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AZERBAIJAN: "They believe talking about their faith is not a crime"

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

Arrested by police in Yevlakh in late August for "preaching the Nursi religious trend" – a reference to the teachings of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi - Hasil Mamedov was imprisoned for seven days and Yusif Mamedov and Arif Yunusov for five days each on charges of hooliganism, court officials told Forum 18 News Service. "The police accused them of hooliganism, but they were not guilty of any wrongdoing," their lawyer Farhat Mamedov told Forum 18. "They believe talking about their faith is not a crime." Other Nursi followers have been fined. Jehovah's Witness Tarana Khutsishvili, whose husband was deported to punish him for his religious activity in July, again had a meeting in her home raided by a dozen police in August. Although in her last month of pregnancy, police threatened her with arrest and told others to pay large fines.

Three adherents of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi were given prison terms of between five and seven days in the central town of Yevlakh [Yevlax] in late August for teaching their beliefs, court officials and the men's lawyer told Forum 18 News Service. "The police accused them of hooliganism, but they were not guilty of any wrongdoing," the lawyer Farhat Mamedov told Forum 18 from Yevlakh on 10 September. "They believe talking about their faith is not a crime." Police have continued to move against other Nursi adherents, as well as Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestants.

As is their usual custom, the officials who answered the telephones on 11 September of Gunduz Ismailov and Yagut Alieva, spokespersons at the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, hung up as soon as Forum 18 had asked about the recent harassment of religious communities.

Religious communities of a variety of faiths are facing a wave of harassment at the moment. In the wake of the deportation of two Jehovah's Witnesses – both Georgian citizens – in July, police on 10 September fined and ordered the deportation of Javid Shingarov, an Azerbaijan-born Baptist from Yalama in the north of the country, after accusing him of "illegally propagandizing his faith" in his home (see F18News 11 September 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1347).

Moves against Nursi followers

Police in Yevlakh detained Hasil Mamedov, Yusif Mamedov and Arif Yunusov in late August for "preaching the Nursi religious trend", the local news agency APA reported, quoting local police. The agency said religious literature "banned for distribution" was confiscated.

Yevlakh District Court found the three men guilty on 26 August of violating Article 296 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes "petty hooliganism", the court chancellery told Forum 18 on 10 September. Hasil Mamedov received a seven-day prison term, while Yusif Mamedov and Arif Yunusov each received a five-day sentence. Both the court and their lawyer told Forum 18 that the three denied the accusations against them but did not lodge appeals against the sentences.

The man who answered the phone of Yevlakh police chief Mehrali Bayramov on 11 September hung up as soon as Forum 18 asked why the three had been detained and punished. The duty officer at the police station insisted the same day that the men had been punished by the court, not by the police, but refused to discuss why the police had detained them in the first place and what acts of hooliganism they are alleged to have committed.

Another group of Nursi followers were fined under the Code of Administrative Offences in Gyanja [Gäncä], Azerbaijan's second city, in late July. Quoting Interior Ministry officers, Trend news agency reported on 27 July that police took eleven local residents and one visitor from the capital Baku to the police station after they were caught studying Said Nursi's teachings in a private flat owned by Elmir Mekhtiev.

The agency said two of those held – Rovshan Iskenderov and Ismail Askerov – were punished under Article 310 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes "wilful failure to obey the demands of the law or the police". Mekhtiev was punished under Article 299, which punishes "violation of the procedure for religious activity". The agency said the remainder were freed after

they wrote statements.

Despite repeated calls on 14 September to Gyanja's Kapaz District Court – where it appears the three were fined - Forum 18 was unable to find any official able to confirm the cases and give the level of the fines.

These are the latest in a series of moves against Nursi adherents. In the north-western Gakh [Qax] District in July, three visitors from Mingechaur [Mingacevir] were detained for "propaganda for religious extremism" and copies of Nursi's works were confiscated from them. They were punished by Gakh District Court under the Code of Administrative Offences and expelled from the District (see F18News 22 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1330).

The APA news agency also noted that ten men the police described as "Wahhabis" were detained in Yevlakh in August for "illegal religious propaganda". It said the group was led by local resident Zafar Ibrahimov. They too were sentenced to short terms of imprisonment by Yevlakh Regional Court. It remains unclear what activity the men were engaged in.

Jehovah's Witnesses and Baptists face administrative penalties

On 12 August police again raided a group of Jehovah's Witnesses in Gakh, four weeks to the day after a previous raid. The group was meeting in the private home of Tarana Khutsishvili. In the wake of the 15 July raid, her husband, Elguja Khutsishvili, an Azerbaijan-born Georgian citizen, was deported from Azerbaijan on 23 July to punish him for his religious activity (see F18News 11 September 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1347).

Shortly after the 12 August meeting concluded in mid-afternoon, about nine men in police uniform and another four in civilian clothing arrived at the Khutsishvili home, where 15 persons were gathered. "The worshippers relate how the police burst in and announced that all the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses in Gakh is forbidden," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "They then searched the house without showing any identification, finally insulting those present and accusing them of violating administrative law." The police said that each would be fined 300 Manats (2,217 Norwegian Kroner, 256 Euros or 373 US Dollars).

They also threatened Tarana Khutsishvili with imprisonment, despite the fact that she was in the last month of her pregnancy and has two other children to look after in the absence of her deported husband.

Four of the men and one woman present were taken to the police station, where they were insulted, questioned and pressured to sign documents admitting that they had violated the law. One man was hit in the face. Two young women, also Jehovah's Witnesses, who had already left the Khutsishvili home before the police arrived, were also detained at the police station and not allowed to speak to anyone.

After a few hours' detention, the policemen told the two women that they should pay a fine of 500 Manats (3,694 Norwegian Kroner, 426 Euros or 622 US Dollars). All were finally released late that night.

Police in Gakh refused to answer any of Forum 18's questions on 14 September about why Elguja Khutsishvili had been deported, why religious meetings at the family home had been raided in July and August, why the Jehovah's Witnesses were detained, why one was beaten and why they were threatened with fines. After long deliberations with colleagues, the duty officer put the phone down.

The Interior Ministry website noted on the day of the raid that six Jehovah's Witnesses – five of them visitors from other towns - had been detained in Gakh for "proselytising the Jehovah's Witness faith". It added that sixty Jehovah's Witness brochures and seven books were found and taken from them. The Ministry said the six were released after official protocols about them had been drawn up under the "relevant article" of the Administrative Offences Code. As is their usual practice, the Ministry did not reveal anything about any punishments.

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 14 September that those detained have not paid the threatened fines and that they are not being pressed to do so at the moment. They say they intend to file a complaint with the General Prosecutor's Office against the police in connection with the raid.

Meanwhile, a young Baptist, Fagan Mammadov, is facing trial on 15 September in Guneshli in Baku under Articles 299 and 300 of the Code of Administrative Offences, Baptists told Forum 18 from Baku on 11 September. He has been accused of "illegally spreading Christianity to a minor" after giving a Christian CD to a teenage girl he knew who asked him for material on the Christian faith.

Baptists also complain that in the town of Gusar [Qusar], close to Azerbaijan's northern border with Russia, officials began in late August to force local church members to sign statements rejecting any Christian activity, otherwise they are threatened with arrest. "They even do this for women," they added. They say some church members have been forced to flee to other towns "for their own safety".

Baptists added that church members on the island of Pirallahi (Artyom) close to Baku are afraid after police began searching for them, though pressure there seems to have eased. (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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