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AZERBAIJAN: "We don't need Baptists here," shouts obstructive official

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

"We don't need any Baptists here," Najiba Mamedova, the notary of Azerbaijan's north-western Zakatala [Zaqatala] region shouted at Forum 18 News Service, asked why she has for more than a year refused to notarise the signatures on the registration application of a local Baptist congregation. "We don't want a second Karabakh," Najiba Mamedova screamed, adding "Who financed you? Go to them," before throwing Forum 18 out of her office and threatening to call the police. The church's pastor, Hamid Shabanov, told Forum 18 that "She always spoke to us like that." The church began applying for registration in 1994, making it the religious community which has been denied registration in Azerbaijan for the longest period. The head of the Aliabad administration, Gasim Orujov, has refused to allow the Baptists to build a church in the village. "There is Islam here and we have our mosque," he told Forum 18.

"We don't need any Baptists here," the notary of Azerbaijan's north-western Zakatala [Zaqatala] region shouted at Forum 18 News Service on 27 November when it tried to find out why for more than a year she had refused to notarise the signatures on the registration application by a local Baptist congregation. "We don't want a second Karabakh," Najiba Mamedova screamed, referring to the Armenian-populated region that broke away from Azerbaijani control more than a decade ago in a brutal war. "Who financed you? Go to them," she added before throwing Forum 18 out of her office in Zakatala's court building and threatening to call the police. "She always spoke to us like that," the church's pastor, Hamid Shabanov, who had witnessed Mamedova's response, told Forum 18 sadly.

Shabanov's church – one of three Baptist congregations in the village of Aliabad, two of which are members of the Azerbaijani Baptist Union – lodged its latest registration application for notarisation with Mamedova some fourteen months ago, but she has consistently refused to process it, church members complain. Without the notarised signatures of the church's founding members the application cannot be processed and the congregation cannot get legal status.

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Ali Abasov, a professor at the National Academy of Sciences and president of the Azerbaijani branch of the International Religious Liberty Association, said he could well understand how the authorities in a place like Aliabad could "illegally obstruct" the registration of a minority religious community. "It is a question of ten minutes at the notary's office," he told Forum 18 in the capital Baku on 29 November. "Officials should do their job in accordance with the law."

"It is wrong for the notary to refuse to notarise the documents," Azer Sharafli, head of the general department of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, told Forum 18 in his office in Baku on 24 November. "It's their job to do so." He said although his committee is in charge of the registration of religious organisations, it is not its responsibility if other officials refuse to do their job. "No-one appealed to us," he claimed. He said if the Baptists have any complaint they should take their case to court.

"If all the paperwork is in order, notarisation is a question of no more than 30 minutes maximum, that's my view," the head of the Aliabad administration, Gasim Orujov, told Forum 18 under oversized portraits of President Ilham Aliyev and his late father Heydar Aliyev in his office in the village on 27 November. Although no fan of the Baptists, he said he was unable to tell if the authorities want to register the Baptists or not. "It's not my responsibility. I won't interfere."

Orujov readily admitted that the Baptists – like believers of any other faith – have the full right to practise their religion. "There's democracy here." He claimed to be ready to give the Baptists any documents they require to complete the registration process. However, he resolutely refused to allow them to build a church in the village. "There is Islam here and we have our mosque," he told Forum 18, gesturing to the nearby minaret. "People wouldn't allow a church nearby. There would be conflict." (He did not mention that Aliabad used to have a Georgian Orthodox church, which was closed during the Soviet period.)

Orujov brushed aside suggestions that one group of citizens cannot prevent another group of citizens exercising their rights. "Can we allow a church to be built after they have been here for only ten years?" he asked. "Let them pray at home." Told that registered places of worship of a wide variety of faiths exist in Baku he responded: "Baku has people of many faiths and different backgrounds – it's OK for churches to exist there."

This is not the only part of Azerbaijan in which the state has attacked Baptist churches (see F18News 12 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=252). (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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