they kill us, when they burn down our houses — and they burned down hundreds of houses in my town — we don't do that to them, but we pursue justice. We want the world to see what they are doing."