## Baha’i Girl Denied Burial

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When 12-year old Mahna Samandari died in October, her family arranged for her to be buried in Tabriz, where the family lived. But because Samandari was Baha’i, the authorities in the East Azerbaijan capital rejected the grieving family’s burial requests on the grounds of her religion. After 21 days, her body remains in the city morgue and the family’s requests for Mahna Samandari to be granted a proper burial continue to be ignored.

IranWire spoke to one of Mahna Samandari’s relatives about the ordeal.

**What happened after Mahna died and when did the authorities refuse to issue a burial permit?**

Mahna died on October 21 in hospital, due to an illness. At the insistence of her family, her body was transferred to her home so that the Baha’i rites for the dead could be performed. On the way to the house, the ambulance driver noticed that the family was Baha’i. He refused to continue, but finally, he yielded to the pleas of the family and delivered the body to their home.

After washing the body, reciting prayers and shrouding her according to Baha’i tenets, the family took Mahna’s body to the city’s public cemetery, Vadi-e Rahmat [“Valley of Mercy”]. But the cemetery officials stated that they didn’t issue permits for the burial of non-Muslims in their cemetery. Since then Mahna’s body has been at the morgue.

**Is there a precedent for this? Have other Tabriz Baha’is been treated this way?**

After the Islamic Revolution, the Baha’i cemetery was closed down and since then, Baha’is have been buried in Vadi-e Rahmat, a public cemetery. But, starting in 2014, cemetery officials refused to bury Baha’is. Since then more than 20 Baha’is have died in Tabriz; none have been issued a burial permit. The excuse the officials give is that they cannot bury the deceased Baha’is next to Muslims because it would amount to propaganda for them.

They only issue permits if the deceased Baha’i is buried without a coffin and according to Islamic sharia law. Because they don’t have access to another burial place, the Baha’is place the body at the morgue, hoping the officials will provide them with a place to bury their dead. Unfortunately, after a few days they get the news that the body had been buried in the Baha’i cemetery in the city of Miandoab or in Urmia [both in West Azerbaijan, 167 and 147 kilometres from Tabriz respectively] without the family’s knowledge and without administering proper religious rites.

According to the tenets of Baha’ism, the time distance between the places of death and burial cannot be more than one hour. Since both Miandoab and Urmia are more than one hour away from Tabriz, it seems that the authorities want to insult the religious beliefs of the relatives of the deceased Baha’is. The Baha’is of Tabriz have complained to various local and national legal authorities to redress the wrongs and to receive land for a cemetery of their own. But so far they’ve received no answers.

**What has Mahna’s family done regarding the body of their daughter?**

Burying Tabriz Baha’is has been problematic for the past few years, but keeping the body of a handicapped Baha’i adolescent in the morgue for 21 days is unprecedented and exceptional. Mahna’s parents are both disabled and pursuing the issue of their daughter’s body is very difficult for them. Mahna’s mother is deaf and her father has a bad leg and needs to walk with a stick. Despite this, they have repeatedly visited the offices of Vadi-e Rahmat cemetery. But the only answer they’ve received has been “there’s no need to come here. If something happens we will let you know.”

They’ve even tried to meet with the provincial governor or his deputy, but neither has agreed to meet them. When Mahna was alive, the governor had commended her for her paintings, so the Samandari family thought he would help them to bury their daughter. A few days ago they went to the Bar Association to appoint a lawyer, but no lawyer agreed to take on the case because it has “security” ramifications.

**What did Mahna Samandari die from?**

Mahna was suffering from a rare disease. It wasn’t genetic, but it was progressive. Her legs stopped growing when she was a baby and after a while she lost the use of them. Little by little, she stopped growing and towards the end she was confined to a wheelchair. In her final days the disease spread to her internal organs as well. Her lungs stopped working, which was the cause of her death.

Despite the disease, Mahna was a hopeful and cheerful girl. She was young but the problems brought about by her illness never defeated her and she found a way around them. For example, when her legs stopped working she started using her hands. She loved to study and to paint. When her hands were no longer working she would hold the pen between her lips and continued painting. She was awarded a prize for her paintings, and the provincial governor wrote her a letter of commendation. She studied at a school for the handicapped and was a distinguished student.