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AZERBAIJAN: Four mosques remain closed, Georgian Orthodox still with no priest

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

Four mosques in the village of Nardaran near Azerbaijan's capital Baku remain closed as the authorities work to bring them under state control. They can resume worship only if they submit to the state-backed Muslim Board and get registration with the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations. They were forcibly closed immediately after the November 2015 armed assault on the village to suppress the Muslim Unity Movement and arrest its leader Taleh Bagirov. The imam of Nardaran's closed Rahima Hanum Mosque is also among those in pre-trial imprisonment. Meanwhile, parishioners of the two Georgian Orthodox parishes which the government allows to exist remain without a priest, seven months after their previous priest was denied re-entry to Azerbaijan. "There is no news for us to be joyful about," a Georgian diplomat familiar with the negotiations told Forum 18 News Service. The State Committee has yet to allow Georgian citizen Fr Petre Khumarashvili to begin serving in Azerbaijan. The regional State Committee representative repeatedly refused to give Forum 18 any date for permission to be given or explain why it has been withheld so far.

Two months after an armed assault on the village of Nardaran north-east of Azerbaijan's capital Baku, at least four of the village's mosques remain closed. State officials are determined to subjugate them to the state-backed Caucasian Muslim Board. Only once they submit to the Board will the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations allow them to gain the compulsory state registration which will allow them to reopen. No official at the State Committee in Baku would explain to Forum 18 News Service why the mosques cannot hold worship freely.

The armed assault on Nardaran on 26 November 2015 left at least seven people dead – two police officers and five villagers. The authorities were determined to crush the Muslim Unity Movement, led by Shia Muslim theologian and prisoner of conscience Taleh Bagirov (also known as Bagirzade). He was among dozens of Muslims arrested during and after the assault. Bagirov was tortured while in prison awaiting trial (see F18News 27 January 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2143).

Nuhbala Rahimov, imam of Rahima Hanum Mosque, one of Nardaran's closed Mosques, was arrested on 9 December 2015 and given an administrative term of imprisonment (see F18News 9 December 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2131).

However, Rahimov was subsequently ordered held in four months' pre-trial detention after a criminal case was opened against him (see F18News 27 January 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2143).

Meanwhile, parishioners of the two Georgian Orthodox parishes which the government allows to exist in the north-western Gakh [Qax] Region still remain without a priest, seven months after their previous priest was denied re-entry to Azerbaijan. "There is no news for us to be joyful about," a Georgian diplomat familiar with the negotiations told Forum 18 on 26 January (see below).

Registration compulsory – if you can get it

Religious communities have repeatedly complained of arbitrary registration and re-registration denials. Azerbaijan insists that state permission is needed for people to meet together to exercise freedom of religion or belief, in defiance of its international human rights obligations. Lack of state registration can lead to police raids, confiscations of religious literature, fines and even criminal prosecutions.

Azerbaijan's harsh Religion Law also imposes specific restrictions on Muslim communities which are not imposed on communities of other faiths. Mosques cannot gain state registration independently and must be subject to the Muslim Board, which has to appoint the clergy (see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2081).

The State Committee – which is supposed to register religious communities – has persistently refused to process registration applications by communities it does not like. Particular targets of obstruction to registration or re-registration attempts are Sunni Muslim communities, other Muslim communities outside the control of the state-backed Caucasian Muslim Board, Protestant

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churches and Jehovah's Witness communities.

Four Nardaran Mosques still forcibly closed

The village of Nardaran has a population of about 8,000 and is located on the northern shore of the Absheron peninsula 25 kms (15 miles) north of Baku. It is known as a stronghold of Shia Islam (see F18News 3 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=681).

Immediately following the November 2015 assault, officials closed down at least four of Nardaran's Shia Mosques - Rahima Hanum, Gulam Ali, Kichik and Aga – because they did not have the compulsory state registration and were not subject to the state-backed Muslim Board.

Mubariz Qurbanli, chair of the State Committee, told the APA news agency on 21 January that Rahima Hanum Mosque is in the process of state registration. He said 53 mosque members (just above the legal minimum of 50 adult citizen members) had prepared documents and applied to the administration of Baku's Sabunchu District, where Nardaran is located.

