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AZERBAIJAN: Juma mosque stolen by police, community refused access for worship, and new imam imposed

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

Following Wednesday's police attack on Baku's Juma mosque community and its religious freedom activist imam, in which an attempt to impose a new imam failed, Forum 18 News Service has ascertained that the police have now seized control of the 1,000 year old mosque, imposed a new imam against the will of Muslims who worship there, and are refusing to allow the existing mosque community to use their own mosque for prayers and other religious activities. The mosque community has appealed to the European Court of Human Rights, following previous attacks on their religious freedom by the authorities.

The entire Juma mosque complex in Baku's Old City, stormed and seized by police on 30 June (See F18News 30 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=352), remains under police control, a member of the mosque community told Forum 18 News Service today (2 July). Najaf Allahverdiev, brother of the mosque's imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev, said that police are guarding the upstairs rooms and allowing in only supporters of Surkhai Mamedov, the imam imposed by the Caucasian Muslim Board, an organisation which the mosque does not belong to. He said the police had allowed the community into the main prayer hall at noon for midday prayers led by his brother, and that they had promised to let them in to evening prayers, but that the police said they would lock the mosque up after that. "They are refusing to let us in our own mosque for morning prayers."

On telephoning the mosque office on 2 July, Forum 18 spoke to a man who identified himself as Haji Ilham, newly-named imam of the mosque, who said Imam Mamedov was not available. He said he himself had been named to the post by Sheikh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, the head of the Caucasian Muslim Board. Asked what involvement the Board could have in a mosque that is not subject to its authority he responded: "That is not a subject for a telephone conversation." Pressed on the issue he insisted: "Who they are subject to is their affair. I am subject to the Muslim Board."

Asked why the police were involved in installing leaders from the Muslim Board he responded: "That's not our affair." He said he was unable to say whose responsibility it was or who had invited the police to help in trying to install a new leadership. On 30 June, the mosque community rejected the attempt to install an imam against its will (See F18News 30 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=352).

Asked about his connection with the Juma mosque, Haji Ilham declared that he had long been involved at Baku's Taza-Pir mosque, where the Board has its headquarters. He claimed "sometimes" to have visited the Juma mosque for prayers in the past. He declined to answer any other questions and put the phone down.

Allahverdiev told Forum 18 that the rooms inaccessible to the community include the mosque office, the room where the Koran is taught and the kitchen. "It was only because of the sheer numbers of people coming to worship – more than 2,000 – that they let us in to the toilet and washroom to conduct the ritual washing before prayers," he reported. "But they're not cleaning that area and with the large numbers of people it is now filthy." He said police officers in uniform with sidearms are guarding the entrance to the barred rooms and the police have put their own locks on the doors.

Nuridin Mustafaev, the court executor for the Sabail district court, which ordered the community to vacate the mosque in March, a decision upheld by the appeal court in April, insisted that he was obliged to execute the court judgment. "We gave them a long time to leave voluntarily, but they didn't do so," he told Forum 18 from Baku on 2 July. "We were instructed to remove the community and their property and we did so." He admitted that "of course it was unpleasant" but denied there had been any political involvement in the decision to expel the community. Mustafaev said he knew nothing about any police violence and claimed the police did not enter the mosque's prayer room.

He said that if any other court – including the European Court of Human Rights to which the mosque community has appealed – issues another ruling handing the mosque back to the community the court executors will hand it back.

Mustafaev said he did not know who had invited the Caucasian Muslim Board to name new imams, but insisted that community members can still go to pray in the mosque, but simply can't use the other rooms.

Allaverdiev reaffirmed that during the storming of the mosque on 30 June, the police officers had beaten the fifteen or so people they found inside with their hands. He said the police had been carrying sidearms in their holsters but had not used them. "They were very aggressive," he recalled. "Two policeman would hold someone while the third would beat them. It was very easy for them as we did not resist. We carried on praying." He claimed some of the officers involved in the raid had been drinking alcohol, which community members found highly offensive.

He said the mosque community has heard rumours that the authorities are now preparing to close the mosque for "repairs". "The building doesn't need repairs," he insisted. "We have been looking after it well for the last decade." The authorities have also said in the past that they want to turn the 1,000-year old mosque into a carpet museum, which is what the anti-religious Soviet regime used it for.

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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