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AZERBAIJAN: Baptist warned not to hold home meetings

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

Anzor Katsiashvili, a Baptist in Belokani in north western Azerbaijan, was summoned by the local procurator on 13 and 14 March and warned not to hold religious meetings in his home. "He told me I don't have the right to preach as I'm not an Azerbaijani citizen," Katsiashvili told Forum 18 News Service. "At the same time I've been denied citizenship for the past few years because I preach. It's a vicious circle." However, Ilham Babayev, head of the local passport department, denied that his office had obstructed Katsiashvili's application for Azerbaijani citizenship and local registration. "As soon as he comes in we'll give it to him – tomorrow if necessary," he told Forum 18. Katsiashvili rejects the procurator's claim that he cannot gather fellow believers for religious meetings: "I believe I have the right to preach God's word in my own home."

Anzor Katsiashvili, a Baptist who lives in the small town of Belokani in north western Azerbaijan close to the border with Georgia and Russia, was summoned twice by the local procurator on 13 and 14 March and warned not to hold religious meetings in his home. "He told me I don't have the right to preach as I'm not an Azerbaijani citizen," Katsiashvili told Forum 18 News Service on 19 March. "At the same time I've been denied citizenship for the past few years because I preach. It's a vicious circle." However, Ilham Babayev, head of the local passport department, denied that his office had obstructed Katsiashvili's application for Azerbaijani citizenship and local registration. "As soon as he comes in we'll give it to him – tomorrow if necessary," he told Forum 18 on 19 March.

Katsiashvili leads a small Baptist congregation of seven people, which meets in his home. He and his fellow Baptists have faced frequent harassment from the district authorities for practising their faith. "They have summoned us to the local administration, interrogated us and taken the names of people who attend our meetings," Katsiashvili told Forum 18. "I have been forced to write statements to say that I won't preach on the street. But I believe I have the right to preach God's word in my own home."

Ilya Zenchenko, the head of the Azerbaijani Baptist Union, has tried to take up Katsiashvili's case with the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in the capital Baku. "We appealed to them but they said it is not their problem," Zenchenko told Forum 18 from Baku on 19 March. "They told us that he should get local registration and then he wouldn't have difficulties." It remains unclear why Katsiashvili's lack of local registration should prevent him gathering fellow-believers in his home for religious meetings, which is not illegal under Azerbaijani law. Zenchenko said the Baptist Union is now engaging a lawyer to handle Katsiashvili's case.

Katsiashvili - who moved from Georgia to Azerbaijan some years ago, is married to an Azerbaijani citizen and has a young son who is an Azerbaijani citizen - has been seeking citizenship and local registration in Belokani for several years in vain (Azerbaijan retains the Soviet practice of local residence registration). However, Babayev claimed that delays in obtaining documents from Georgia was the reason for the delay and everything was now ready for Katsiashvili to be given the documents.

Babayev categorically denied that there was any religious motivation behind the delay in granting Katsiashvili's application. "His faith is of no relevance, it's his own business," Babayev told Forum 18. "He can be a Muslim, a Baptist or whatever – we don't interfere." Told that Katsiashvili had been summoned to the procuracy where he was told not to hold religious meetings at home, Babayev responded: "That is none of my business. That is a matter for the procuracy." Forum 18 was unable to reach the local procuracy on 19 March to ask why it was interfering in religious meetings in Katsiashvili's home.

Local authorities away from Baku have often obstructed believers of minority faiths – especially Protestants – from meeting, even in private homes.

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