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AZERBAIJAN: State still deprives Muslims of mosque and Baptists of pastor

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

Azerbaijan continues to maintain the closure of Baku's Abu-Bekr Mosque, Forum 18 News Service has found. The closure was imposed after a 17 August bomb attack on the mosque, and a nationwide "temporary" ban – still in force – on people praying outside mosques was also imposed. The authorities have caught the alleged attackers, but "the decision not to allow the mosque to reopen offends the community," Imam Gamet Suleymanov told Forum 18. The ordinary police, the Interior Ministry, the Prosecutor's Office, the National Security Ministry (NSM) secret police, and the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations all deny that their agency is responsible. Similarly, the authorities also refuse to release the text of the ban on praying outside mosques. Elsewhere, Baptist prisoner of conscience Hamid Shabanov remains in jail, with his latest detention period due to end on 21 October. It is unclear what the authorities plan to do, even though he is held on charges his church and family insist are fabricated.

Two months after a 17 August bomb explosion at the Abu-Bekr Mosque in the capital Baku, which killed two people, worshippers appear to be no nearer to seeing their mosque allowed to reopen, Forum 18 News Service has found. "The decision not to allow the mosque to reopen offends the community," Imam Gamet Suleymanov told Forum 18 from Baku on 13 October. "Two months is too long for it to remain closed, especially as they have caught the bandits who did it." All attempts by the mosque's leaders and lawyer, and by Forum 18, to find out who is obstructing the reopening have been fruitless. Meanwhile, the court-approved detention period for Baptist prisoner of conscience Hamid Shabanov expires on 21 October. However, it remains unclear whether Pastor Shabanov will be tried, freed or have his period of detention extended.

Police, the Interior Ministry, the Prosecutor's Office, the National Security Ministry (NSM) secret police, and the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations have all avoided saying which agency is responsible for the mosque closure. "No one in the state will take responsibility," the mosque community's lawyer, Javanshir Suleymanov (no relation to the imam), complained to Forum 18 from Baku on 13 October. "We want to find out who did it – and to have the mosque reopened."

In the community's bid to reopen their mosque, they lodged a case in Baku's Sabail District Court against the State Committee. However, on 6 October the State Committee presented the judge with a declaration that the mosque had been closed by the law-enforcement agencies because of the investigation. It added that it did not have the right to determine which places of worship to open or close.

The community's lawyer Suleymanov said police are manning a checkpoint at the mosque, and have a car outside also to prevent anyone from entering.

The mosque community also lodged a case in the Narimanov District Court against the District Police, claiming that it had closed the mosque. The community complained that it had not been shown the order referred to by the police. It said the NSM secret police had already told the community that no order to close the mosque existed.

The lawyer Suleymanov said hearings in the case had been due on both 6 and 13 October, but the police had not appeared. He added that another hearing is now scheduled for 20 October, which will go ahead whether or not the police turn up.

The 17 August bombing of the Abu-Bekr Mosque, which occurred during evening prayers, left two worshippers dead and more than a dozen wounded, including imam Suleymanov. The authorities closed the mosque immediately after the explosion while the crime was investigated. The authorities have arrested several members of a group they call the Forest Brothers, who they say carried out the attack.

"We don't know who closed the mosque – people said it was the State Committee," Imam Suleymanov told Forum 18. "Its reopening depends on them. We don't understand why the State Committee needs to approve the opening of a place of worship." He said they had hoped the mosque could reopen ahead of Ramadan, which began at the beginning of September, but that had not happened. He added that they again wrote to the State Committee chairman Hidayat Orujev in early October calling on it to allow the mosque to

reopen but have had no response. "They have a cold attitude to us." Suleymanov also wrote to President Ilham Aliyev.

No one at the State Committee was prepared to discuss the mosque closure with Forum 18 on 16 October. The woman who answered the phone of Committee spokesperson Yagut Alieva said she was out of the office. She refused to answer any questions. The man who answered the phone of another Committee official Gunduz Ismailov told Forum 18 he was not Ismailov and did not work at the Committee but at a private firm.

Muradali Babaev, head of the Narimanov District Police, categorically denied that his officers had closed the mosque. "It is not within our competence," he told Forum 18 on 16 October. "We don't close mosques. Ask the National Security Ministry – they closed it." Asked about the police post outside the mosque, he said police are stationed all around Baku.

