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AZERBAIJAN: "We want freedom – freedom in society, freedom of faith and freedom to worship"

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

A Protestant Pastor has described what Christians want to Forum 18 News Service as "we want freedom – freedom in society, freedom of faith and freedom to worship, freedom from the state so that it no longer interferes." One example of many incidents was a police raid in which the police halted a worship service, questioned all those present, and later tried to recruit the church leader as an informer. That congregation has been unable to meet for worship since. Police raids and harassment take place throughout Azerbaijan, with many believers involved being too frightened to speak out. As one pastor put it, "sometimes their own relatives don't even know they've become Christians." A pastor told Forum 18 that Baha'is and Jehovah's Witnesses face the same pressure from the authorities as Christians, as do independent Muslim and Hare Krishna communities. The authorities have denied to Forum 18 that religious persecution happens in Azerbaijan.

"We want freedom – freedom in society, freedom of faith and freedom to worship," a Protestant pastor in central Azerbaijan told Forum 18 News Service. "Freedom from the state so that it no longer interferes." Protestant, independent Muslim, Hare Krishna, Jehovah's Witness and Baha'i religious communities have all told Forum 18 that they want an end to harassment and freedom to worship as they cannot function freely and openly, especially away from the capital Baku, citing police raids, intimidation, fines, bans and occasional beatings.

Registration as a religious community, with the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, is difficult to obtain and can be a protection against such harassment, though not always. In November 2004, police raided a registered Adventist congregation in Azerbaijan's second city Gyanja [Gänca] (see F18News 22 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=458).

"Registration is like permission to operate although under the constitution there are no obstructions to free religious practice," Alakbar Gasimov, vice president of the Baptist Union, told Forum 18. "Without it you can be arrested." Another Baptist pastor told Forum 18 that "Our constitution guarantees us freedom of religion, but in reality we don't have it" (see F18News 9 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=473). Gasimov said an official of the State Committee's legal department had told the Baptists that no more than ten people could meet without registration.

"Of course we want to register," one Protestant pastor based in the capital Baku who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 on 21 November of his three associated congregations. "If we meet without registration and the authorities find out, big problems will follow. The police, secret police, local administration officials will come, probably with a hostile television crew as well."

The pastor told Forum 18 that during the summer a local police chief visited a Protestant leader at his home in Baku, halted the service that was then underway and questioned all those present. The congregation – made up of ethnic Azeri Protestants – has been unable to meet for worship as one community since. The police summoned the leader and, says the pastor, placed him under "great pressure". "They asked who was paying him, then tried to recruit him as an informer." The pastor said the leader then gave up his position as leader of the church. "He said he has a family – his wife and children - to worry about."

The pastor noted that in summer 2003 the congregation in the town of Sumgait [Sumqayit] north of the capital Baku was raided by two police officers, one in uniform and one in civilian clothes. "What are you doing?" one police officer asked. "Who's your leader?" The Protestants asked the officers why they were talking to them like that, given that they were citizens of Azerbaijan. They insisted that they had the right to meet together as believers. The police disagreed, taking two of the Protestants to the local police station, where they were interrogated as to why the church was meeting without registration.

The pastor recounted that the police ordered meetings in private flats to stop and began pressuring and threatening members of the congregation. "They now have to meet in very small groups to avoid problems – they must be so cautious," he told Forum 18 sadly. "Sumgait is a different town. The authorities are a law unto themselves."

The two Baku congregations still cannot meet publicly all together, the pastor noted. "We don't want attention from the authorities at

the moment." Although all three congregations have the required ten members prepared to sign the registration applications (and indeed, one of the Baku congregations has tried to register – in vain – for the last two years), the pastor says officials of the residency registration office refuse to hand over a certificate confirming that applicants live at their registered home address.

Although the State Committee is nowhere empowered to do so, it demands certificates from the place of work of each of the founding members to confirm that each is a member of the community. "Without such a document for each founding member you won't get registration," the pastor noted. "It is a system of control."

This pastor reports that controls on freedom of worship are much tighter outside the capital, a view shared by many other leaders of different religious faiths. "Things have gradually got better in Baku, but in Sumgait and Gyanja for example, it is much worse," members of Baku's Lutheran congregation told Forum 18 on 29 November. Mila Ibrahimova, pastor of the New Life Protestant church in Baku, said that the harassment her church experienced three years ago is now at an end. "Police raided our services back then, but have not done so for a long time," she told Forum on 29 November. "We haven't been given registration, but we can meet to praise God at any time."

One particular blackspot is the exclave of Nakhichevan [Naxçıvan] – wedged between Armenia, Turkey and Iran – where believers face intense pressure, with Adventists and Baha'is complaining that their communities have been "crushed" (see F18News 10 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=474). Three Baptist communities in the village of Aliabad in north-western Azerbaijan have also faced years of threats, harassment and denial of legal existence (see F18News 8 December http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=471).

Incidents in towns and villages in other parts of Azerbaijan are numerous, and many believers involved are too frightened to describe the incidents publicly. In the town of Sheki [Saki] in northern Azerbaijan, one local Protestant was interrogated by the police in mid-November after missionaries from Baku had come to give out Christian literature in the town. "Police look badly at Protestants," another local Protestant told Forum 18 in the town. "They want to know what we are doing and where we meet." Local Protestants told Forum 18 they want to register a church but do not know how the authorities would react. "Many church members are too frightened to come forward – sometimes their own relatives don't even know they've become Christians."

Forum 18 was told that a Protestant community in Shemakha [Samaxi], a town west of Baku, was banned from meeting in its house of prayer this summer.

One Protestant pastor working in a town in central Azerbaijan told Forum 18 he and his congregation have faced repeated harassment. "The local secret police have followed me in a car," declared the pastor – who asked for his name and location not to be revealed. "My flat was raided in 2003 at the same time as other believers' homes. They had no search warrant. They seemed well-informed and asked me where we met for worship. But so far they haven't raided any services."

The pastor said his main aim is to gain registration for the church to try to protect it from further harassment, but few church members are prepared to give the authorities their names for fear of retaliation. "We have enough people in theory to register, but the authorities would do all in their power to prevent such registration," he told Forum 18.

The pastor recounted that local Baha'is and Jehovah's Witnesses had faced the same pressure from the authorities. Hare Krishna devotees report that restrictions on meetings outside Baku are now easing, with the harassment they received two years ago now much reduced. "Five people getting together is OK, but ten is not," devotees told Forum 18 at Baku's Hare Krishna temple on 24 November. "This is not official - local authorities tell us this verbally." They complained that outside Baku they are unable to distribute religious literature.

The Baptist Union complains that small congregations outside Baku are often harassed and denied the possibility to register. The church in Neftechala, which has existed since 1966, has been repeatedly denied registration. "A year and a half ago we were banned from meeting in the church for three weeks," Baptist leader Timur Aliev told Forum 18 on 24 November. "Now we can at least meet, though we have to be very quiet. If we're quiet, the authorities are quiet." He said there is no sign to indicate that the building is a church.

Sumgait's 20-strong Adventist community has been banned orally from meeting in its house of prayer, reported Yahya Zavrichko, head of the Adventist church in Azerbaijan. "The congregations repaired the church this spring and was about to hold the official rededication," he told Forum 18 in Baku on 24 November. "Just a week before officers from the town's fourth police department warned our pastor, Khalid Babaev, not to go ahead." Babaev was then fined 82,500 manats (104 Norwegian Kroner, 13 Euros, or 17 US Dollars) – Zavrichko showed Forum 18 the receipt for the fine – on charges of living in the town "illegally". The average monthly salary in Azerbaijan is around 147,300 Azeri Manats (186 Norwegian Kroner, 23 Euros, or 30 US Dollars).

"This was all an excuse to pressure the church not to hold the dedication and not to meet for worship," Zavrichko insisted. "Babaev was forced to sign a receipt to say the church would not meet without registration." He said the State Committee demands that the congregation's leader be from Sumgait itself, not from elsewhere in Azerbaijan, although this is nowhere specified in registration regulations.

Zavrichko recounted that a small group of Adventists live in the town of Mingechaur in western Azerbaijan. "There have been problems with the police and the secret police – we can't preach there," he noted.

"The authorities are doing everything to prevent the spread of our faith," Zavrichko lamented. "We can only work in Baku and Gyanja – the towns where we have registration. We can't open new church as leaders have to be locals and we can't train people up. The authorities know this and are doing this deliberately."

Azer Sharaflı, head of the general department at the State Committee in Baku, brushed aside any suggestions that religious believers were restricted in being able to worship. "They just need to register with the authorities and then they can function legally," he told Forum 18 in his office at the committee on 24 November. He rejected accusations that the authorities harassed unregistered religious communities, insisting that officials were merely upholding the law. He declined to say whether religious communities without registration could meet.

Some local religious leaders have tried to clarify whether unregistered religious meetings are legal or not (the law nowhere bans unregistered religious meetings, but officials, the police and the secret police usually treat such unregistered meetings as illegal). When Zavrichko wrote to Rafik Aliyev, head of the State Committee, seeking clarification on whether the Sumgait Adventist congregation can meet without registration, he received an evasive reply. Aliyev's 17 May 2004 response, seen by Forum 18, merely explained how communities register and failed to answer Zavrichko's question.

"In mid-November Rafik Aliyev appeared on Space TV and said it is OK for religious groups to meet without registration," Zavrichko declared. "But in practice this is not the case." (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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