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AZERBAIJAN: The boy who (officially) doesn't exist

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

18-month-old Luka Eyvazov does not officially exist, Forum 18 News Service has found, because local authorities refuse to issue birth certificates for children with Christian names. "We have letters from village residents and 98 per cent are opposed to registering Christian names," local registration official Aybeniz Kalashova told Forum 18. Mehman Soltanov of the Justice Ministry asked Forum 18 "why did they choose a religious name?" and then speculated that it was not Luka's parents who chose his name but "some religious sect". Luka's father, Novruz Eyvazov, insists that children are from God and told Forum 18 that "We went many times to ask what basis they had to interfere in our family life. They indicated there was pressure on them from on high. When they told me to choose the name of a famous Azerbaijani poet or writer instead," he told Forum 18, "I responded that Luke, as one of the Gospel-writers, will still be famous when all the poets and writers are long forgotten." This is the latest of case of official refusal to register Christian names. Without birth certificates, people cannot go to kindergarten or to school, get treatment in a hospital or travel abroad.

Although officially he does not exist, 18-month-old Luka Eyvazov appears to be real enough. Observed by Forum 18 News Service on 26 November, Luka laughed, cried and played with his parents' telephone in their home in the village of Aliabad in the north-western region of Zakatala [Zaqatala] close to the border with Georgia. Despite repeated attempts by his parents, who are Baptists, the local civil registration office has consistently refused to issue a birth certificate because they do not wish to register children with Christian names. "We have letters from village residents and 98 per cent are opposed to registering Christian names," Aybeniz Kalashova of the local registration office in the regional centre Zakatala told Forum 18 on 1 December.

"This is ridiculous," remarked a member of a Christian community in the capital Baku, who works in the legal field, on being told of the problems in Zakatala region. "You can call your child 'Communist' or 'Tractor'," she told Forum 18 on 29 November. "Why not a Christian name?" Believers of a variety of faiths and human rights activists told Forum 18 they were not aware of such restrictions in any other part of Azerbaijan, even those populated by ethnic minorities.

"Luka is not an Azerbaijani name," Mehman Soltanov of the Justice Ministry's civil registration department told Forum 18 from Baku on 1 December. "Why did they choose a religious name?" Soltanov, who wrote to tell Luka's father Novruz Eyvazov on 5 April that he had issued "appropriate instructions" to Kalashova's office, speculated to Forum 18 that it was not the parents who had chosen this name but "some religious sect".

Indeed, in her 1 May response to Novruz Eyvazov, which Forum 18 has seen, Kalashova complained that "during the chaos and anarchy in the country in 1989-90, foreign missionaries came to the village of Aliabad and tried to conduct subversive activity, spreading the Christian faith of the Baptist sect among the population, and tried to change surnames and first names, changing them into Georgian and Christian names, strengthening separatist sentiment and setting friend against friend". She claimed local villagers had protested against such activity. She asked Eyvazov to "respect and honour the desire and wish of the inhabitants of Aliabad".

Kalashova refused to explain to Forum 18 why the complaints of other local residents affected Eyvazov's right to register the birth of his child with the name he and his wife have chosen. "Why are you interfering in the internal affairs of Azerbaijan?" she asked Forum 18.

In a second interview later on 1 December, Soltanov told Forum 18 he had spoken to Kalashova at the Zakatala civil registration office and that Luka's parents should go once again and would receive the birth certificate. "They won't have any problems now," he pledged.

Children's births in Azerbaijan are generally registered at the place where their parents are registered to live. As Azerbaijani citizens and registered residents of Aliabad, the Eyvazov couple originally tried to register Luka's birth at the local village administration, which is where they first encountered a refusal. They failed too at the regional level in Zakatala, both before and after taking their case to Soltanov at the Justice Ministry in Baku.

"We told the officials we had chosen the name Luka, but they refused to register it, complaining that we were spreading Christianity," Novruz Eyvazov recalled. "We went many times to ask what basis they had to interfere in our family life. They

indicated there was pressure on them from on high."

He insists that a child is from God. "When they told me to choose the name of a famous Azerbaijani poet or writer instead," he told Forum 18, "I responded that Luke, as one of the Gospel-writers, will still be famous when all the poets and writers are long forgotten."

Speaking to Forum 18 on 27 November in his office at the village administration, village leader Gasim Orujov claimed that the refusal to register Christian first names had been resolved. "The civil registration office has corrected this in the past year," he claimed (wrongly). "It is no longer a problem." Reminded of the continuing refusal to give a birth certificate to Luka Eyvazov, Orujov declared: "Let his parents come. I'll give them the certificate." However, when Novruz Eyvazov went to his office on 29 November, Orujov said the decision lay with the regional office at Zakatala.

The Eyvazov family – like the vast majority of Aliabad's 10,000 inhabitants – are members of the Ingilo minority, ethnic Georgians who were converted to Islam several centuries ago. Most retain their Muslim faith with varying degrees of observance. The village mosque remains the only registered religious community, as the three existing Baptist communities do not have registration.

Since Christianity took hold in the village a decade ago, adherents have faced strong pressure from the village authorities. Although the Eyvazovs' church is part of a Baptist network that refuses on principle to register with the authorities in any of the former Soviet republics where it operates, two other Baptist communities in Aliabad have been repeatedly denied registration (see F18News 8 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=471).

"Without a birth certificate, Luka will not be able to go to kindergarten or to school, get treatment in a hospital if he should need it or travel abroad," Zaur Balaev, pastor of one of the Baptist communities which is seeking registration told Forum 18 in Aliabad on 26 November. He related that Luka's case is only the latest in a string of similar refusals to register the births of children given Georgian and/or Christian first names by their parents.

Novruz Eyvazov told Forum 18 that when his third child was born, it had taken him three months to register his birth with the name Moisei (Moses).

Another local Baptist, Ramiz Osmanov, told Forum 18 on 27 November that the civil registration authorities only issued a birth certificate for his son Daniil (who is now aged three) when he was six months old. Osmanov said he had been forced to take his case to officials in Baku before he was given the birth certificate. Baptist villager and pastor Hamid Shabanov told Forum 18 that the civil registration authorities had rejected the name Samson for his grandson. In the end the parents chose Daud (David), knowing they would never get a birth certificate with the name Samson.

Members of the Georgian Orthodox minority in the neighbouring Kakh [Qax] region told Forum 18 at Kakh's Orthodox church on 27 November that they had no problem registering the births of their children with Georgian religious names. Aliabad's Baptists say such problems do not exist either in the Balakan [Balakän] region north of Zakatala, which also has an Ingilo minority.

Local Baptist pastor Zaur Balaev pointed out that members of neighbouring Georgia's large ethnic Azeri minority do not have problems freely choosing names for their children. (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Azerbaijan 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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