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AZERBAIJAN: "A religiously tolerant country"?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Four Baptists in Azerbaijan were yesterday (31 October) given five day jail terms after a police raid the same day on a Harvest Festival celebration in a private home, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Around 80 Baptists were present when police raided. Police first turned off the gas and electricity to prevent church members from preparing a festive meal, and then recorded the names of all those present also photographing and filming them. After a late night closed court hearing, home owner, Ilgar Mamedov and three others – Zalib Ibrahimov, Rauf Gurbanov and Akif Babaev - were given five-day prison terms. Police insisted to Forum 18 that there was nothing unusual about a late Sunday evening court hearing, claiming that "it happens". In a separate case, a court in the capital Baku has handed down a large fine on a Jehovah's Witness to punish her for offering religious literature on the streets. Azerbaijan has also rejected re-registration applications from many religious communities, after it made unregistered activity illegal. Asked about this, an official claimed: "Even our enemies admit that Azerbaijan is a religiously tolerant country".

Police in the northern Azerbaijani town of Kusar [Qusar] raided a Baptist Harvest Festival being celebrated yesterday (31 October) in a private home and arrested four participants, Baptists have told Forum 18 News Service. The home owner, Ilgar Mamedov, and three others – Zalib Ibrahimov, Rauf Gurbanov and Akif Babaev - were given five-day prison terms at a late-night closed court hearing. "This morning one brother went to the police station to find out how the brothers were. He was told there will be another trial in five days' time," Baptists told Forum 18 on 1 November. "And they're threatening to give Zalib Ibrahimov a 12-year prison sentence." In a separate case, a court in the capital Baku has handed down a large fine on a Jehovah's Witness to punish her for offering religious literature on the streets.

The four Baptists belong to the Council of Churches, whose congregations refuse on principle to register with the authorities in any of the former Soviet states where they operate.

The raid

Around 80 Baptists – including guests from Baku and Sumgait - had gathered on Sunday 31 October for the Harvest Festival in Mamedov's home in Kusar, where the Baptist church meets, when police raided. Police first turned off the gas and electricity to prevent church members from preparing a festive meal. Police Lieutenant Mamedshah Hasanaliyev then recorded the names of all those present. "Police officers were present throughout the service, photographing and filming those present," Baptists complained to Forum 18. "The brothers and sisters had gathered to thank God for the harvest."

At about noon, police took the four men - Mamedov (the home owner), Babaev (who is from a nearby village), Gurbanov (who is from Sumgait) and Ibrahimov (who is from Baku) – to Kusar Police Station. About seven hours later, the four were "secretly" taken to Kusar's Court, where they were tried on charges of insulting people, Baptists complained. "The court hearing was closed – not even their close relatives were allowed in." They say the only witness to the hearing was one local woman. "The police used her testimony."

Church members maintained a vigil on Sunday afternoon and evening outside Kusar Police Station and the Court, only seeing the men briefly at 11 pm as they were returned from the Court to the Police Station.

"It happens"

The duty officers at Kusar Police Station initially declined to explain to Forum 18 late on 31 October why they had raided the Baptist service, and why the four had been imprisoned. Eventually one officer – who did not give his name – told Forum 18 that a complaint had come in that the four had "insulted" people. The officer refused to give any further details, insisting that the court had issued the punishments, not the police. The officer insisted to Forum 18 that there was nothing unusual about a late Sunday evening court hearing, claiming that "it happens".

The officer refused to say why the police had raided the service and why, if a complaint had come in about one or more individuals, officers had taken the names of all those present, cut off the gas and electricity supply and filmed the service.

The telephone of Eynulla Nurullaev, the official of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in the northern town of Quba responsible for religious affairs in northern Azerbaijan, went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 1 November.

"We have never had such heavy penalties"

"We have never had such heavy penalties on our members in Azerbaijan," one Council of Churches Baptist told Forum 18. The Baptist said that the most recent serious state harassment they faced was in July 2009, when the authorities broke up the children's Christian summer camp they had planned to hold in the village of Avaran near Kusar.

This had been due to be held next to land owned by Ilgar Mamedov, but police closed the camp, kicked one of the participants in the stomach in the presence of children and confiscated Christian literature. Mamedov was subsequently given a small fine in his absence, but refused to pay (see F18News 18 September 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1350).

But the Baptist also pointed to prison sentences handed down on pastors Zaur Balaev (imprisoned from May 2007 to March 2008) and Hamid Shabanov (imprisoned from June 2008 to February 2009) of a Baptist Union congregation in the town of Aliabad in the north-western region of Zakatala [Zaqatala]. This congregation has been seeking state registration in vain for many years (see F18News 11 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1443).

A religious prisoner of conscience currently in jail is Jehovah's Witness Farid Mammedov, sentenced to nine months' imprisonment for refusing compulsory military service. He began his sentence on 8 September when his appeal was rejected (see F18News 15 September 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1488).

Readers of the works of the Muslim theologian Said Nursi are frequently given prison terms of up to 15 days under the Code of Administrative Offences. However, in the most recent known case, four readers were held for three days from 11 May in the cellars of the National Security Ministry (NSM) secret police in Nakhichevan [Naxçıvan] city without any trial taking place (see F18News 20 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1447).

Fined for offering religious literature

Jehovah's Witness Nina Gridneva, a 63-year-old pensioner, was found guilty by a Baku court on 19 October of distributing religious literature which had not been approved for import or distribution by the government under Article 300.0.2 of the Code of Administrative Offences. Judge Fuad Huseynov of Sabail District Court fined her 200 Manats (1,460 Norwegian Kroner, 179 Euros or 250 US Dollars).

Article 300.0.2 was included in the Code of Administrative Offences in 2009 amid harsh new revisions to the Religion Law and a package of new "offences" introduced into the Criminal and Administrative Codes (see F18News 3 June 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1305).

Gridneva lodged an appeal against the sentence to Baku Appeal Court on 29 October, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. No date has yet been set for the appeal to be heard.

Police detained Gridneva together with another woman accompanying her on the morning of 24 September, after she gave a copy of the Jehovah's Witness magazine "The Watchtower" to a woman in a park near the seafront in Baku. Shortly afterwards, a man approached Gridneva saying what she had done was illegal. Within a few minutes, several uniformed police officers arrived and took Gridneva and her friend to Sabail District Police Station No. 9, where the two were held and interrogated for nearly 11 hours.

The police confiscated all Gridneva's literature, except for her personal copy of the Bible. One book seized was a copy of "What Does the Bible Really Teach?" which, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18, she had not given to anyone. "It was her personal copy with her name inside and full of her personal notes."

In 2005 and 2006, the State Committee gave permission for a total of 4,700 copies of "What Does the Bible Really Teach?" to be imported, but since then has refused its import. It operates the system of prior compulsory censorship of all religious literature published in Azerbaijan or imported into the country (see F18News 24 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1259). "Distributing religious literature without state permission" often attracts state hostility and fines (see eg. F18News 12 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1420).

Book "never approved"

A police officer told the Jehovah's Witnesses the police had received a letter from the State Committee saying that "What Does the Bible Really Teach?" was never approved, it is only for use within the community (not for distribution), and the park where the two Jehovah's Witnesses were walking is not the Religious Community's legal address and religious activity is forbidden outside the legal address.

Initially, Gridneva was charged with selling religious literature outside an approved point of sale, an "offence" under Article 300.0.3 of the Administrative Code. The charges were later changed. In early October, Judge Huseynov refused to try Gridneva and her friend, sending the cases back for further investigation. Charges against Gridneva's friend were later dropped.

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that the Sabail Court verdict revealed that Gridneva was being punished not for giving away a copy of "The Watchtower", but for having a copy of "What Does the Bible Really Teach?" in her bag which, they pointed out, had been obtained with State Committee permission.

"In Gridneva's case, the court reasoned that because a copy of the book was in her possession while she was distributing other religious literature, it was 'completely proven' she was guilty of an administrative violation," Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18. "The conviction of Gridneva is the latest effort in what appears to be an organised campaign to eradicate from the Azerbaijan Republic all copies of the book 'What Does the Bible Really Teach?'."

The duty officer at Sabail District Police Station No. 9 refused to discuss with Forum 18 on 1 November why the two Jehovah's Witnesses had been detained and why one of them had subsequently been prosecuted. He referred Forum 18 to Sabail District police chief, but his telephone went unanswered when Forum 18 called.

Salih Aslanov of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in Baku told Forum 18 on 1 November he was not familiar with the imprisonment of the four Baptists in Kusal, or the fine imposed on the Jehovah's Witness in Baku. However, he said he would investigate and respond to Forum 18's written questions.

Re-registration denials

While Council of Churches Baptist congregations do not seek state registration, Baptist Union congregations and the Jehovah's Witness community are among many which have been denied state re-registration by the State Committee in the compulsory round of re-registration mandated by the 2009 amendments to the Religion Law.

The re-registration process was supposed to have been concluded by the deadline of the end of 2009. Thomas Hammarberg, the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, condemned the re-registration requirement in June as "superfluous" and described the process as "cumbersome" (see F18News 1 September 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1482).

Azerbaijan also imposes repeated barriers on even registered Muslim and Christian communities from regaining or using their places of worship (see eg. F18News 27 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1451).

However, as of 1 November, the State Committee recorded on its website only 480 religious communities which have succeeded in gaining registration. All the latest batch of 30 re-registered in mid-September were Muslim.

Conspicuous by their absence from the list of registered communities are Azerbaijan's only Catholic Church, which is in Baku, as well as almost all Protestant churches. Among Protestant churches, only Baku's Erlösergemeinde Lutheran community, three Molokan communities in Baku, Sumgait and Hilmilli, as well as New Life Church in Baku have been re-registered.

"Azerbaijan is a religiously tolerant country"

Despite this, Aslanov of the State Committee insisted to Forum 18 that the process is continuing. Asked why so many communities have had their applications rejected, have faced repeated demands to amend their documents or have received no response, Aslanov responded: "Maybe their documents were not in order or contained inadequacies."

Asked why the Aliabad Baptist congregation has been unable to gain registration at all, despite applications dating back 15 years, Aslanov laughed, but declined to comment.

Told that many religious communities who have had their applications rejected believe that his Committee's officials are not neutral in the way they consider applications, Aslanov responded: "It's not true we like or dislike individual communities. We don't have such phobias."

"Even our enemies admit that Azerbaijan is a religiously tolerant country", he claimed. (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>.

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