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AZERBAIJAN: Independent Muslim leaders "safe", but pressure continues

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Prominent independent Muslim leaders Ilgar Ibragimoglu and Azer Ramizoglu have not been detained and are safe in hiding, one of their colleagues reported. Seymour Rashidov, spokesman for religious freedom group Devamm, told Forum 18 News Service that on 20 October Ibragimoglu, imam of the Juma mosque in Baku's old city, left the Norwegian embassy where he had sought refuge to avoid arrest after the police raided Friday prayers on 17 October. Rashidov complained of continuing media attacks on Ibragimoglu and his colleagues and the continued denial of registration for three Muslim and religious freedom organisations. "The authorities don't want anyone in the country to investigate religious freedom because there are so many violations." He said tens of thousands of Muslim women who had refused to be photographed without headscarves for their identity documents were denied the ability to vote in the 15 October presidential election.

Two leading independent Muslims whom the authorities tried to arrest at Friday prayers on 17 October have not been detained and are safe, Seymour Rashidov, spokesman for religious freedom group Devamm, told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Baku on 22 October. "No actions have been taken against Ilgar Ibragimoglu and Azer Ramizoglu and no accusations have been made against them," he reported. Rashidov confirmed that late on 20 October, Ibragimoglu, imam of the Juma mosque in Baku's old city, left the Norwegian embassy where he had taken refuge (see F18News 20 October 2003) and both he and Ramizoglu are now in hiding. He said the Juma mosque, which was raided by police and plain clothes officers on 17 October, is functioning normally. "There are no police there and all religious rituals are following their path." However, Rashidov expressed concern at continuing media attacks on Ibragimoglu and on the activities of the Juma mosque.

The attempt to arrest Ibragimoglu and Ramizoglu came amid a brutal government response to widespread demonstrations against the way the government manipulated voting in the 15 October presidential election. The authorities have arrested several hundred opposition leaders, journalists and human rights activists. Rashidov said two Devamm activists detained in the raid on the Juma mosque, Azad Narimanoglu and Najaf Allahverdiyev, were held and questioned by the police for only some 20 minutes before being freed. "No action has been taken against them since."

Rashidov also highlighted the impossibility for Muslim women who refused to be photographed for their identification documents without headscarves to vote. "Tens of thousands of devout Muslim women were denied the right to vote," he told Forum 18. "Only those who had old Soviet-era identity documents could vote." The problems came amid a long-running dispute over the authorities' refusal to allow devout Muslim women to be photographed in the hijab. Devamm (Centre for the Protection of Freedom of Conscience and Religion) has long campaigned for the many thousands of women who have been refused identity documents and passports as a result. Rashidov said his group had appealed in vain to the Interior Ministry, the procuracy and international organisations to allow such women to obtain official identity documents.

Rashidov also complained of the continuation of what Devamm regards as the officially-sanctioned slander campaign against it and associated organisations. He said the private television station ANS-TV, which he described as "pro-government", had attacked Ibragimoglu and the Juma Mosque in a broadcast on 21 October, accusing the mosque of - among other alleged crimes - harbouring "unknown groups". "These charges of course had no foundation," he insisted. He said that lawyers for the Islam-Ittihad society have taken two other television stations - Space TV and Lider TV - to court accusing them of slandering the society in broadcasts of 11 October.

The authorities - who have long been running a campaign against Ibragimoglu and Ramizoglu and the organisations they are involved in - were angered that they had spoken up in favour of presidential candidate Isa Gambar, who came second according to the contested official results of the presidential poll. The president-elect according to the official results, Ilham Aliiev, had received open backing from Sheikh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, the head of the Spiritual Administration of Caucasian Muslims, without any complaint from officials. Among those congratulating Ilham Aliiev was Russian Orthodox Patriarch Aleksy, who wrote to him on 20 October to offer his "heartfelt congratulations" and to affirm his conviction that he would "expend all his strength and talents for the good of the people of Azerbaijan".

Rashidov believes the authorities will continue to deny recognition to three organisations connected with Ramizoglu and Ibragimoglu. Ramizoglu is leader of Devamm (Centre for the Protection of Freedom of Conscience and Religion) and chairman of the Islam-Ittihad Society, which works for inter-religious dialogue and tolerance. As well as being imam of the Juma Mosque, Ibragimoglu is a board member of the Islam-Ittihad Society, leading coordinator of Devamm and Secretary General of the Azerbaijani Chapter of the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA).

Rashidov said that Islam-Ittihad had lodged a challenge at the Appeal Court to the 28 August Sabail district court decision to liquidate the organisation in a suit brought by the Justice Ministry. He complained that the registration department of the Justice Ministry had consistently refused to register Devamm or the Azerbaijani IRLA Chapter. "The justice ministry refused and returned the Devamm application," he told Forum 18, "but they have been sitting on the IRLA application for exactly a year - without any response. The authorities don't want anyone in the country to investigate religious freedom because there are so many violations."

Fazil Mamedov, head of the justice ministry registration department, appears indifferent to whether Islam-Ittihad challenges its liquidation. "Let them appeal," he told Forum 18 from Baku on 22 October. He said he had "no time" to explain to Forum 18 why he had initiated its liquidation, muttering only that it "created armed groups". He said he had denied Devamm registration "because it was the same organisation as Islam-Ittihad". As to IRLA, he said initially that "there is no such organisation", then declared that he had handed over the registration issue to the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations. He declined to discuss anything further and put the phone down.

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