Qurbanli added that Sabunchu District Administration will provide a certificate confirming the Mosque's legal address and send it together with the application to the Caucasian Muslim Board and the State Committee. "The application is now being considered and Inshallah [God willing] the community will be registered," he told APA.

He said that only once Rahima Hanum Mosque – and other Mosques in Nardaran - have been registered will they be allowed to resume worship.

Qurbanli insisted to APA that the other Mosques in the village forcibly closed for lack of state registration - including Gulam Ali, Kichik and Aga Mosques - similarly need to collect and lodge the necessary documents. Only Nardaran's Juma (Friday) Mosque has state registration.

Official "help"

State officials have repeatedly pressured Nardaran's Muslims to register their Mosques since the November 2015 armed assault on the village. On 13 January 2016, Qurbanli – together with Kamal Abdullayev, the Presidential advisor on inter-ethnic, multicultural and religious affairs, and the head of Sabunchu District Administration, Adil Valiyev - gathered villagers in Rahima Hanum Mosque.

Officials reminded the villagers that Mosques in Nardaran have to abide by the law, which requires state registration before any religious community is allowed to exist. Officials offered "help" in gaining registration, the State Committee noted on its website the same day.

Assistants to Anar Kazimov, the representative for Baku of the State Committee, told Forum 18 on 26 January that they "have no right to respond" to Forum 18's questions about the enforced closure of the Nardaran Mosques. They referred Forum 18 to the State Committee Press Service.

However, the official who answered the phone the same day at the State Committee Press Service refused to answer any questions and put the phone down. When Forum 18 called back immediately the line had been transferred to a fax machine.

More than 1,000 Mosques functioning "illegally"

Qurbanli complained that more than a thousand Mosques are functioning "illegally" in Azerbaijan. Of the 1,500 Mosques which are functioning, only 450 have an imam appointed by the Muslim Board. He put the number of Mosque communities at 620.

"Each of the 1,500 Mosques must have a [registered] religious community and in each of them clergy must be appointed," he told the Russian Interfax news agency on 12 January. "If a Mosque is functioning without a [registered] community, its activity is considered to be incorrect. The presence of a [registered] community is obligatory."

Martyrs' Mosque to reopen "in near future" or never?

In addition to closing Nardaran's Shia mosques, the authorities have also consistently closed down Sunni Muslim mosques in recent years on various pretexts, including several in Baku and one in Gyanja (see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2081). Another example is the Lezgin Mosque in Baku's Old City, which has repeatedly been threatened with closure and from whose congregation five men – including the Imam – have been jailed as prisoners of conscience (see F18News 8 October 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2109).

An unnamed official of Baku City Administration told "Bizim Yol" (Our Way) newspaper on 18 January that the city's long-closed

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Sunni Muslim Martyrs' (Shehidler) Mosque near Parliament will be reopened for worship "in the near future". The official gave no date and did not say whether it might reopen as a Sunni or a Shia mosque.

The Martyrs' Mosque was built by the Turkish government's Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) and opened for worship in June 1996. Officials closed it in 2008, claiming it needed to be repaired.

Repairs – under the supervision of the City Administration's Architecture and Urban Planning Department – are supposedly underway on the 20-year-old Mosque. However, "Bizim Yol" noted that "no work has been done for a long time".

Officials at the City Administration's Architecture and Urban Planning Department confirmed that repairs to the Martyrs' Mosque are under the supervision of their Department. But they refused to discuss what progress they are making – if any – and said they do not know when the Mosque will be allowed to reopen. "It won't be soon," one told Forum 18 on 21 January.

The telephone of Akif Abdullayev, head of the Architecture and Urban Planning Department, went unanswered when Forum 18 called the same day.

Sarkhan Halilov, the then Baku representative for the State Committee, told Forum 18 in August 2014 that the Martyrs' Mosque will never be reopened, given its location (see F18News 11 August 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1984).

Seven months with no resident priest

The Georgian Orthodox Church's only two parishes allowed to exist in the country – St George's Church in Gakh and St Nino's Church in the nearby village of Alibeyli – are still without a resident priest, the Georgian diplomat told Forum 18. Documents for a new priest, Georgian citizen Fr Petre Khumarashvili, have been lodged with the State Committee in Baku, the diplomat added. "We are waiting for an answer."

Azerbaijan's State Border Service suddenly denied re-entry to Azerbaijan in June 2015 with no explanation to the parishes' previous priest - Fr Demetre (secular name Levan Tetruashvili), who had previously been allowed to serve in Azerbaijan. A Georgian citizen, he was also the bishop-designate for the Georgian Church's new Azerbaijan Diocese created in 2014. Officials claimed afterwards that they cannot allow a foreign citizen to lead a religious community, despite the fact that other religious communities are led by foreign citizens with no problem.

The Georgian Orthodox Church has long struggled to gain permission to re-open churches in Azerbaijan (see F18News 8 September 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2097).

The State Committee's persistent refusal to allow a new priest meant that the parishes had no opportunity to hold liturgies to celebrate the feast of Christmas on 7 January. Bishop Demetre Kapanadze of the Diocese of Khornabuji and Hereti (who has oversight of Azerbaijan's parishes) had told Forum 18 from neighbouring Georgia in December 2015 of his hopes that the problem would have been resolved by Christmas (see F18News 18 December 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2135).

Bishop Demetre was able to visit the Gakh parishes on St George's day, 23 November 2015, and serve the liturgy in the churches. He also took the opportunity to conduct weddings and baptisms, which had had to be postponed in the absence of a priest (see F18News 18 December 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2135).

Neither the bishop nor other clergy have been able to visit the parishes again since the November 2015 visit, the Georgian diplomat lamented to Forum 18.

Mehman Ismayilov, senior north-west regional official for the State Committee, who is based in Zakatala [Zaqatala], insisted to Forum 18 on 26 January 2016 that a Georgian Orthodox priest will be allowed to serve in Gakh once again. However, he repeatedly refused to give any date for permission to be given or to explain why it has been withheld so far.

The refusal of the press office at the State Committee in Baku to answer any questions also meant Forum 18 was unable to find out what is preventing the State Committee allowing Fr Khumarashvili or any other priest chosen by the Georgian Orthodox Church from serving in the Gakh parishes.

Official warning for former mosque leader

The former imam of the Juma (Friday) Mosque in Qum in Gakh Region, Jeyhun Baliyev, complained to Radio Free Europe's Azerbaijani Service on 14 December 2015 that he had been ousted because police and the local authorities were unhappy that Friday prayers that he led had become too popular. He said officials had also renamed the Mosque after he was ousted.

Armed with a search warrant approved by Gakh Regional Court on 31 July 2015, police searched Baliyev's home on 12 August 2015 and seized "illegal" religious literature and the community's founding documents. A case was then prepared against him under

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Administrative Code Article 299.0.2. This punishes "violating legislation on holding religious meetings, marches, and other religious ceremonies", with fines for individuals of between 1,500 and 2,000 Manats.

On 13 October 2015, Judge Atabay Kichibayov of Gakh Regional Court found Baliyev guilty and issued him with an official warning, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. The Judge ruled that Baliyev had conducted "illegal" religious meetings in his home, something he denied. He explained he had bought the confiscated books in a bookshop in Baku during his university studies and had given them to people on request at the mosque. He added that he had not known that they were "illegal". The court decision records Baliyev as being sorry for any violations he had committed.

"The National Security Ministry handed the materials to the court," Judge Kichibayov told Forum 18 from Gakh on 21 January. "He had ten or twelve books and I had to find him guilty because of the nature of the material." The Judge refused to say what was unlawful about the books. "Baliyev didn't appeal against the warning – he agreed with the decision," he claimed.

It remains unclear why the then National Security Ministry secret police (now the State Security Service SSS) was involved in the case.

Baliyev complained to Radio Free Europe that the books and founding documents were not returned after the trial. He also complained that the mosque was no longer open for daily prayer.

The State Committee registered the Juma Mosque in September 2010, according to the State Committee website.

Regional State Committee representative Ismayilov put the phone down when Forum 18 began to ask about Baliyev's case. (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2081.

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.

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.

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