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AZERBAIJAN: Court decides to "immediately" expel Muslims from mosque

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

A court has decided today (1 March) to "immediately" expel the Muslim community of the 1,000 year-old Juma mosque in Baku's Old City, Forum 18 news Service has learnt. This is an apparent punishment for the community's independence from the authorities, and for its stance defending human rights, including religious freedom, for all in Azerbaijan. The Muslims now fear that police could expel them at any moment. Ilya Zenchenko, head of Azerbaijan's Baptist community, called the ruling a "blatant injustice". "The government fights not only against dissidents, like Christians and others, but even against Muslims, its own," he told Forum 18. "It is not even a Muslim government. It is against God." He said the government wants everyone to worship and fear it, and not to speak out. "It is trying to take the place of God."

The court of Baku's Sabail district ruled today (1 March) – at the height of Ashura, one of Shia Muslims' most important commemorations – to oust the Muslim community from the thousand-year-old Juma mosque in the Old City it has been using for the last twelve years in apparent punishment for the community's independence from the authorities. "The court hearing was a farce," Najaf Allahverdiev, mosque spokesman and brother of its imprisoned imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev, told Forum 18 News Service from Baku on 1 March. "The judge obviously handed down the decision decided by the authorities in advance." He rejected the ruling and pledged that the Muslim community would not give up its place of worship, but would defend its rights through peaceful means.

The court ruling gave no deadline for the Muslims to leave the mosque, though ordered it to take place "immediately". The Muslims now fear the police could arrive to oust them at any moment.

This is the latest move by the authorities against the mosque and its imprisoned Imam, human rights activist Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev, who has been active in defending the religious freedom of all faiths in Azerbaijan (see F18News 20 February http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=258).

Among the observers at the trial were representatives of the United States and Royal Norwegian embassies, as well as the Baku office of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Also present was Mehmet Gaidarov, an official of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, which has long sought to end the Juma mosque's religious activity.

Leaping to the Muslims' defence is Ilya Zenchenko, head of Azerbaijan's Baptist community, who called the ruling a "blatant injustice". "The government fights not only against dissidents, like Christians and others, but even against Muslims, its own," he told Forum 18 from Baku on 1 March. "It is not even a Muslim government. It is against God." He said the government wants everyone to worship and fear it, and not to speak out. "It is trying to take the place of God."

Najaf Allahverdiev complained that at the three-hour hearing, Judge Yusif Karimov "violated all legal procedures" by not allowing the mosque representatives to make their case properly, question the architectural conservation area that had brought the action to oust the community and, crucially, refused to allow the Muslims enough time to study six documents presented for the first time at the hearing. "The documents were hidden from us up till now," Allahverdiev complained. "The judge offered us only five minutes to study them."

Among the newly-presented documents was, he said, a 19 January letter from Baku mayor Hajibala Abutalybov to the local police instructing them to remove the Muslims from the mosque.

Allahverdiev claimed the court had failed to prove that the mosque's failure to gain reregistration invalidated its original 1993 Justice Ministry registration, one of the conservation area's accusations.

Allahverdiev said the Muslim representatives left the courtroom before Judge Karimov presented his ruling in protest at the way the proceedings were being conducted. "We made a statement outside to say this was a continuation of the persecutions [under Stalin] of 1937 and a violation of religious freedom," Allahverdiev told Forum 18.

"Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Azerbaijani Constitution guarantee us the right to religious freedom," he continued. "We will continue to pray in our mosque and defend it. Ashura prayers will continue all night tonight and tomorrow."

The Muslims plan to lodge an appeal against the court ruling on 3 March after Ashura. "We are not losing hope. The force of the state will not stop is praying. They will need truncheons to drive us out of our mosque."

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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