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AZERBAIJAN: Raid on Jehovah's Witnesses deliberately timed?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Azerbaijan's latest manifestation of hostility to Protestant Christian and other religious minorities, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, is a 24 December raid on the Kingdom Hall in the capital, Baku, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "We suspect that the police and prosecutor used the holiday season - when foreign representations obviously have only minimum staff - to make this attack," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Property was confiscated, money was apparently stolen by police, congregation members were detained and at least two were beaten up. In a repeated pattern during police raids on religious minorities, a local TV station which encourages religious intolerance was present. Six foreign attendees - three of whom grew up in Azerbaijan - may be deported. Forum 18 was able to speak to the Migration Police, but not to Hidayat Orujev, chair of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, or other officials there, for comment.

Azerbaijan's Jehovah's Witness community remains deeply sceptical over the timing of a major raid on a convention at their Kingdom Hall in the capital Baku on 24 December that saw property confiscated and many of those present detained at the police station for several hours. "We suspect that the police and prosecutor used the holiday season - when foreign representations obviously have only minimum staff - to make this attack," Jehovah's Witness sources told Forum 18 News Service on 26 December.

Six foreigners present at the convention are now threatened with deportation for conducting "religious propaganda" which - in defiance of the country's international human rights commitments - is illegal in Azerbaijan. Many religious minorities would like this and other bars to religious freedom in the country to be removed (see F18News 14 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=828). However, instead, the authorities seem to be planning further restrictions on their citizens' religious freedom (see F18News 14 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=827).

Police and local administration officials arrived at the convention at about 10.30 am on 24 December, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. As has been the repeated pattern in recent years when religious minority communities are raided, the police were accompanied by cameras from a local television station (see eg. F18News 16 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=689).

Although police did not produce a search warrant, they broke down the door to the third-floor room where some 200 Jehovah's Witnesses had assembled for the convention. Many of those present - including the six foreigners - were put on buses and taken to police station No. 34 in the city's Khatai district, where they were questioned for many hours. "At least two men were beaten up by police officers," the Jehovah's Witnesses report.

Despite apparently not having a search warrant, the remaining police officers then forced their way into other rooms in the building and conducted a search, refusing to allow the local Jehovah's Witnesses to accompany them. The search continued until 7.00 pm, and the police confiscated the contribution box with all of the contents, congregation record cards, and several computers that were being used for translation of the Bible and Biblical literature into Azerbaijani. The police issued a record of confiscation only for the computers and some smaller items. The Jehovah's Witnesses also discovered later that some 300 Manats (about 2,200 Norwegian Kroner, 270 Euros, or 350 US Dollars) of congregation funds had gone missing without any notification of this by the police. The police also confiscated a large amount of literature, piling it into a minibus.

The Khatai district police freed the detained local Jehovah's Witnesses at 5 pm, while the six foreigners - three of whom had grown up in Azerbaijan - were transferred to the Migration Police.

"Don't worry about the six," Senior Inspector Elchin Mamedov of the Migration Police, within the Interior Ministry, who is handling their cases, told Forum 18 from Baku on 27 December. "We will take a fair and just decision." However, he insisted that under Article 300 of the Code of Administrative Offences - which punishes those conducting "religious propaganda" with fines of between 20 and 25 times the minimum monthly wage, or deportation for foreigners or those without citizenship - the six had violated the law. He admitted that this article restricts the rights of individuals to religious freedom, but said that as this is the law it has to be applied. "It was the local police who raided the meeting and detained the six, not us," he insisted.

Senior Inspector Mamedov said he was talking to a lawyer the Jehovah's Witnesses had sent from Russia, and expected the six to be

freed by the Migration Police today (27 December). But Mamedov would not tell Forum 18 if this meant they could remain in Azerbaijan. The Jehovah's Witnesses say the Khatai district Public Prosecutor appeared to be in charge of the operation. Also present was an official of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, which apparently thinks – without any legal justification whatsoever – that religious meetings need its approval.

The duty officer at police station No. 34 – where many of the participants were taken for questioning – told Forum 18 on 27 December that he knew nothing of the raid or interrogation of Jehovah's Witnesses at the police station. "We have many police officers working here," he told Forum 18. He referred all enquiries to his chief, Rustam Ismailov, who he said was in a meeting.

Forum 18 was unable to reach Hidayat Orujev, chair of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, or other officials there on 27 December. However, the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that on 25 December they were able to talk to Orujev's assistant. "At first he claimed ignorance as to what took place, but then said he had seen something on television about the raid. We informed him that we are very concerned about the welfare of those who are still in custody and request their release as soon as possible, and we told him that we are putting together a complete list of all the property that was taken and damage that was done to the building. We asked him to pass this information to his superiors, since we consider this to be an egregious abuse of the rights of our fellow worshippers. He said he would inform them."

This is not the first time the Baku Kingdom Hall has been raided. A similar raid was staged on 12 June 2005 (see F18News 21 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=590).

Reports of the raid in the local media – such as on the Day.az website and in the Russian-language Zerkalo newspaper – claimed the Jehovah's Witness convention had been raided because it was illegal and held without permission from the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations. The media – apparently well-supplied with information from officials – also accused the Jehovah's Witness of being a dangerous "sect" conducting "subversive" activity. Several newspapers claimed – wrongly – that the Jehovah's Witnesses have been banned in Europe and Russia since the 1980s. (However, the Moscow city branch only, has been legally banned from working in the city – see F18News 17 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=781).

In an apparent attempt to stir up popular hostility to the Jehovah's Witnesses, given the unresolved conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, the media also claimed that the group's leaders in the Caucasus – based in neighbouring Georgia - have Armenian surnames. There are almost 50 Jehovah's Witness – and one Baptist – religious prisoners of conscience in Armenia, imprisoned for their refusal to perform military service (see F18News 22 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=732).

Vilification of religious minorities in the media has been commonplace in recent years, with Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses the main victims. Police raids on such communities are – as in the 24 December raid – often accompanied by sympathetic journalists from government-loyal media outlets.

Ilya Zenchenko, head of Azerbaijan's Baptist Union, told Forum 18 that the last such raid on a Baptist church was in Azerbaijan's second-largest city, Gyanja [Gäncä], in May 2006. "In the wake of the raid we complained to the authorities," he told Forum 18 on 27 December from Baku. "But after they intervened such raids came to a stop." However, Gyanja's Sunni mosque is unable to invite its own imam back after his arrest on apparently fabricated charges (see F18News 10 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=741).

National and local officials often arbitrarily interpret laws in ways that restrict religious freedom, or invent restrictions which have no foundation in law. Among such inventions are the restriction of religious communities that function without registration and restriction of the functioning of a religious community to the city or town where it is registered (see eg. F18News 3 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=681). "We can only get registration in Baku," Aja-Das of the Hare Krishna community told Forum 18. "We want to work in the whole country, not just in Baku." He cited continuing restrictions on Hare Krishna work outside the capital. "In some places we have been stopped from distributing literature. It wouldn't be bad if this was changed so that religious communities can work across the country."

Protestants and members of other faiths have encountered frequent similar bans in small towns and villages (see eg. F18News 16 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=689). (END)

For a personal commentary, by an Azeri Protestant, on how the international community can help establish religious freedom in Azerbaijan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=482

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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