

10 January 2005

AZERBAIJAN: Will Christian children now get birth certificates?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Having repeatedly refused to register 18-month old Luka Eyvazov's birth, because his parents gave him a Christian name, the authorities have at last given him a birth certificate, after Forum 18 News Service reported his case. Unusually, the authorities also apologised to Luka's parents "for making us wait and suffer for so long," Luka's mother Gurayat Eyvazov told Forum 18. Without a birth certificate, Luka was not able to go to kindergarten or to school, get treatment in a hospital, or travel abroad. Luka's case was the last known case of a series of Baptist parents in the mainly-Muslim town who were refused birth certificates for their children because they had chosen Christian, not Muslim first names. However, Gurayat Eyvazov said it was unclear if the next time Baptist parents try to register a child's birth with a Christian name they will face similar refusals. "Officials said nothing on this."

At the age of nearly 18 months, Luka Eyvazov has finally received his birth certificate just weeks after Forum 18 News Service reported the authorities' repeated refusals to issue a birth certificate because they did not wish to register him with a Christian name. Luka's parents, who are ethnic-Georgian Baptists, live in the small town of Aliabad in the north-western region of Zakatala [Zaqatala] close to the border with Georgia. "The town administration phoned my husband on 17 December to say the birth certificate would be there and he collected it on 20 December," Luka's mother Gurayat Eyvazov told Forum 18 from Aliabad on 10 January. "They said they had no permission earlier to issue the birth certificate and even apologised to us for making us wait and suffer for so long."

Luka Eyvazov is the fourth child of Novruz Eyvazov, the leader of one of three Baptist congregations in Aliabad. His is the last known case of a series of Baptist parents in the mainly-Muslim town who were refused birth certificates for their children because they had chosen Christian, not Muslim first names. However, Gurayat Eyvazov said it was unclear if the next time Baptist parents try to register a child's birth with a Christian name they will face similar refusals. "Officials said nothing on this," she told Forum 18.

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 town administration, which is where they first encountered a refusal. Without a birth certificate, Luka was not able to go to kindergarten or to school, get treatment in a hospital, or travel abroad.

Luka's parents failed too at the regional level in Zakatala, where civil registration official Aybeniz Kalashova wrote to the Eyvazovs last May complaining of foreign Baptist missionaries who had come to Azerbaijan in the early 1990s "spreading the Christian faith of the Baptist sect among the population", and who "tried to change surnames and first names, changing them into Georgian and Christian names". The Eyvazovs even took their case to Mehman Soltanov of the Justice Ministry's civil registration department in the capital Baku, but this too failed to break the logjam (see F18News 1 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=466).

Other members of Azerbaijan's ethnic Georgian minority have told Forum 18 that the difficulty of registering children with Georgian Christian names is particularly acute in the Zakatala region, though it occurs from time to time in neighbouring regions with an ethnic Georgian minority.

One ethnic Georgian told Forum 18 on 10 January from Kakh [Qax] region south of Zakatala region that Ingilos – ethnic Georgians who were converted to Islam several centuries ago and are considered to be Georgian-speaking Azeris by the Azerbaijani authorities, such as the Baptists in Aliabad – face great difficulties trying to change their surnames back to the Georgian form and registering children's births with Georgian names. However, the Georgian told Forum 18 that in most of these cases the motivation for the parents' desire for Georgian first names is national, not religious.

Georgian Orthodox priest Fr Ioan Abesashvili confirmed to Forum 18 in Kakh last November that his parishioners had no problems registering the births of their children with Georgian Christian names.

Meanwhile, Zaur Balaev, pastor of another Baptist congregation in Aliabad, told Forum 18 on 4 January that the town authorities have finally agreed to allow him to open a grocery shop. He said the earlier refusals were part of systematic local official opposition to Baptists in the town and an attempt to drive them out by economic means by depriving them of the means to earn a living (see

F18News 9 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=473).

Two of the three Baptist congregations in Aliabad have repeatedly tried to register with the authorities to gain legal status but, despite meeting all the criteria, have got nowhere with their applications (see F18News 8 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=471). The third congregation does not wish to register. Church members have been detained, fined, threatened and their homes have even been shot at over the past decade.

Najiba Mamedova, the notary of Zakatala region, angrily refused to discuss with Forum 18 on 10 January why she is still refusing to notarise the signatures on the Baptist congregations' registration applications necessary for the applications to go further. "You are asking about such trivial matters when 25 percent of Azerbaijan's territory is occupied by Armenian bandits and the country is flooded with refugees," she declared, refusing to say why this was relevant to why she would not notarise the Baptists' signatures. She then put the phone down. Mamedova has a record of behaving angrily towards enquirers, having shouted "We don't need Baptists here" at Forum 18 (see F18News 8 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=471). (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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