

18 December 2015

AZERBAIJAN: No Christmas meetings for worship for Georgian Orthodox?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Azerbaijan is still denying entry to Georgian Orthodox priests, denying the Church's only two parishes allowed to exist in the country (in the north-western Gakh Region) the possibility of celebrating the liturgy. "I still don't know who will lead the Christmas liturgy there," Bishop Demetre Kapanadze told Forum 18 News Service. "I hope this will be resolved by then." Also, after nearly 10 months' secret police imprisonment, the criminal trial of two Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience - Irina Zakharchenko (who is 80 per cent disabled) and Valida Jabrayilova - has begun. Azerbaijan has ignored an urgent request from the UN Human Rights Committee for Zakharchenko to be moved to a hospital or house arrest. "As a result of 10 months of detention, Irina is suffering from the effects of malnourishment, extreme sleep deprivation and severe psychological pressure," Jehovah's Witnesses noted. And following the arrest during a violent raid on Nardaran of 14 Shia Muslim prisoners of conscience, the authorities have forcibly closed mosques and obstructed the holding of religious events in the village. Officials have refused to answer Forum 18's questions about Azerbaijan's violations of the freedom of religion or belief of Georgian Orthodox Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims.

Six months after Azerbaijan in June denied re-entry to the only Georgian Orthodox priest then allowed to serve in the country, the nation's only two state-registered Georgian Orthodox parishes - in the north-western Gakh [Qax] Region - still have no priest. "I still don't know who will lead the Christmas liturgy there," Bishop Demetre Kapanadze of the Diocese of Khornabuji and Hereti (who has oversight of Azerbaijan's parishes) told Forum 18 News Service from neighbouring Georgia on 16 December. "I hope this will be resolved by then."

The Georgian Orthodox Church celebrates Christmas on 7 January. Asked whether Azerbaijan's government is likely to allow a priest to return to serve in the two parishes, Bishop Demetre responded: "Documents must still be formulated." The Bishop could not predict how long this would take.

"I hope there will be a resolution very soon," a Georgian diplomat familiar with the negotiations over the return of a priest told Forum 18 in mid-December. "I hope it will be for Christmas."

Why?

Azerbaijan's State Border Service suddenly denied re-entry to Azerbaijan on 21 June with no explanation to the parishes' previous priest - Fr Demetre (secular name Levan Tetrushvili), who had previously been allowed to serve in Azerbaijan. A Georgian citizen, he was also the bishop-designate for the Georgian Church's new Azerbaijan Diocese created in 2014. Officials claimed afterwards that they cannot allow a foreign citizen to lead a religious community, despite the fact that other religious communities are led by foreign citizens with no problem. The Georgian Orthodox Church has long struggled to gain permission to re-open churches in Azerbaijan (see F18News 8 September 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2097).

Following Fr Demetre's June denial of re-entry to Azerbaijan, Bishop Demetre Kapanadze chose an alternative parish priest, Fr Basil. The Bishop presented Fr Basil to the head of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Ilya, during the Sunday liturgy on 20 September. The patriarch blessed Fr Basil for service in Azerbaijan.

Mehman Ismayilov, senior north-west regional official for Azerbaijan's State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, insisted to Forum 18 on 17 December from Zakatala [Zaqatala] that there will be a priest again in the parishes. Asked when, he responded: "I don't know." Told that the parishes have had no priest for six months and asked how this matches officials' repeated but fictitious constant claims of religious tolerance, he put the phone down. All subsequent calls went unanswered.

No-one at Gakh Regional Administration was willing to explain to Forum 18 why the local Georgian Orthodox parishes are not allowed a priest. Deputy head Tahir Ismayilov listened to Forum 18's question on 17 December, then claimed he could not hear and put the phone down. All subsequent calls went unanswered.

"Three or four" visits only

Azerbaijan has allowed Bishop Demetre to make "three or four" visits to the Church's parishes, he told Forum 18. His most recent visit was on 23 November, which the Georgian Orthodox Church celebrates as St George's day. He visited two churches dedicated to the saint, St George's in Gakh (which has state registration) and St George's in the nearby village of Kurmukh.

The Azerbaijani authorities have in the past banned the Georgian Orthodox community access to the historic Kurmukh church, despite appeals from local people (see F18News 29 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1246).

Another nearby parish – Holy Trinity Church in the village of Kotuklu – prepared a registration application in 2009 signed by 20 parishioners. But the State Committee has still not registered it by 2015, finding many alleged faults with the application (see F18News 8 September 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2097). Many belief communities have complained of arbitrary State Committee decisions and delays in dealing with re-registration applications required under 2009 changes to the Religion Law (see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2081).

Criminal trial begins

After nearly 10 months' imprisonment by the then National Security Ministry (NSM) secret police (now the State Security Service SSS), the criminal trial of two female Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience began with a preliminary hearing on 10 December, before Judge Akram Qahramanov at Baku's Pirallahi District Court. The trial is taking place on the second floor of Baku's Khazar District Court as Pirallahi District Court does not have its own building.

Irina Zakharchenko, a 55-year-old disabled widow who is in poor health, and 38-year-old Valida Jabrayilova face imprisonment of between two and five years if convicted of offering religious literature to others without state permission (see F18News 9 December 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2131).

The 10 December preliminary hearing, which lasted an hour, was, unlike past hearings, open to the public, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Both women were in court, as were their lawyers. Zakharchenko's two sons and her son-in-law were present, but Jabrayilova's mother was not able to be there. Forum 18 has been unable to find out whether this was the first time that the relatives have seen the two women since their imprisonment in February. The two prisoners of conscience are being held in the Investigation Prison in Kurdakhani, in north-eastern Baku, whose address is:

AZ-1104, Baki shahari

Sabunchu rayonu

Zabrat-2 qasabasi

Baki Istintaq tacridxanasi

Azerbaijan

"Malnourishment, extreme sleep deprivation and severe psychological pressure"

"Irina was looking emaciated and very tired," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "When she first spoke, the judge kept asking her to speak up until her lawyer reminded him that she is frail and cannot speak very loud."

They added that prisoner of conscience Jabrayilova was looking "a little better physically than Irina", but was also very tired and apparently emotionally fragile. Jabrayilova told Judge Qahramanov she needed medical treatment and asked to return home to see her mother, for whom she was the main carer until her arrest.

The lawyers presented three applications: to allow the women to sit beside their lawyers rather than in the courtroom cage; to transfer them to house arrest; and to terminate the criminal proceedings. Judge Qahramanov rejected all three applications. He said the order for detention of the women until 2 pm on 17 December would remain unchanged.

The judge appointed an Azerbaijani-Russian translator for prisoner of conscience Zakharchenko (who is Russian speaking). "But little effort was made to ensure that the translation was adequate," Jehovah's Witnesses complained.

The full trial began on 17 December. "The trial was open and many people were there, including relatives," a court official – who did not give her name - told Forum 18 the same day. She said Judge Qahramanov rejected the defence application once again to transfer the two women out of prison. She said they remain in Kurdakhani Investigation Prison, to which they were transferred on 4 December. The official added that the trial is due to continue on 7 January 2016 at 12 noon.

The court official said she had seen the two prisoners of conscience. "Zakharchenko's state was bad, but she could walk and talk and was able to get up the stairs to the courtroom." She said that "of course" Zakharchenko would be like that after ten months' secret police detention.

Jehovah's Witnesses continue to express concern especially about Zakharchenko. "Azerbaijan has ignored the urgent request of the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee to transfer Irina Zakharchenko from jail to a medical facility or to house arrest," they noted. They point out that Judge Qahramanov's 10 December decision came one week after the government received the 3 December UN request (see F18News 9 December 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2131). There have been persistent concerns throughout the prisoners of consciences' imprisonment for their health, not least as Zakharchenko is 80 per cent disabled because of severe arthritis and an injury to her right leg (see eg. F18News 10 July 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2079).

"As a result of 10 months of detention, Irina is suffering from the effects of malnourishment, extreme sleep deprivation and severe psychological pressure," Jehovah's Witnesses noted.

A wide-ranging state crackdown continues on people exercising human rights Azerbaijan's government has solemn international obligations to protect, including the arrest and jailing as prisoners of conscience of many lawyers, journalists, human rights defenders and public figures the government dislikes. The many prisoners of conscience include Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses exercising their freedom of religion or belief, and a conscientious objector to military service (see eg. F18News 19 November 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2123).

Lack of registration excuse used to close Nardaran mosques

On 26 November Interior Ministry forces conducted a massive raid on followers and suspected followers of the Muslim Unity Movement while they were meeting for prayer, led by Shia Muslim imam and former prisoner of conscience Taleh Bagirov (also known as Bagirzade). He and at least 13 other Muslims were arrested during the raid on the village of Nardaran, north of the capital Baku. During the raid, two police officers and at least five villagers were shot dead and police then detained the 14 Muslims as prisoners of conscience (see F18News 1 December 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2127).

The village of Nardaran has a population of about 8,000 and is located on the northern shore of the Absheron peninsula 25 kms (15 miles) north of Baku. It is known as a stronghold of Shia Islam (see F18News 3 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=681). Villagers have protested at repressive 2009 Religion Law changes targeting Muslims (see F18News 30 June 2009 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1320). Former prisoner of conscience Bagirov, who is 31, has recently preached and held gatherings in the village, and was before the 26 November raid detained and harassed by armed police (see F18News 29 September 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2106).

Following the 26 November raid, the authorities have obstructed the holding of religious events in Nardaran, denied access to Muslim places of worship and forcibly closed mosques, claiming they cannot function without the compulsory state registration. State employees also removed religious flags and banners, and painted over religious slogans on walls, local media noted.

On 5 December, 10 days after the Nardaran raid, President Ilham Aliyev signed into law rushed legal changes to the Religion Law, the Criminal Code, the Administrative Code and the Citizenship Law – as well as a new "Religious Extremism" Law. They further restrict the right to freedom of religion or belief, among other things banning slogans or religious signs (apart from on a person) and flags outside places of worship (see F18News 16 December 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2134).

Villagers complained on 11 December that the authorities had forcibly closed the Huseyniyya Mosque and the shrine to Rahima Hanum after the 7 December arrest of the prayer leader, Nuhbala Rahimov. He was ordered held in 12 days' detention (see F18News 9 December 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2131).

The State Committee insisted to the local media on 11 December that the Mosque and shrine were not registered, and that Rahimov did not have the required approval from the state-backed Caucasian Muslim Board. Such approval is required before imams are allowed to lead state-registered religious communities (see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2081).

Following further discontent in Nardaran over forced closures of other village mosques, State Committee Chair Mubariz Qurbanli justified the closures to the local media by insisting that no mosques in the village had state registration. He said the Juma Mosque had registration, but had not applied for re-registration in 2009 when harsh amendments were made to the Religion Law and a requirement for re-registration was again imposed on all registered religious communities. Qurbanli added that no other village mosques had ever had state registration.

Two Shia commemorations also banned

Police prevented Shia Muslims from outside the village entering Nardaran for the commemoration of the 40th day after the

commemorations for the death of Imam Husein, killed at the battle of Karbala in 680 AD, marked this year on 2 December. The 40th day commemorations usually attract a crowd of tens of thousands of Shia Muslims to the shrine at Nardaran.

The authorities also prevented villagers commemorating the death of Imam Reza, the eighth Shia imam, on 11 to 12 December. "It's not clear on what basis this is being done," village elder Natiq Karimov complained to the local Turan news agency on 11 December. "Has a state of emergency or martial law been declared or something else? Don't they finally have to explain to people what is going on?"

"No one can answer your questions"

The assistant to Anar Kazimov, the Baku representative for the State Committee, refused to explain why the authorities have taken down religious notices from the streets of Nardaran, blocked access to Muslim sites in the village, prevented even villagers from commemorating the death of Imam Reza and closing mosques. "Where did you get this information?" the assistant – who would not give his name – asked Forum 18 on 17 December.

The assistant declined to answer the questions. "I can't answer your questions, I don't have the authority. Ask the State Committee press office – they will answer you." After wishing Forum 18 a happy new year he put the phone down.

Despite the assistant's promises, an official of the State Committee press office – who did not give her name – declined to give any responses either. "No one can answer your questions," she told Forum 18 on 17 December and put the phone down.

Arbitrary mosque closures and registration denials

In addition to closing Nardaran's Shia mosques, the authorities have also consistently closed down Sunni Muslim mosques in recent years on various pretexts, including several in Baku and one in Gyanja (see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2081). Another example is the Lezgin Mosque in Baku's Old City, which has repeatedly been threatened with closure and from whose congregation five men – including the Imam – have been jailed as prisoners of conscience (see F18News 8 October 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2109).

The State Committee has also rejected or ignored registration applications from many religious communities apart from the Georgian Orthodox parish in Kotuklu. The Jehovah's Witness community in Azerbaijan's second city Gyanja has been repeatedly refused registration since 2010. Police raided the community again on 14 November, fining at least ten of its members, while two were given short-term imprisonment for failing to pay earlier fines (see F18News 16 December 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2134).

The State Committee granted registration to nine further communities on 16 November, six mosques and three Christian communities (Baku's Agape Azeri-language Baptist congregation, the Sumgait branch of Word of Life Pentecostal Church and the Molokan community in the village of Ivanovka in Ismailli Region). This is the first time any non-Muslim communities have been able to gain state registration since May 2012, Forum 18 notes.

Although the State Committee has not updated its website list of registered religious communities, these new registrations appear to bring the current number to 639. Of these, 615 are Muslim communities, all under the control of the state-backed Muslim Board, while the other 24 are of other faiths (6 Jewish communities of different affiliation, 4 Molokan, 2 Baha'i, 2 Georgian Orthodox, 2 Udi Christian, 2 Word of Life Pentecostal, the Russian Orthodox diocese with its 7 parishes, the Catholic church, Lutherans, Hare Krishna community, the Baptist congregation and New Life Pentecostal).

Many other communities – including mosques, Jehovah's Witness congregations, the many other Baptist congregations, Seventh-day Adventists, New Apostolic Church and other Protestants – lodged applications in 2009 when they were told to re-register. Many applications have been arbitrarily rejected or ignored (see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2081). (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2081.

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.

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