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AZERBAIJAN: "Traitor" for being Christian?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

A deputy head of police has threatened a Baptist Pastor, trying "to drive him out of the town, ban him from visiting and insulted him as a 'traitor' for having adopted Christianity," the leader of the Baptist church in Azerbaijan has told Forum 18 News Service. This is one of many problems Baptists have, including other threats from local police officers and congregations being unable to get state registration. An Azeri-language Baptist church has been closed down and its pastor banned from preaching and subjected to a harsh media campaign. Also, 50,000 Azeri-language New Testaments have been denied entry to Azerbaijan. Baptists have told Forum 18 of their opposition to attempts to crush the Muslim community of Baku's Juma mosque led by imprisoned imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev. The Baptists have been prominent in his defence, pointing out that his arrest "testifies to the intentions of the authorities to restrict even further the religious freedom not only of Baptists but of all believers in Azerbaijan".

A senior local official in the south-eastern town of Neftechala (at the mouth of the river Kura) has promised to help the local Baptist congregation end harassment from the local police. Baptist leaders have told Forum 18 News Service that Telman Aliyev, who has served as the congregation's pastor since last May, is regularly abused and threatened by the local police when he visits the town to lead services. But Alatin Rzayev, aide to the head of the district executive authority of Neftechala district, told Forum 18 from the town on 12 February that he is committed to resolving the problems. "We'll summon the policemen and ask them why they are doing this to the church," he declared. "They shouldn't have such difficulties."

Ilya Zenchenko, head of the Baptist Union in Azerbaijan, reported that the deputy head of the Neftechala police, Gorkhmas Asadov, has regularly summoned, threatened and insulted Aliyev, most recently in early February. "He threatened to drive him out of the town, ban him from visiting and insulted him as a 'traitor' for having adopted Christianity," Zenchenko told Forum 18 from the capital Baku on 12 February. "The authorities are putting systematic pressure on the congregation and on Aliyev. They want to break him morally and stop him coming to preach in the church."

Zenchenko recounted that when he visited the Neftechala church to lead the Sunday service with Aliyev on 28 December, Asadov and the local policeman Arif (last name unknown) arrived during the service. "It was good that I was there, otherwise they would have broken up the service," he declared. "Asadov spoke to me politely – he was all smiles." Zenchenko said that twice before that service and at least twice afterwards Aliyev has received police threats.

However, Asadov from the police vigorously denied he had threatened Aliyev or the church. "There are no problems. There were no threats," he asserted to Forum 18 on 12 February. "Let Telman Aliyev come and lead the church, but it must have registration. Let them register where they meet and then continue their activity. I've explained to him what documents he needs to have." Asadov claimed that without such registration, the church's activity is illegal under the country's religion law (although the religion law does not impose compulsory registration which would, in any case, be illegal under Azerbaijan's international human rights commitments).

Rzayev of the district executive authority also maintained that the church needs registration in order to function. "They don't need registration to be able to meet, but they do in order to function," he maintained. "That's why we force even the Muslims to register." Challenged on his interpretation of the religion law, he declared: "I'm not an expert on this – we have a special department that covers social, political and religious activity. We also have officials from the Committee for Work with Religious Organisations that come here every month and ask us how many registered and how many unregistered religious communities are functioning."

The Neftechala Baptist church consists of about fifteen elderly women, Zenchenko reports. "We want to register the congregation," he insisted.

The Baptist church has throughout Azerbaijan had great difficulty registering its congregations with the State Committee, which has been in charge of such registration for the past three years. Only three of its congregations (in Baku, Sumgait [Sumqayit] and Gyanja [Gänca]) have been able to gain registration.

Last year the state notary in Aliabad in the northern Zakatala (Zaqatala) district told local Baptists that she would not register their signatures on the application as she could not allow a Baptist church to exist in the area. The Aliabad congregation has been seeking

registration in vain for more than a decade. "The congregation can meet without too many problems at the moment, the police have been busy with other things lately," Zenchenko reported. "But now they will have to start the registration process all over again."

The State Committee has continued to ignore the application from the Eternal Love Church, Baku's Azeri-language Baptist congregation. Committee chairman Rafik Aliyev had the church closed down by court order in April 2002 after alleging that the pastor, Sari Mirzoyev, had insulted Islam. Mirzoyev was "banned" from preaching and subjected to a harsh media campaign. "First the chairman was away on holiday, then he was on a work trip to Iran, then President Aliyev died," Zenchenko told Forum 18. "There's always some excuse why they won't handle the application. There are other congregations too we would like to register, but it's a question of time and nerves."

Nor can Zenchenko register the Baptist Union as a separate legal entity. The Union held the formal founding meeting on 25 October 2003 and submitted the application. After several months of inaction, in early February Rafik Aliyev wrote Zenchenko a two-page letter demanding changes to the Union's statute and making other recommendations. He has often objected to Zenchenko speaking on behalf of all the country's Baptist congregations, declaring that each one should make its own representations.

Reached by telephone on 14 February, Zemfira Rzayeva, head of the registration department at the State Committee, declined absolutely to answer Forum 18's questions about the Baptists' registration difficulties. "I have given you information before and you have distorted it," she declared. "You publish completely inaccurate information." She declined to specify what inaccurate information Forum 18 had published and put the phone down.

In addition to the registration problems and the threats in Neftechala, Zenchenko reports that other smaller congregations have been threatened by the local police, including those in Kusari (Qusar) district of northern Azerbaijan and in the village of Ititala in Balakan (Balakän) district in the north-west. "They are trying to force them to abandon their Christian faith," he claims.

The State Committee, which by law carries out the compulsory prior censorship required of all religious literature, has refused to allow the Sumgait Baptist congregation to import 50,000 copies of the New Testament in Azeri into the country. Rafik Aliyev initially responded saying they could import only 2,000 copies, a concession the Baptists have rejected. When the Baku Baptist congregation applied to import the remaining 48,000, Rafik Aliyev wrote back on 25 December to say his committee had already approved the import of 2,000 copies and that was enough for all. "It was a very bad Christmas present," Zenchenko told Forum 18. He said the twenty or so rural congregations of the church will be deprived of "spiritual nourishment" because of the ban.

Zenchenko said he wrote again to Rafik Aliyev in early January asking again for permission and asking Aliyev to explain the legal basis as to why copies of a Holy Book have been denied entry to the country. "I asked him to explain why if the Bible is not banned he is limiting the number of copies allowed into Azerbaijan."

The Baptists are also upset over Aliyev's recent remarks on television that their church in central Baku, confiscated by the communist authorities, will not be returned and will be turned into a museum. Zenchenko likened this to the plans to turn the Juma mosque in Baku's Old City into a carpet museum, in what many people believe is an attempt to crush the Muslim community led by imprisoned imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev (see F18News 2 February http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=241). The Baptists have been prominent in their solidarity for Ibrahimoglu, pointing out that his arrest "testifies to the intentions of the authorities to restrict even further the religious freedom not only of Baptists but of all believers in Azerbaijan".

Forum 18 tried on 12 February to reach Rafik Aliyev, head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, but his assistant said he was out of the office.

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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