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ARMENIA: Secret order banishes religious minorities from police

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

Human rights activists, the Baptists and the Jehovah's Witnesses have criticised a secret order issued by the head of the police service last December banning members of religious minorities from working for the police. "This order is unconstitutional and violates human rights," Mikael Danielian of the Helsinki Association told Forum 18 News Service. "We regard this order as very negative," Asatur Nahapetyan, general secretary of the Baptist Union, declared. Drew Holiner, a Jehovah's Witness lawyer who defended Zemfira Voskanyan sacked earlier this year from the police for her faith, agreed. "It is clearly discriminatory," he told Forum 18. "It requires dismissal in pretty unambiguous terms of those who belong to other groups than the Armenian Apostolic Church." Forum 18 has been unable to obtain the text of the secret order and has not found any official prepared to discuss why religious minorities cannot serve in the police.

Human rights activists, the Baptists and the Jehovah's Witnesses have criticised a secret order issued by the head of the police service last December banning members of religious minorities from working for the police. "This order is unconstitutional and violates human rights," Mikael Danielian, chairman of the Helsinki Association, told Forum 18 News Service from the Armenian capital Yerevan on 25 April. Officials are reluctant to discuss the issue. Asked by Forum 18 whether in the light of the order members of religious minorities can work for the police, Edik Kazaryan, chief of staff of the police service, responded: "This is the first I have heard of it, so I cannot reply to the question." He declined to answer any further questions over the telephone but promised an official response in writing.

Forum 18 contacted the secretariat of the police service in Yerevan on 25 April, but they declined a telephone interview with Lt-Gen Hayk Harutyunyan, the head of the police service who signed the order.

Colonel Arshaluis Budagyan, deputy head of the personnel department of the Lori regional police who had originally sacked Jehovah's Witness Zemfira Voskanyan in February on the basis of the order (see separate F18News article), told Forum 18 on 25 April that it applies to serving police officers, not to "technical staff" employed by the police. However, he refused to answer questions on why members of religious minorities cannot serve as police officers. "I haven't seen this order," he claimed. "I'm new in this job." He then put the phone down.

Echoing Danielian's criticisms of the order was Asatur Nahapetyan, general secretary of the Baptist Union. "We regard this order as very negative," he told Forum 18 from Yerevan on 25 April. He said he had first learnt about it back in January from Baptists who work in the police but had not seen a copy of the text. He regarded the order as part of a general pattern of obstruction to the activity of any religious group apart from the dominant Armenian Apostolic Church.

Drew Holiner, a Jehovah's Witness lawyer who defended Voskanyan in court, also vigorously condemned the order. "It is clearly discriminatory," he told Forum 18 from Yerevan on 23 April. "It requires dismissal in pretty unambiguous terms of those who belong to other groups than the Armenian Apostolic Church." He declared that such discrimination violates the Armenian Constitution, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European human rights convention.

The order, No. 551-A, signed by Lt-Gen Harutyunyan on 3 December, was apparently sent to all police departments. Employees of the police appear to have been given it to read soon after it was issued and some were required to sign it to say they had read and understood it. However, the order has not been published and Forum 18 has so far been unable to obtain a copy of it from the police service, from human rights community or from diplomatic sources in Yerevan.

On 18 April, local journalist Vahan Ishkhanyan published on the news website ArmeniaNow what he said were extracts from the order. He said that the order specified that police department employees who are members of any religion other than the Armenian Apostolic Church must be identified and those who do not recant their faith are subject to dismissal. According to the order, "unlike the Armenian traditional national Church, new religious movements and organisations represent corrosive totalitarian cults or sects. Their activities are directed against individuals and families as well as society."

Attempts by the Jehovah's Witnesses to obtain a copy of the order through the court failed. Likewise the Helsinki Association failed. "Our branch in Vanadzor asked the local police verbally for a copy of the order but they refused," Danielian declared.

Holiner objected not only to the content of the order but to the fact that it was unpublished. "Article 6 of the Armenian Constitution says that normative acts which are not published have no legal effect," he declared. "There is a question as to whether this order is valid."

Rustam Khachatryan, a Yerevan-based Jehovah's Witness lawyer, told Forum 18 on 23 April that Voskanyan is the first and so far only Jehovah's Witness to have been sacked as a result of the December order. "Some other Jehovah's Witnesses have left their jobs in the police because of the atmosphere, though not specifically because of the order."

Nahapetyan told Forum 18 that to his knowledge no Baptists had so far been dismissed from the police as a result of the order. "No-one has had any problems yet, but maybe that will come soon." An official of the Baha'i community in Yerevan also confirmed to Forum 18 on 25 April that none of their members had encountered problems as a result of the order. Nor had the Helsinki Association learnt of anyone apart from Voskanyan who had been sacked in the wake of the order.

The Helsinki Association plans in the coming days to work on having the order revoked, Danielian reported. "It is difficult to say whether we will be successful."

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