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AZERBAIJAN: Police refuse to protect Adventists facing death threats

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

Police have refused to protect an Adventist pastor in Nakhichevan (Naxçivan), who has been threatened by local men with death or being driven out of the community. "People phone and come to my house to threaten us but the authorities have refused to help," Pastor Khalid Babaev told Forum 18 News Service. Pastor Babaev fears for the safety of his wife and son, and does not know if it will be safe to hold a service as usual next Saturday. Local Muslims have threatened to sacrifice Babaev as a holy duty and to halt Adventist religious activity in Nakhichevan. If Pastor Babaev holds another service, he has been told that a mob will be collected to attack his house. The police have refused to discuss the threats with Forum 18, or say what they would do to protect church members from the threatened violence.

Police in the town of Nakhichevan (Naxçivan), an Azerbaijani exclave between Armenia, Turkey and Iran, have refused to protect the small Adventist church from local men who have threatened to kill or drive out the community. "People phone and come to my house to threaten us but the authorities have refused to help," Pastor Khalid Babaev told Forum 18 News Service from Nakhichevan today (25 February). "We have a democracy here. Why can such things happen?" Babaev said he feared for his wife and son, and did not know whether it would be safe to hold a service as usual next Saturday. Reached by telephone on 25 February, two officials at the main Nakhichevan police headquarters separately refused to discuss the threats with Forum 18 or say what they would do to protect church members from the threatened violence.

Idris Abbasov, head of the local branch of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, said he had heard of the threats but did not have full information. "When I have this I will compile a report and share it with you," he told Forum 18 from Nakhichevan on 25 February. "But all religious communities have the right to pray and meet together - our constitution guarantees that. The police are there to defend the law and human rights for all."

Babaev told Forum 18 that there had been a threatening telephone call a week ago, followed by two more late on 24 February. At lunchtime on 25 February five men had come to his house, where the church meets, and told him that as Muslims they were ready to sacrifice him as a holy duty and halt the Adventists' religious activity in Nakhichevan. They threatened him that if he held another service they would collect a mob of people to attack the house. They ordered him to leave Nakhichevan. "It is not clear if they were threatening to kill me or to drive me out," Babaev told Forum 18.

He said the local policeman Musa (last name unknown) refused to speak to him on the telephone when he sought help, while Ashraf (last name unknown), an officer at the police headquarters, was equally unhelpful. "We can't give you any help," Babaev quoted the officer as having told him. "We can't stand guard by every front door and can't listen in to every phone call." The officer refused to accept his report of the threats.

The Adventist community in the Azerbaijani capital Baku has also sought to help gain protection for the church. "We phoned the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations," the head of the Adventist Church in Azerbaijan, Pastor Yahya Zavrichko, told Forum 18 from Baku on 25 February. "But they had no suggestions as to what we should do." He condemned the Nakhichevan authorities' decision not to protect the church.

He speculated that the threats might have come now because of heightened Muslim sensibilities ahead of the holy day of Ashura in the month of Muharram, an important day in the Shia Muslim calendar when believers commemorate the martyrdom of Husayn in 680. But he also pointed to the church's long-running difficulties from the authorities. "The State Committee has been dragging out registration of the church, while six months ago the Justice Ministry stripped the church of its registration, claiming that there was something wrong with the church's legal address." He said when they asked the State Committee in Baku why the church's registration application was being stalled officials said the Nakhichevan branch of the committee was not under its control but subject to the regional parliament.

The Nakhichevan Adventist church - which has some 17 members - has faced repeated pressure from the authorities, including the deportation from the region of a previous pastor Vahid Nagiev in June 2002. For more than a year it could hold no services (see

F18News 8 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=48). Babaev was installed as pastor in July 2003 and, apart from a visit by the local policeman who claimed the church could not meet without registration, has been able to continue its services.

Another religious minority with small congregations under pressure is the Baptists, whose congregation in the south-eastern town of Neftechala has been harassed by the local deputy police chief with threats to drive their pastor out of town and has been told it cannot meet without registration. Other small Baptist congregations have also faced threats from the police and registration problems (see F18News 12 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=252).

For more background information see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=92

A printer-friendly map of Azerbaijan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=azerba>

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