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AZERBAIJAN: Baptist Pastor arrested / Another Protestant child denied birth certificate

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

Baptist pastor Zaur Balaev has been detained by police in Azerbaijan since Sunday (20 May), when police raided his church's worship service, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Police claim that Balaev was arrested as he resisted them, but this is strongly denied by witnesses. The police also claim – in defiance of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and belief – that the church has no right to meet, as it is not registered. The authorities have put Pastor Balaev's church under strong pressure since its foundation. "We are immensely humiliated as human beings in a country which pretends to be democratic," one congregation member told Forum 18. "We are discriminated against in many ways." It has been suggested that the raid and detention is in retaliation for protests against the authorities' attempts to demolish a church member's home. Also, in their latest refusal to register the birth of a Protestant family's child, the authorities are refusing to register the birth of Ilya Eyvazov – who officially does not exist and so cannot have health care.

Baptist pastor Zaur Balaev was arrested on 20 May when police raided the church's Sunday service, the head of Azerbaijan's Baptist Union Ilya Zenchenko has told Forum 18 News Service. Balaev leads the congregation in the remote village of Aliabad in the north-western Zakatala [Zaqatala] district close to the border with Georgia. "Zaur is still being held in the police detention centre in Zakatala. I am now waiting to see the Human Rights Ombudsperson Elmira Suleymanova to ask for her intervention," Zenchenko told Forum 18 from the capital Baku on the afternoon of 22 May.

Pastor Zenchenko said that the Azeri government's Committee for Work with Religious Organisations has told the Baptist Union that it could not intervene in police matters. "Why does this Committee exist, if it can't help when such problems arise?" Zenchenko complained.

After Zenchenko contacted the police in Baku, they contacted the Zakatala police, who claimed that Balaev was arrested for resisting the police and setting a dog onto them when police raided the service last Sunday. But Zenchenko dismisses this claim. "Church members insist this is not true and I believe them," he told Forum 18. "The authorities are trying to intimidate the church."

The congregation in Aliabad has been trying to get legal status from the authorities for 15 years. It appears to hold the record for the religious community which has been denied state registration in Azerbaijan for the longest time. "We are immensely humiliated as human beings in a country which pretends to be democratic," one congregation member complained from Aliabad. "We are discriminated against in many ways."

When police, led by village policeman Khalid Memedov, arrived at the Sunday 20 May service in a private home, they demanded that it be stopped and the people disperse. Police insisted that the congregation cannot meet because it is not registered. The police then demanded that Pastor Balaev accompany them to the police station. To avoid any potential conflict, he agreed to go.

When the police did not release Balaev from detention, church members went to the nearby town of Zakatala where he was being held. "When they enquired about Pastor Zaur they too were held and detained at the police station for a while," Baptist sources told Forum 18. "One church member, Aza Suleimanova, was even physically assaulted by police officers. She was severely beaten on her head and face."

Forum 18 has been unable to find out why Zaur Balaev has been arrested. Officials told Forum 18 on 22 May that Khakim Khan Safarov, the prosecutor of Zakatala district who is handling the case against Balaev, was not in the office. Forum 18 called his mobile phone, which was answered at first. When Forum 18 explained who was calling and why, the call was terminated. Subsequently the mobile phone has been switched off.

Likewise, an official told Forum 18 on 22 May that Asif Askerov, the head of Zakatala district administration, was not in the office, adding that no-one else was available either to answer Forum 18's questions. The telephone of Hasan Hasanov, the head of the Aliabad village administration, also went unanswered the same day.

Jeyhun Mamedov, the spokesperson for the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in Baku, declined to answer any of Forum 18's questions on 22 May. He refused to talk about either Balaev's arrest, or about why the Aliabad Baptist congregation has been denied registration for some 15 years. "I have no information," he kept repeating before putting the phone down.

The Aliabad congregation Balaev leads is made up of members of the local Georgian-speaking Ingilo minority. The church was founded after visits by members of the Georgian Baptist Union in the early 1990s. It has faced relentless pressure from the local authorities ever since, as have other Baptist churches in the region. When Forum 18 in 2004 asked the regional state notary, Najiba Mamedova, why she refused to notarise the signatures on the registration application of another Baptist church, she screamed "We don't need any Baptists here", before throwing Forum 18 out of her office (see F18News 8 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=471)

Zenchenko of the Azerbaijani Baptist Union speculated to Forum 18 that the raid and arrest of Balaev could be retaliation for his Union's attempts to prevent the authorities from demolishing a house built by church member Suleimanova. "I wrote letters of complaint to several government agencies a month ago, as they want to demolish the house to stop her from opening a shop," Zenchenko told Forum 18. "The local authorities are doing everything they can to prevent church members from earning a living."

Official discrimination against Protestants in the village has even extended to new-born children. Novruz Eyvazov, a member of a different Baptist congregation in the village, complained that although his son Ilya is eleven months old (born on 18 June 2006), officials are still refusing to issue him with a proper birth certificate. "They won't accept that we have given him a Christian name," he told Forum 18 on 10 May. "Both officials in the village and in the Zakatala registry office are responsible for this." The Eyvazov family's fourth child, Luka, was similarly denied a birth certificate (see F18News 10 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=487).

Children's births in Azerbaijan are normally registered at the place where their parents are registered to live. As Azerbaijani citizens and registered residents of Aliabad, the Eyvazov family originally tried to register Ilya's birth at the local town administration, which is where – just as in the case of his brother Luka – they first encountered a refusal. Without a birth certificate, it is impossible for children to go to kindergarten or to school, get treatment in a hospital, or travel abroad.

However, reached by Forum 18 on 10 May, the Zakatala registry office dismissed all enquiries. "What's it to you? It can't be that he hasn't got a birth certificate." Another official in the office, Aybeniz Kalashova, insisted to Forum 18 later that Eyvazov's son had received a birth certificate "two years ago." As Ilya was not born or even conceived two years ago, this presumably refers to the obstruction Luka faced in being officially recognised as existing. "No-one has complained to us," Kalashova insisted. Attempting to justify her refusal to register Ilya's birth, she used the same excuse that she used in refusing to register Luka's birth: "the village population is against the Christians" (see F18News 1 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=466). Asked why this was relevant, Kalashova responded: "Eyvazov creates these problems himself."

Reached on 10 May, Mehman Sultanov of the Justice Ministry in Baku promised Forum 18 that he would investigate the case. The problem of officials refusing to register the children of Protestant parents – thus in official terms denying that they exist – is a long-standing one in Zakatala region (see F18News 1 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=466). (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

More coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Azerbaijan is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=23&results=50>

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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