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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

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AZERBAIJAN: "Why shouldn't we bring order to this?"

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

Complaining of the latest closure of a mosque in Azerbaijan is Muslim rights activist Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev. He told Forum 18 News Service that local officials and police banned Muslims from praying at the Khazrat Fatima mosque in Baku, cut off the power and threatened to demolish the uncompleted building. "The time the community had to complete construction work is over," local police chief Jovdat Mamedov told Forum 18. "The city authorities ordered them to stop. It's a problem of documentation." Parliamentary deputy Rabiyyat Aslanova defended the moves against mosques, insisting to Forum 18 that only "illegal structures" had been demolished or closed. "Why shouldn't we bring order to this?" Police elsewhere in Baku warned Jehovah's Witnesses they would be closed down if they allow children to attend, while two female Jehovah's Witnesses have officially complained of police interrogations during which they were pressured to change their faith.

Moves to restrict religious activity even more – this time targeted specifically at Muslims – come as another mosque has been closed down in the capital Baku. The Khazrat Fatima mosque in the settlement of Yeni Guneshli in the city's Surakhany District was closed by officials of the District Administration on about 19 June, Muslim rights activist Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev told Forum 18 News Service on 23 June. He pointed out that this was the latest of a series of mosques destroyed or closed in and around Baku. But dismissing such concerns was Rabiyyat Aslanova, a parliamentary deputy of the ruling party, who insisted that only "illegal structures" had been demolished or closed. "Why shouldn't we bring order to this?" she told Forum 18 on 25 June.

Facing continuing pressure from police officers are Jehovah's Witnesses, two of whom have lodged an official complaint over police interrogations during which they were pressured to change their faith. Police have warned the community in Baku that it will be closed down if it allows children to attend. Jehovah's Witnesses have also failed in a court challenge to the denial of permission to import some of their literature by the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, the official body which administers the system of prior compulsory censorship of all religious literature.

The telephones of the two spokespersons for the State Committee, Gunduz Ismailov and Yagut Alieva, went unanswered when Forum 18 called on 23 June.

The Milli Mejlis (Parliament) is due to consider the latest amendments to the Religion Law on 30 June which would impose new restrictions on Muslims. If adopted, these would be the second set of amendments to the Religion Law this year. The previous amendments, which came into force in May, were criticised by the Monitoring Committee of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly, which called on the authorities to submit them for a review of their compliance with European norms (see F18News 25 June 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1318).

Why was the latest mosque closed down?

Muslim rights activist Ibrahimoglu told Forum 18 that officials who arrived at the Khazrat Fatima mosque in Yeni Guneshli were soon joined by officers of the local police, who expressly forbade the praying of the namaz. Officials cut off the power and threatened to demolish the building.

The decision to close the mosque appears to have been taken by the Surakhany District administration. However, Forum 18 was unable to reach anyone there on 23 June to find out why they had banned further public prayer on the site.

Jovdat Mamedov, the head of the 33rd police division in Yeni Guneshli, insisted to Forum 18 on 23 June that no mosque had been closed. Asked about the closure of the Khazrat Fatima mosque, he responded: "Ask the city authorities. The time the community had to complete construction work is over. The city authorities ordered them to stop. It's a problem of documentation."

Asked why officers had been sent to the site to prevent Muslims from praying, Mamedov insisted that they were not present. Asked if they had been there in the previous week with local officials he seemed unsure, referring enquiries to his superiors at the Surakhany District police.

The deputy head of Surakhany District police, who gave his family name as Veliev, told Forum 18 that the District police had not

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sent any officers to the mosque. "Ask the 33rd police division."

Asked who had issued the order to close the mosque, Ibrahimoglu suggested that the District Administration would have been unlikely to have issued such an order without an order "from above".

Ibrahimoglu told Forum 18 that the mosque has been under construction since the 1990s, and that the interior is largely complete. He said only the cupola and the exterior of the walls need completing. He added that officials are no longer talking about demolishing the mosque but will only allow a few people from the mosque community to pray on the site. "The hundreds of local people who used to come there to pray are being blocked from doing so."

Forum 18 notes that many buildings in and around Baku are left unfinished – often for many years – and a few are used in the interim.

Muslims have expressed outrage to Forum 18 over the demolition of the two mosques and the closure of others in and near Baku (see F18News 18 June 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1314). Press reports say attempts have been made away from Baku to demolish several mosques this year.

Deputy Aslanova of the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan (New Azerbaijan) Party, who heads the Milli Mejlis Human Rights Committee, insisted to Forum 18 that mosques that were built "illegally" – whether without documentation or on other people's property – had to be dealt with. She said this was not linked to the closure of other mosques on security grounds or for restoration. "You shouldn't be asking the question 'Why is this all happening now?', but rather 'Why wasn't this done before?'"

A deputy chairman of the Caucasian Muslim Board, Haji Salman Musaev, also downplayed the demolitions and closures. He told Forum 18 on 22 June that reconstruction underway in a number of mosques is necessary and that they will reopen as soon as possible.

A nationwide "temporary" ban on praying outside mosques, imposed in August 2008, along with bans on some Georgian Orthodox and Baptist churches reopening still remain in force (see F18News 29 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1246).

Children banned from worship?

Police have tried to prevent Jehovah's Witnesses from allowing children to attend their meetings in Baku, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 23 June. One of the leaders of their community in Baku was called in by the police of the 34th division in the city's Khatai District on 3 June. Police told the leader that children are not allowed to attend and that he was being given a "last warning". Police said that if this warning was not heeded their Kingdom Hall would be closed down.

"The police gave our leader no legal justification for the warning or for the demand not to allow children to attend," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. However, they said that children have continued to attend and so far police have not followed up on the warning.

No-one at the police's 34th division was prepared to talk to Forum 18 on 23 June to explain why the "warning" was issued and why they are insisting that children are not allowed to attend places of worship.

Officials have long disliked the presence of children at religious events. In December 2007, police in Azerbaijan's second city Gyanja [Gäncä] threatened Seventh-day Adventist pastor Elshan Samedov with jail for not banning school-age children from church and for leading worship in church-owned properties (see F18News 20 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1065).

Jehovah's Witnesses harassed

Two Jehovah's Witnesses lodged official complaints to the General Prosecutor's Office on 2 June over what they say was harassment by police officers at the 10th division of the police in Baku's Garadag District. In their complaints – seen by Forum 18 – Makhluga Akhmedova and Kaklik Muradova say they were discussing their faith on the street in Lokbatan on 30 April when two police cars drove up close to them. Four officers got out and, without showing identification or any document, ordered them to come to the police station, where the two women were held for four hours.

The two women complain that police officers "crudely insulted our faith and accused us of abandoning the Islamic religion, as though the law does not allow this". One officer told them they had no right to preach. Another officer forced them to write a statement about what they were doing and what they believe, despite their unwillingness to do so without a lawyer being present.

Akhmedova was asked to summon her husband, but she told police he was at work and they had no reason to intervene in her family life. Muradova said that she had an asthma attack during questioning and the police merely opened the window to allow in fresh air,

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but would not release her to allow her to get her medicine.

Several officers "demanded that we change our religion which, given their duty as state officials, is illegal," Akhmedova wrote in her complaint.

Akhmedova and Muradova demanded of the General Prosecutor's Office that disciplinary measures be taken against the officers, including the head of the 10th division, Zabit Baliev.

Reached on 23 June, Baliev claimed to Forum 18 that he did not recall the detention of the two women and said he would "look into it".

Told about the two women's complaints of pressure from the local police, including the pressure to abandon their faith and adopt another, parliamentary deputy Aslanova declared: "If this happened it would be a violation of the law and those involved could be punished." She pledged that if the Jehovah's Witnesses came to her with the evidence she would lodge a formal enquiry with the Interior Ministry, which oversees the police.

Supreme Court upholds religious censorship

One year after the Jehovah's Witnesses were denied permission by the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations to import some religious books from abroad, Azerbaijan's Supreme Court finally rejected their complaint against the decision on 16 June. Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that they submitted to the State Committee in early 2008 a list of titles they wished to import in line with the legal requirement that all religious literature needs to undergo prior compulsory censorship.

On 13 June 2008 the State Committee responded, granting permission for some books on the list but rejecting others. "They gave no reason for rejecting certain titles," the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Unhappy at the decision, the community challenged the rejection first in Sabail District Court, then in Baku Appeal Court and finally in the Supreme Court, all of which rejected their complaint.

The Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that as soon as they get the written judgment from the Supreme Court they will consider bringing a case to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

The Religion Law amendments which came into force in May reinforced the sweeping censorship of all religious literature produced in Azerbaijan or imported into the country. Adding to the existing compulsory prior censorship of all religious literature, the new amendments now require state permission to set up a shop selling religious literature. Even exporting religious literature now needs permission. Changes made at the same time to the Code of Administrative Offences introduced new penalties for producing, selling, circulating, importing and exporting religious literature without state permission (see F18News 3 June 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1305). (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 printer-friendly map of Azerbaijan is available at http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=azerba.

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