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AZERBAIJAN: Jehovah's Witness claims police beating, interrogation and strip-search

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Police in Azerbaijan's northwestern district of Zakatala have refused to explain whether, and if so why, they beat a 71-year-old Jehovah's Witness Lydia Suleimanova. She states that a beating from police left her requiring medical attention, and that police questioned her for many hours at the police station, accused her of being a prostitute and stripped her naked for a drugs search. Deputy police chief Kamandar Hasanov asked Forum 18 News Service: "Why are you getting involved in things here that have nothing to do with you?" Despite repeated calls, no duty officer at the police station was prepared to discuss Suleimanova's case. She has lodged an appeal against her maltreatment with the General Prosecutor's Office, the Interior Ministry's Inspection Department and the Human Rights Ombudsperson. Police elsewhere in Azerbaijan have also been involved in harassment of Muslim and Protestant religious believers. Also, Jehovah's Witness Mushfiq Mammedov has failed in his appeal to overturn his criminal conviction for conscientious objection to military service. He is preparing an appeal to the Supreme Court.

Police in the northwestern district of Zakatala [Zaqatala] have refused to explain whether, and if so why, on 29 November they beat a 71-year-old Jehovah's Witness Lydia Suleimanova. She states that a beating from police left her requiring medical attention, and that police questioned her for many hours at the police station, accused her of being a prostitute and stripped her naked for a drugs search. The man who answered the telephone of district police chief Faik Shabanov on 15 December refused to talk to Forum 18 News Service. The deputy chief Kamandar Hasanov told Forum 18 that he had not been on duty then. "I was on leave in Russia and am off till later in December," he said. "Why are you getting involved in things here that have nothing to do with you?" he asked Forum 18. Despite repeated calls on 15 December, no duty officer at the police station was prepared to discuss Suleimanova's case.

Eldar Zeynalov, head of the Baku-based Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan, says he finds Suleimanova's claims of maltreatment at the hands of the police credible. "The fact that there are many similar cases of police maltreatment and the background of moves in that region of Azerbaijan against Baptists, Georgian Orthodox and so-called Wahhabis force me to believe that they are true." Forum 18 notes that on occasion police in Azerbaijan raid, threaten, harass, question and insult religious believers who do not share their own religious views or who they fear will threaten government authority.

Zeynalov of the Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan points out that Azerbaijan's Law on the Police forbids the use of physical force against women. He finds it disturbing that officials have been slow to respond to her complaint. "The danger is that traces of the incident will disappear." Zeynalov called for a thorough investigation of the claims of maltreatment, a search for eye-witnesses to testify and an assessment of Suleimanova's medical condition. "If the claims are proven the police should be punished."

Elsewhere, police in the capital Baku prevented a group of Muslims angry at the decision to confiscate their half-finished mosque in the Yeni Guneshli district from conducting Friday prayers at the site on 11 December (see F18News 22 December 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1390). The mosque was ordered demolished by a court in August (see F18News 18 September 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1350).

Beating, insults, interrogation and a strip-search

Suleimanova, who is from the town of Sheki, had been visiting the village of Aliabad near Zakatala on 29 November for a Jehovah's Witness meeting. She was waiting for a bus back to her home town on the main road on the edge of the village at 1.30 pm when she says she was suddenly approached by a man of about 40 in a police uniform. He grabbed her bag and, swearing at her, pushed her into a nearby cafe. "He was very large and strong and I was very afraid as he was very angry," she recounted.

Inside the cafe he emptied out Suleimanova's bag, finding her Bible, a copy of the Watchtower magazine and other Jehovah's Witness publications, and accused her of distributing literature at the market, which she denied. She said he then again insulted her "using words which I cannot repeat" as a "Jehovist", as well as insulting "my fellow believers and my God".

Suleimanova said that although the cafe was full with Sunday customers, no one intervened to protect her when he began hitting her on the head and in the face. She said he then dragged her to the door of the cafe, deliberately banging her head on it, and then pushed

her outside, where he told two waiting police officers to take her in their car to Zakatala police station.

Suleimanova complained that she was then taken from office to office to be questioned by four or five different police officers about why she had come from Sheki to Aliabad, whether she had handed out leaflets at the market and what they had discussed at their Jehovah's Witness meeting. "One investigator asked me angrily why I did not read the Koran," Suleimanova complained. "I told him I read the Injil [Bible]." She said officers were insulting and used words "inappropriate for cultured people", including again accusing her of being a prostitute.

Officers refused to allow her to call a lawyer or any friends in Zakatala. Fearing that she would again be maltreated she signed a statement the police prepared. When she asked for her books back they said they would be sent to the police in her home town of Sheki.

One officer then forced a female cleaner in the police station to conduct a full strip-search of Suleimanova to look for drugs. "Of course there were no drugs there."

At 8pm she says she was taken to the medical centre next to the police station for a doctor to do an official examination of her wounds. The doctor refused to show her what he had written. She said that it was only the following morning when bruises around her eyes and haematoma on her forehead became prominently visible.

After some seven hours being interrogated and maltreated, police then proposed to take her back to the bus stop at Aliabad. She persuaded them to take her instead to a fellow Jehovah's Witness locally.

Suleimanova returned home to Sheki the following day. A man identifying himself as a police officer telephoned her and said that as she was not intending to complain about her treatment, he would come round with a document for her to sign declaring that she had no complaint against the police. She told him she was going to complain and he said he would come anyway, but he never did.

She said on 1 December that she went to a local photographer to record her injuries and asked him to date stamp the photo as evidence. She was also treated by an emergency doctor, but as he would not give her a certificate recording her condition she also went to the local polyclinic, but they said they would not conduct an official examination without a request from the police. At the police station in Sheki she described the events and the man she says was responsible. "But I didn't say he was in police uniform otherwise he would not have sent me for the official examination." However, the doctor would not give her a copy of his findings.

Religious communities in Zakatala District have long experienced harassment from the authorities. Two Baptist pastors have successively been imprisoned on what church members strongly insist were false charges, imposed in retaliation for their continuing worship without state registration (see eg. F18News 12 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1254).

Appeals against maltreatment

On 7 December Suleimanova lodged an appeal against her maltreatment to the General Prosecutor's Office in Baku, the Interior Ministry's Inspection Department and the country's Human Rights Ombudsperson Elmira Suleymanova. (Forum 18 has seen a copy of her appeal.) "These police officers persecuted me because I hold religious views which differ from their own personal views and attend religious meetings," she declared. "They thrust their own religion on me by force, abusing their official position and power." She called for the police officers involved to be punished.

The Complaints Department at the Ombudsperson's Office told Forum 18 on 15 December that it had received the complaint on 11 December and would respond to Suleimanova within the prescribed ten days. Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that she met an Ombudsperson Office local official in Sheki, Pervez Mamedov, on 15 December to discuss her case.

The Complaints Department at the Interior Ministry told Forum 18 on 15 December that it had not received it. However, an official of the Chief Organisational-Inspection Administration insisted to Forum 18 the same day that "every appeal is considered". No one at the General Prosecutor's Office was available on 15 December to say whether the appeal had been received and what would be done with it.

Suleimanova noted that she is now too afraid to visit her fellow-believers in Aliabad for religious meetings, in case the local police attack her again.

Other police involvement in harassment

Forum 18 has learnt that police elsewhere in Azerbaijan have taken part in harassing other religious believers.

The Interior Ministry reported on its website on 8 December that police in Belakan district – to the north of Zakatala – searched the home of Ilfan Makhmurov and his brother Kanan in the village of Gullar. They confiscated 47 religious books, 33 computer discs, two videotapes and six religious drawings.

Belakan police chief Jalil Mehmanov told Forum 18 from Belakan on 15 December that the confiscated books were Muslim. "I didn't take part in the operation, but there are Wahhabis here," he told Forum 18, referring to a common name for purist Muslims, whether or not they are violent. "We sent the books for expert assessment to the State Committee for Work with Religious Communities in Baku. If a religion is not allowed we don't allow their books." He said that if the books represent no danger, they will be returned in a month's time.

Asked whether this meant that any religious books were safe from confiscation for verification by the State Committee, Mehmanov responded: "We usually don't take the risk and get them checked." He refused to say on what grounds the Makhmuev's home had been searched in the first place.

In early 2009 a Protestant church member was attacked by three unknown men in a Baku suburb who called her a "kafir" [Arabic for "unbeliever"] and ended up in hospital, the church member told Forum 18. When the church member went to the local police to give information about the attackers so that they could be identified and prosecuted, the police asked why the church member had been attacked. On hearing that it was because of their faith, the police said: "If you were attacked because you changed your faith, that is your fault." The church member was again summoned by the police without giving a reason two months later, but decided not to go. The church member felt obliged to leave the suburb.

The Protestant – who became a Christian more than ten years ago – said social pressure against the family had always been strong, with one adult family member being sacked from their state job and another being downgraded. "My boss said you have changed your faith this time, next time you'll betray your country." The children had faced bullying in school from other children.

Another Protestant Christian elsewhere in Azerbaijan, who asked that neither his name nor his location be identified for fear of reprisals, told Forum 18 that after he gathered local residents for smallscale Christian meetings in a private home in his native region, someone informed the police and he was summoned in summer 2009. "I was taken to the police station where I and those who had gathered for meetings with me were insulted," he told Forum 18. "We were strictly warned that if we again meet together we will have serious problems. Then they tried to find out who had sent me, who I work for, and beat me. I was banned from living and evangelising in the district."

Before being forced to flee, the Protestant said a local man, "a strong believer in Islam", had threatened that if he spoke to anyone of his Christian faith he would kill him and then cross the border to Iran. "I would be blessed there for killing a kafir [unbeliever]," the man reportedly told the Protestant.

"I am now forced to live far from my home region," the Protestant complained to Forum 18. "I want to be able to return."

In another town some distance from Baku, police raided a Protestant Sunday service in a private home in October, Protestants who asked not to be identified told Forum 18. They asked that the location also not be published for fear of reprisals against the community. Police took the names and other details of all those present and questioned them about their meetings.

Conscientious objector's appeal fails

Meanwhile, Jehovah's Witness Mushfiq Mammedov has failed in his appeal to overturn his criminal conviction for refusing military service on grounds of religious faith. On 9 December Judge Rahman Mirzaev at Baku's Appeal Court upheld the original conviction handed down by a local court in Baku in October, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Convicted under Criminal Code Article 321.1, which punishes refusal to perform military service in peacetime, Mammedov was fined 250 Manats (1,737 Norwegian Kroner, 206 Euros or 312 US Dollars). The judge took account of the two months he had spent in pre-trial detention (see F18News 3 December 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1382).

Mammedov argues that Azerbaijan's Constitution and the country's commitment to the Council of Europe require it to introduce a civilian alternative to compulsory military service. He is preparing a further appeal to Azerbaijan's Supreme Court, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. He has not yet paid the fine. (END)

For a personal commentary, by an Azeri Protestant, on how the international community can help establish religious freedom in Azerbaijan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=482.

For more background information see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1192.

More coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Azerbaijan is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=23>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be

found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A personal commentary on the European Court of Human Rights and conscientious objection to military service is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1377.

A printer-friendly map of Azerbaijan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=azerba>.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY