

20 May 2010

AZERBAIJAN: Nakhichevan - "No trial – they were just held"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Four readers of the works of the late Muslim theologian Said Nursi were held for three days without trial by Azerbaijan's NSM secret police in Nakhichevan, Forum 18 News Service has learned. "There was no administrative trial – they were just held there," Muslims complained. Restrictions in Nakhichevan - an exclave between Armenia, Iran, and Turkey - are even tighter than in the rest of Azerbaijan. No officials, whether in Nakhichevan or in the capital Baku, were prepared to explain why the four Muslims were held without trial. The NSM denied the incident, claiming that they "didn't arrest anyone for reading books. That would be absurd." Trouble began for the Nursi readers when one of them was arrested at Nakhichevan airport after Nursi literature was found on him. Five other local Nursi readers were then arrested at home, and eventually late at night two of them were freed. The remaining four were held in the NSM cellars for three days, a Nursi reader told Forum 18. Like Baha'is and Adventists, Nursi readers have also told Forum 18 that a number of them have left Nakhichevan, to live in other parts of Azerbaijan where pressure on them is not so intense.

Four readers of the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi were held for three days from 11 May in the cellars of the National Security Ministry (NSM) secret police in Nakhichevan [Naxçıvan] city, fellow readers who asked not to be identified have complained to Forum 18 News Service. "There was no administrative trial – they were just held there." Nursi readers are frequently detained and fined in Azerbaijan, including in Nakhichevan, an Azerbaijani exclave wedged between Armenia, Iran, and Turkey. Restrictions on religious activity in Nakhichevan are even tighter than in the rest of Azerbaijan.

Meanwhile, President Ilham Aliyev has bowed to local and foreign pressure not to allow the demolition of the Fatima Zahra mosque in the Azerbaijani capital Baku. The Mosque, along with other mosques as well as Christian churches, has been forcibly closed by the authorities (see F18News 7 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1441). President Aliyev has made no move towards allowing the reopening of other places of worship (see F18News 27 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1451).

Officials refuse to discuss detentions without trial

No officials – whether in Nakhichevan or in Baku – were prepared to explain why the four Muslims were held without trial. The press officer at the NSM secret police in Baku – who refused to give his name – insisted to Forum 18 on 18 May that no such arrests had happened. "The National Security Ministry didn't arrest anyone for reading books," he claimed. "That would be absurd." He declined to answer any other questions and put the phone down.

The authorities have frequently confiscated "illegal" religious literature, and detained the books' owners (see F18News 11 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1443).

Equally unresponsive was the NSM secret police in Nakhichevan. An officer who would not give his name listened to Forum 18's questions on 18 May and promised to look into it, asking Forum 18 to call back in an hour. Each time Forum 18 called back, the phone was immediately put down.

The man who answered the phone of Idris Abbasov - the senior local religious affairs official who answers to the Nakhichevan government, not to the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in Baku – told Forum 18 on 18 May that he was away on a work trip. He said no-one else could answer Forum 18's questions.

Nakhichevan's Human Rights Ombudsperson Ulkar Bayramova, who reports to the exclave's parliament, put the phone down on 18 May as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself and asked about the detentions of the four Nursi readers. Officials refused to reconnect Forum 18 with her when it called back.

Three-day detentions

Trouble began for the Nursi readers on 11 May when one of them, Rahman (last name unknown), who comes from Nakhichevan but now works in Baku, arrived back in the exclave at Nakhichevan airport. He was arrested when the NSM secret police found in his

luggage two full sets of Nursi's 14-volume work *Risale-i Nur* (Messages of Light), as well as religious CDs, Nursi readers told Forum 18. He told them that one set was his and the other was a gift for a friend. The books were confiscated.

The NSM secret police then went to the homes of five other local Nursi readers, Ramin Ibrahimov, and four others, Ali, Kadir, Parviz and Khakani (last names unknown). "Pray the namaz [Muslim prayer], but you mustn't read these books," the Nursi reader quoted officers as telling the six readers. The six were then taken to the NSM headquarters in Nakhichevan city.

Late at night, Ali and Parviz were freed. However, the other four were held in the NSM cellars for three days, the Nursi reader told Forum 18. The Nursi reader added that the four were not maltreated during their detention and, unlike in other jails, were given food. At least one of the four intends to write a formal complaint against the detention.

Nakhichevan's severe human rights limitations

Islam in Nakhichevan remains under tight state control, along with all other religious faiths and other civil society groups. Shia Muslims faced a crackdown as they commemorated the festival of Ashura in December 2009, with young men being turned away from mosques in Nakhichevan city and a massive crackdown in the village of Bananyar in Nakhichevan's Julfa District the day after a large Ashura commemoration. Three young men who attended the Turkish-led Sunni Juma Mosque in Nakhichevan city were reported to have been imprisoned for 15 days in November 2009 (see F18News 21 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1397).

The exclave's authorities have long had a de facto ban on religious activity by non-Muslim communities. Small groups of Baha'is, Seventh-day Adventists and Hare Krishna devotees were banned from meeting several years ago. Faik Farajov of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic Department for Work with Religious Organisations told Forum 18 in January 2010 that no non-Muslim communities exist. "The Adventists and Baha'is have all left," he claimed (see F18News 21 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1397). The small numbers of religious minority believers in Nakhichevan cannot worship openly, communities told Forum 18.

Nakhichevan has no Russian Orthodox church, and there are only six Orthodox churches in the whole of Azerbaijan. A spokesperson at the Russian Orthodox diocese in Baku told Forum 18 on 20 May that, although a few Russian Orthodox live in the exclave, no regular services take place and no priest has visited at least in the past year.

Human rights defenders and journalists have long complained that Nakhichevan is even more authoritarian and restrictive than the rest of Azerbaijan (see F18News 21 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1397).

Nursi readers leaving Nakhichevan

Like the Baha'is and Adventists, Nursi readers have also told Forum 18 that a number of Nursi readers have had to leave Nakhichevan to live in other parts of Azerbaijan where pressure on them is not so intense. They say police officers told them in 2009: "We're Shias – why don't you pray like us?" They were told not to go to pray at the Sunni Juma Mosque in Nakhichevan city.

Detentions of up to 15 days were common in Nakhichevan until late 2009, Nursi readers told Forum 18. But in what they say was a deliberate tactic, the sentenced Nursi readers were not given the court verdicts in writing, thereby preventing them from lodging appeals. "We wrote a complaint to the President, and after that they stopped persecuting believers," one Nursi reader told Forum 18.

Nursi readers have told Forum 18 that in other cases elsewhere in Azerbaijan, appeals and complaints have led to a lessening of official harassment of them (see F18News 11 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1443). (END)

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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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.

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