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HUMAN RIGHTS AND DISABILITY

Written statement submitted by Baha'i International Community, a
non-governmental organization in consultative status (category II)

The Secretary-General has received the following communication which is
circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[13 August 1988]

The Baha'i International Community welcomes the impressive work
accomplished by the Special Rapporteur, Mr. Leandro Despouy, on his study on
human rights and disability. We believe that Mr. Despouy's study makes an
important contribution to the effort to enhance disabled persons' enjoyment of
fundamental human rights.

In our statement under this agenda item submitted to the Sub-Commission
at its thirty-eighth session, circulated as E/CN.4/Sub.2/1985/NGO/3, we
outlined the Baha'i view on discrimination against disabled persons as well as
the question of institutionalization. In this statement, we would like to
address an additional topic which Mr. Despouy has included in his study,
namely, economic, social and cultural rights as they related to disability.

In addition to facing outright discrimination in many aspects of their lives, disabled persons encounter special barriers in fully realizing their potentials to contribute to the economic, social and cultural life of society. While disabled persons obviously have special needs which must be met in order for them to enjoy the rights to which they are entitled, the question of rehabilitation extends beyond the provision of primary health care. It necessitates the development of a supportive social milieu in which the disabled person can acquire skills, utilize strengths and participate in society to the fullest degree allowed by the individual's impairment. For these reasons we fully approve of Mr. Despouy's statement, in his preliminary report, that "the most effective way of mitigating the effects of the present situation is to ensure the full and equal participation of disabled persons in all fields of social life".

For example, in the area of education, pre-school, primary, and secondary schools might offer special programmes to assist disabled children to work through their disabilities, and disabled children should be provided with adequate means to participate in these programmes, including appropriate provision for transportation. These programmes should be integrated as much as possible with the mainstream programme, so that disabled children are not unnecessarily isolated from their peers and socially stigmatized. It is crucial that disabled children learn to view themselves as contributing members of their peer-group and be seen as such. Furthermore, the active support and involvement of families in the educational process is essential, as we discuss in more detail below.

Educational programmes, in addition to helping disabled children cope with the practical problems of their disabilities, should seek to develop the particular talents and gifts of each and every disabled child. Disabled children must be given a special opportunity to enhance their innate talents, for developing these talents and skills is one of the surest ways of enabling disabled children to see themselves positively, to cultivate self-respect through accomplishments and to contribute to the well-being of society.

Disabled persons encounter some of their greatest difficulties in taking advantage of their right - and responsibility - to work. Society too often brands the disabled as unemployable and inferior in their work abilities, or relegates them to a role of passive dependency. Certainly, every disabled person faces limitations which might restrict employment options, but often these disabilities can be overcome or can guide choices toward the use of strengths. More importantly, it is the Baha'i conviction that work is a form of worship and a means to spiritual growth; in consequence, the right to perform work in service to fellow human beings is a fundamental right for all persons. Profitable and socially useful employment is especially important for disabled persons, who, because of their disabilities, can easily feel socially irrelevant. Accordingly, disabled persons must be given special opportunities to acquire skills that make them employable, perhaps through specially-designed training programmes, and should also be given the opportunity to make use of these skills in workplaces which are accessible to them and which promote their full integration.

A specially important social right for disabled persons is the right to freedom of religion. It should be noted that disabilities present a reminder of the fragility of our existence and of our own mortality - a reminder which members of society may prefer to avoid. Religion can play a major role in helping the disabled person to understand his spiritual purpose, to acquire a healthy perspective of his impairment and to recognize that his physical or mental disabilities need not adversely affect his fundamental character as a human being. Baha'is believe that religion should be free from superstition and must operate in full harmony with scientific knowledge and advances. Too often outmoded, religiously-based superstitions have attached a social stigma to those with disabilities, implicitly linking disabilities with lower, "evil" forces or associating them with culpability. When religious belief is freed from superstition and harmonized with science, religion becomes a source of inspiration to disabled persons - assisting them in taking full advantage of the medical developments, while fostering the development of a positive outlook founded on a recognition of life's spiritual purpose.

Finally, Baha'is believe that the families of disabled persons can play a crucial part in helping them realize their full potentialities. The sense of belonging to a family, and acceptance by the members of one's family, can help to provide the support and encouragement so necessary to the development of a sense of dignity and self-worth. The family, in the Baha'i view, is the basic unit of society, and it is in the family that the child's fundamental outlook on the world is shaped and that he is first educated. If the disabled child receives sincere love, encouragement and support from his family, balanced by the inculcation of a sense of social responsibility, he will emerge much better prepared to deal with his disability in a positive manner and to contribute to the welfare of the community. As not infrequently disability requires the family to come to terms with the impairment so that such loving encouragement can be provided, it is important that family members receive the kind of education we suggested in our statement to the Sub-Commission at its thirty-eighth session - education aimed at helping them develop a greater understanding of the nature of disability and an appreciation for the special gifts and talents of their disabled fellow family members.

We once again express our support for the very important work undertaken by Mr. Despouy.