However, Lieutenant-Colonel Ahsan Zahidov of the Interior Ministry insisted to Forum 18 on 16 October that it had been the State Committee that had closed the mosque. However, he claimed that no one was now preventing the mosque from reopening. "If the imam reopens the mosque, nothing will happen to him," he claimed, before putting the phone down.

The telephone of the NSM secret police's press office went unanswered on 16 and 17 October.

The controversial nationwide ban on praying outside mosques has also not been revoked. The unpublished ban – which officials have refused to show Azeri Muslims and Forum 18 – was suddenly imposed at the end of August, allegedly to protect Muslim worshippers from further attacks. State Committee officials insisted to the local media that the nationwide ban was "temporary" (see F18News 18 September 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1188).

Among those backing the Abu-Bekr mosque community is Fazil Gazanfaroglu Mustafaev, the only parliamentary deputy from the opposition Böyük Qurulus Partiyası (Great Formation Party) and a member of the parliamentary Human Rights Commission. He insisted to Forum 18 on 16 October that the ban is no longer justified and violates the community's constitutional rights. "They should have the right to pray there again. The investigation must have finished by now."

The Abu-Bekr Mosque is one of Baku's few Sunni Muslim mosques (most though not all Muslims in Azerbaijan are Shias). Imam Suleymanov says the mosque is Salafi, a stream of Sunni Islam that seeks to return to what it regards as the faith's authentic roots. He said some 7,000 worshippers used to attend Friday prayers.

Imam Suleymanov confirmed that the community is under the jurisdiction of Azerbaijan's Caucasian Muslim Board, which remains loyal to the government. "All mosques are under the Muslim Board – the State Committee insists on it," he told Forum 18. Article 8 of the Religion Law requires all Muslim communities to be under the umbrella of the Muslim Board. However, he reported that the Board does not interfere in their activity. "We're free, so it's no problem. It would only be a problem if they obstructed our activity."

Asked where members of the mosque community are now worshipping, Imam Suleymanov said they have been forced to attend other mosques. He pointed out that the few Sunni mosques in Baku are overcrowded as "many people" come to them. "If God allows we would build more, but we wouldn't be allowed," he told Forum 18. He declined to explain who was preventing Sunni Muslims from building more mosques. "Maybe they're officials."

No officials have been prepared to discuss with Forum 18 the continuing ban on worshippers praying in the yards and on the streets near mosques when they are full. "There was never any written order – it was all verbal," the lawyer Suleymanov complained to Forum 18.

Imam Suleymanov and the parliamentary deputy Fazil Gazanfaroglu are among many who oppose the ban. "Banning people from praying around mosques is not right," Gazanfaroglu told Forum 18. He said he too has been unable to find out who issued the ban and how long it is supposed to last, or to read the text of any written ban.

The lawyer Suleymanov repeated to Forum 18 earlier complaints by the imam that police had forcibly shaved off the beards of mosque members (see F18News 18 September 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1188). However, he said those affected had now won two legal cases against the police. The Nasimi District Police were forced to apologise, while the case against the Karadag District Police is being sent to the Prosecutor's Office.

Meanwhile, Baptist pastor Hamid Shabanov remains in custody in the north-western Balakan District. The two-month extension to his detention while the investigation continues runs out on 21 October, but Protestants in Baku close to his case told Forum 18 it remains unclear what actions the prosecutors or court are planning. "We're refusing to take part in the investigation as there is no proof against him," one Protestant told Forum 18 on 17 October.

The Protestant said that they have repeatedly asked for Shabanov to be freed unconditionally or at least to be transferred to house arrest, so far without success. "They want to stage a sudden court hearing, but we keep saying if he has to be tried, let it be done openly and fairly," the Protestant told Forum 18.

Pastor Shabanov leads a Georgian-speaking Baptist congregation in the village of Aliabad just outside Zakatala [Zaqatala], in the district south of Balakan. He faces charges that he held an illegal weapon, charges his family and congregation insist are fabricated. Shabanov was arrested during a police raid on his home on 20 June and he has been held since then (see F18News 21 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1146).

His trial began in Zakatala on 22 July, but on 29 July the judge referred the case back to the prosecutor for further investigation (see F18News 30 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1165). A further hearing on 22 August, which was called without informing Shabanov, his family or his defence lawyer, saw his detention extended by two months. He was later transferred to the neighbouring Balakan District, a move cautiously welcomed by his supporters, who point to the long record of police and courts in Zakatala District of punishing people for peaceful religious activity (see F18News 19 September 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1189). (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=1192.

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>.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY