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AZERBAIJAN: Shock at second Baptist pastor arrest

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Ilya Zenchenko, head of Azerbaijan's Baptist Union, has condemned the arrest yesterday (20 June) of Baptist pastor Hamid Shabanov after police claim to have found an illegal weapon in his home. "We're in shock," Zenchenko told Forum 18 News Service. "This was a provocation by the police, a deliberately targeted action." The pastor's brother told Forum 18 the police's aim is to halt Baptist activity. "Their target is the church." Pastor Shabanov is the second Baptist pastor in the remote village of Aliabad to face imprisonment on what local Baptists insist are trumped-up charges. His arrest comes three months after Pastor Zaur Balaev was freed from prison. Shabanov's family insist he has no weapon and that police planted the gun they claim to have found. But the local police chief appears to have made up his mind. "He's a criminal," the head of Zakatala regional police told Forum 18, even though under Azerbaijani law individuals are innocent until found guilty in court.

Three months after Baptist pastor Zaur Balaev was freed from prison on what his family and congregation insist were trumped-up charges, another Baptist pastor in the same remote village of Aliabad in the north-western Zakatala [Zaqatala] Region has been arrested. Family members told Forum 18 from Aliabad that Hamid Shabanov was arrested yesterday (20 June) after police claim to have found a pistol during a house search. Family members insist that police planted the weapon. "He's a criminal," the head of Zakatala regional police Faik Shabanov (no relation) told Forum 18 bluntly on 21 June, even though under Azerbaijani law individuals are innocent until found guilty in court. Pastor Shabanov remains in detention at the Zakatala police station, the police chief confirmed.

Fabricated evidence and lack of due process were also evident in the case of Pastor Balaev (see F18News 9 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1005).

"This is all being done according to a scenario," Pastor Shabanov's brother Badri told Forum 18 from Aliabad on 21 June. "First they imprisoned Zaur Balaev on fabricated charges, now they're going for Hamid. Their aim is also to bring a criminal case and put him in prison." Badri Shabanov insists the true aim is to close down all Baptist activity in Aliabad. "Their target is the church."

Condemning the arrest – the latest move in years of official harassment of Baptists in the village – is Ilya Zenchenko, head of Azerbaijan's Baptist Union. "We're in shock," he told Forum 18 from the capital Baku on 21 June. "This was a provocation by the police, a deliberately targeted action."

Like the overwhelming majority of Aliabad's inhabitants, Pastors Shabanov and Balaev and other church members are from the Georgian-speaking Ingilo minority, which was converted to Islam several centuries ago.

The several Baptist congregations in Aliabad have faced repeated raids, threats and confiscation of religious literature. The congregation Balaev leads has existed for more than fifteen years and has repeatedly been barred from gaining state registration. Forum 18 believes it to be Azerbaijan's religious community that holds the record for the longest denial of registration. Children given Christian first names by their parents in Aliabad have been denied birth certificates by officials angry at their choice of name.

Pastor Shabanov's home was among those searched when Pastor Balaev was arrested in May 2007. Christian literature confiscated during the raid has still not been returned.

Pastor Balaev was freed from prison in March 2008 after a worldwide campaign for his release, including support from former US President Jimmy Carter. Since his release police have threatened Balaev with a further prison term if he continues his religious activity with his congregation (see F18News 12 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1142).

"Without this international campaign Zaur Balaev would never have been freed," Zenchenko of the Baptist Union told Forum 18. "Taking his case through the local courts brought us nothing."

Pastor Shabanov's family told Forum 18 that some ten police officers from both Aliabad and Zakatala had come to the family home in the village at about 5 pm on 20 June. "We believe they already had the intention to seize him," the family reported. "They threatened him because we meet for worship and pray together – they said we shouldn't do it."

The family accuse the police of planting "evidence" to use against Pastor Shabanov. "They came in claiming to be looking for drugs and guns," they reported. "They searched the house and claim to have found a gun, but they planted it themselves. He has got no weapons." The family say the search and the arrest were all over in about twenty minutes.

But police chief Faik Shabanov insists the pastor is guilty of a crime, harbouring an illegal weapon. Told that the family vehemently reject the accusation, the police chief told Forum 18: "They can say what they like." Asked why, if the police was solely concerned with an alleged illegal weapon, officers had threatened the pastor over church meetings in his home, police chief Shabanov responded: "Who are you to talk to the chief of police like that?" He then put the phone down.

Reached on 21 June, Jeyhun Mamedov of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations immediately put the phone down each time Forum 18 tried to ask him about Pastor Shabanov's arrest.

Officials in Zakatala Region have a history of restricting religious freedom, not only for Aliabad's Baptists. In 2007 a police officer banned Muslim men from attending a prayer room at Zakatala's market if they had beards and ordered them to shave. Local Jehovah's Witnesses have also faced harassment, most recently with a police raid on the home of Matanat Gurbanova and her family on 25 March. Police confiscated religious literature they claimed is "banned" and threatened members of her family (see F18News 12 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1142).

Meanwhile, still imprisoned is Said Dadashbeyli, a Baku-based Muslim teacher who received a 14-year sentence at a closed trial in December 2007. His lawyer and family insist that he and eight of those sentenced with him are innocent of the serious terrorism-related charges levelled against them. Dadashbeyli founded an Islamic group called Nima in 2005 and, his family say, promoted a "European style of Islam", mutual respect and unity between Shias (the largest Muslim tendency in Azerbaijan) and Sunnis, and rejected fundamentalism (see F18News 28 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1134). (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>.

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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