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AZERBAIJAN: Destruction for Krishna books as religion chief denies censorship

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Twenty thousand copies of a Hare Krishna booklet imported into Azerbaijan in 1996 and held by customs ever since have been earmarked for destruction by the State Committee for Relations with Religious Organisations. "Maybe they have already been destroyed," the head of the Hare Krishna community Babek Allahverdiev told Forum 18 News Service. The order to destroy the books comes as Rafik Aliyev, the chairman of the State Committee, flatly denied that there is censorship of religious literature in Azerbaijan. Allahverdiev rejected Rafik Aliyev's claims that there is no censorship of religious literature as "untrue". Equally blunt was Baptist leader Ilya Zenchenko. "He's lying," he told Forum 18. "He says one thing but the facts tell another story."

Twenty thousand copies of a Hare Krishna booklet imported into Azerbaijan in September 1996 and held by customs ever since have been earmarked for destruction by the State Committee for Relations with Religious Organisations, reports the head of the Hare Krishna community in Azerbaijan. "Maybe they have already been destroyed," Babek Allahverdiev told Forum 18 News Service from the Azerbaijani capital Baku on 28 March. The order to destroy the books comes as Rafik Aliyev, the chairman of the State Committee, flatly denied that there is censorship of religious literature in Azerbaijan. Allahverdiev rejected Rafik Aliyev's claims that there is no censorship of religious literature as "untrue". Equally blunt was Baptist leader Ilya Zenchenko. "He's lying," he told Forum 18. "He says one thing but the facts tell another story."

Aliyev issued the specific denial in answer to questions from Forum 18 at a meeting in London on 5 March organised by three members of the House of Lords, the upper chamber of the British parliament. Asked twice by Forum 18 why his committee insists on checking all religious literature and granting permission before any literature can be printed or imported into the country in contradiction of its international commitments to freedom of expression and freedom of belief, Aliyev twice vehemently denied that such censorship exists. "There are no restrictions at all."

Ironically, a booklet published by the State Committee entitled "Documents concerning government-religion relationship in the Republic of Azerbaijan" - which Aliyev handed out at the meeting and of which he gave a copy to Forum 18 - contains a translation into English of the July 2001 regulation governing the work of the State Committee which instituted such compulsory prior censorship. "Take control of the production, import and distribution of religious literature, items, other religious informational materials and give its consent on the bases of the appeals of the religious institutions and relevant state bodies in accordance with the established procedure," declares Article 9.2 of the regulation covering the duties of the committee.

Jeyhun Mamedov heads the "expertise department" of the State Committee which censors religious literature and issues instructions authorising or denying permission to print or import religious literature.

Allahverdiev told Forum 18 that an official of the State Committee's juridical department had warned him that if it was discovered that the Hare Krishna community was distributing any literature that had not been authorised for distribution by the State Committee, community members would be punished. Asked how the authorities would know if an individual book had been approved for distribution, Allahverdiev told Forum 18: "The expertise department would check on their computer."

Mamedov's "expertise department" ordered the destruction of the 20,000 Azeri-language copies of the booklet "Krishna Consciousness: The Topmost Yoga System" by the founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. Asked how Mamedov's committee would destroy the books Allahverdiev responded: "Maybe they will burn them - he didn't explain."

Forum 18 was unable to reach Mamedov by telephone on 28 March at the State Committee to find out why he had ordered these religious books to be destroyed. An official, who said he did not work in the same "expertise department", said Mamedov was absent. He added that he knew nothing of the Hare Krishna books, or whether the copies of the booklet had already been destroyed.

Allahverdiev said the State Committee had objected to statements in the book criticising state leaders who do not produce good laws. "They read the book and said it was not appropriate. They say it is too critical and insults our leaders, but religious books

should be critical of the material world," he told Forum 18. "This is not a question of tolerance. The book contains statements that are no different from those in the Koran or in the Bible." He said the book is distributed in countries throughout the world. "Maybe we're more democratic than they are," he added sarcastically.

The booklets were part of a large shipment the Hare Krishna community imported legally into Azerbaijan in 1996, but which were confiscated soon after they reached the Hare Krishna temple in Baku. Last October, after the books had been in a customs warehouse for some six years, Mamedov's office authorised the release of 16,000 other items from the shipment, 13,000 of them in Russian and 3,000 in Azeri. Allahverdiev said that customs had originally demanded more than 2,000 US dollars (14,640 Norwegian kroner or 1,865 Euros) for "warehousing costs", but his community had told customs: "We're a poor community – where can we hope to get such a large sum?" Customs had then reduced the fee to 600 US dollars (4,390 Norwegian kroner or 560 Euros) and the community was obliged to pay up "although it was not we that had asked for the books to be held for six years".

Zenchenko, who heads Baptist Union in Azerbaijan, cited the difficulties the Baptists had faced importing literature – especially in Azeri - and said they could not import anything without specific permission in writing from the State Committee. "We have dozens of letters giving or withholding this permission," he told Forum 18 from Baku on 19 March. "If there is no need for such permission, as Rafik Aliyev asserts, why do customs demand a letter before they will release any religious literature?" He said even to receive ten copies of a religious book by post a letter from the State Committee is needed. "This is a fact. I have documents to prove this." He recounted how he had received ten copies of the Bible by post from Moscow last December and needed a letter from the State Committee to get them from customs.

Branislav Solovic, human dimension officer at the Baku office of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), told Forum 18 on 28 March that his office had received a few complaints from religious groups about religious censorship. He cited the difficulties the Baptist Church had encountered last year trying to import 3,000 copies of "The Wisdom of Solomon" in Azeri into the country.

"In general any censorship of religious literature would be a violation of the OSCE Commitments," Solovic pointed out. He cited in particular Paragraphs 16.9 and 16.10 of the Vienna Concluding Document of 1989 which reads: "16. In order to ensure the freedom of the individual to profess and practice religion or belief, the participating States will, inter alia, 16.9 respect the right of individual believers and communities of believers to acquire, possess and use sacred books, religious publications ... 16.10 allow religious faiths, institutions and organisations to produce, import and disseminate religious publications and materials."

Despite Rafik Aliyev's denials, it is clear that there is "strong control" of imported religious literature, as human rights activist Eldar Zeynalov puts it. However, it remains unclear how far censorship extends to literature published within Azerbaijan. Zeynalov, who is head of the Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan, told Forum 18 from Baku on 11 March that he believed that in practice there was "no censorship" of locally-produced religious literature.

His view was echoed by Haji Akif Agaev, deputy head of the Caucasian Muslim Board. He told Forum 18 from Baku on 28 March that his Board publishes a newspaper and copies of the Koran within the country and that there is "no censorship". "There cannot be censorship of these," he asserted. He said "of course" the State Committee censored imported religious literature, but added that his Board had not imported any religious literature as they could produce enough at home.

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY