

10 December 2007

AZERBAIJAN: "If you meet again you'll be imprisoned," Adventists told

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

Neighbourhood police officer Elhan Sokhbetov, who took part in an 8 December raid on a Baku Adventist congregation's worship service, denied that it was a raid. "It was just a check-up," he insisted to Forum 18 News Service. Asked why 13 police officers had raided the service, why eight church members had been held for five hours, insulted, threatened and fined he responded: "No-one was threatened. It was just a check-up." Pastor Rasim Bakhshiyev told Forum 18 he was warned they would be imprisoned if they meet again for worship. "They tried to make us sign statements that we had been led astray in coming to services and that we were renouncing our faith," he added. "This was a crude violation of the law," another Adventist leader told Forum 18. "All our documents are in order and they have no reason to raid the congregation or to fine our members." No official of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations was available to tell Forum 18 why the service had been raided. Officials have told the Adventists they are "too busy" to receive them.

Police who raided a worship service of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the capital Baku on Saturday 8 December told the congregation's leaders that they will be imprisoned if they meet again, Pastor Rasim Bakhshiyev told Forum 18 News Service from the city on 10 December. "They told us verbally they will check up to make sure we don't meet." He and seven other congregation members were held for five hours at the local police station and fined. However, reached by Forum 18 on 8 December shortly after the group had been fined and released, the duty officer at the Nizami district 25th police department denied that any raid had taken place or that any Adventists had been held.

Reached again on 10 December, the duty officer at the 25th police department was also unable to explain why the Adventist congregation had been raided. "Why?" he asked Forum 18, laughing, but failed to answer the question. He referred all enquiries to the station head, but his telephone went unanswered on 10 December.

But the neighbourhood police officer Elhan Sokhbetov, who took part in the raid and in an earlier unapproved search of the premises where the congregation meets, denied to Forum 18 that it was a raid. "It was just a check-up" he told Forum 18 on 10 December. Asked why 13 police officers had raided the church service, why eight church members had been held for five hours, insulted, threatened and fined he responded: "No-one was threatened. It was just a check-up." He then hung up.

Despite repeated calls on 10 December to the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, none of the officially-authorised spokespersons for the committee was available to tell Forum 18 why a religious community's worship service had been raided. The receptionist said that committee chair Hidayat Orujev was in a meeting, while reached later she said he had left the office. The telephone of deputy chair Elchin Askerov went unanswered. Staff who answered the phones of spokespersons Yagut Alieva and Jeyhun Mamedov said neither was there.

Adventist leaders in Baku told Forum 18 that they had telephoned the State Committee on 10 December to try to arrange an urgent meeting to discuss the raid, but officials told them they were "too busy" to receive them. "They said perhaps they might be free on 25 December, so we should ring them on 24 December to find out," one Adventist told Forum 18 on 10 December. "They just want to avoid talking with us about it." He declined to speculate whether 25 December had been chosen specially, given that this is the day Adventists in Azerbaijan celebrate Christmas.

"This was a crude violation of the law," the Adventist added. "All our documents are in order and they have no reason to raid the congregation or to fine our members."

Bakhshiyev told Forum 18 that at 11.30 am on 8 December, some 13 police officers arrived as he was leading about 20 people in the congregation's worship service (the Adventists' holy day is Saturday). He said the group – half of whom were in uniform and half in civilian clothes – were from the 25th police department.

"They surrounded us and wrote down all our names," Bakhshiyev told Forum 18. "They insulted us, asking why we had no books about [the Muslim prophet] Muhammad and why we preach Jesus without informing them. I calmly told them that we preach Jesus

Christ and that our faith commands us to be peaceable in our preaching. They said we shouldn't preach Jesus Christ."

Bakhshiyev said that he and seven members of the congregation were taken to the local police station. "There were about 20 officers there. They didn't beat us, but they constantly insulted us in words." He said they accused the church of meeting without state registration.

The Azeri-language Adventist congregation Bakhshiyev leads meets in a privately-owned building in Baku's Nizami district, but acts under the umbrella of the city's central Adventist Church, which has state registration. Bakhshiyev said he explained this to the police but they failed to accept this.

Bakhshiyev said the detained Adventists were taken to separate rooms, where officers tried to force them to write statements. "They tried to make us sign statements that we had been led astray in coming to services and that we were renouncing our faith," he told Forum 18. "They accused me of receiving money from Armenia, as though we support Armenia." (Azerbaijan and Armenia have long been in conflict over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh.)

Bakhshiyev said that he was fined 16.50 Manats (106 Norwegian Kroner, 13 Euros or 20 US Dollars). The other seven Adventists were each fined 11 Manats. He said police did not explain exactly which article of the Code of Administrative Offences they had violated. He said one of the detained Adventists had been allowed out to collect together some money and they all paid the fines. But were told receipts for the money would only be given out on 10 December. All were freed after five hours' detention.

During the summer the same congregation faced an unapproved raid led by Sokhbetov, the neighbourhood police officer who took part in the 8 December raid. "I suddenly saw him and about another seven police climbing through the gates to get in," Bakhshiyev reported. "They searched the place right through and then went away – all without any documents at all."

Bakhshiyev said his congregation wants to gain separate legal status, but that the authorities "don't want to register a second Adventist congregation in Baku". He believes controls on religious communities have become tighter since Orujev took over in July 2006 as chair of the State Committee from the former chair Rafik Aliiev.

Meanwhile, imprisoned Baptist pastor Zaur Balaev is still waiting to hear when his appeal to the Supreme Court will be heard. Balaev led a Baptist congregation in Aliabad in the far north-west of Azerbaijan, close to the border with Georgia. Like most of the population of the village, he is from the Georgian-speaking Ingilo minority. The congregation has repeatedly over many years had its applications for legal status refused and has faced years of harassment from the local authorities.

Arrested in May, Balaev is serving a two year sentence on charges of resisting the police, charges eyewitnesses and church members insist are "trumped-up". He is now being held in Ordinary Regime Prison No. 10, located in Darnagul in Baku's Narimanov District (see F18News 16 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1049).

"Zaur's health is worsening in prison," Ilya Zenchenko, head of Azerbaijan's Baptist Union, told Forum 18 from Baku on 10 December. "Some church members were able to visit him yesterday and he needs more medicine." He said the Supreme Court has until 15 January to decide when his second appeal against his sentence will be heard.

In early November, police in the southern port town of Neftechala on the Caspian Sea, threatened local Baptist Jabbar Musaev with the same fate as that of Balaev (see F18News 16 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1049).

"Jabbar was dragged out of his home directly in the eyes of his mother and taken to the police station," Zenchenko complained. "Although he was freed that evening he was so intimidated – and so was his mother."

Other Protestant congregations and Jehovah's Witnesses have also faced harassment in recent months. "Sometimes pressure is open, sometimes it is covert," Zenchenko told Forum 18. (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 survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806.

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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