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AZERBAIJAN: Muslims ordered out of Mosque authorities want as carpet museum

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Having jailed religious freedom activist Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, who is Imam of Baku's historic Juma mosque, Azeri authorities have given Muslims in Baku until the end of January to leave the Mosque, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The authorities want to turn it into a carpet museum, the use to which the 1,000 year-old Mosque was put in Soviet times. "The Muslim community regards the demand to leave the mosque as illegal," the imam's brother Najaf Allahverdiev told Forum 18. "It is unjust punishment and reprisal for my brother's religious and human rights activity." Vowing to resist the expulsion, Najaf Allahverdiev told Forum 18 that the Muslim community will respond calmly. "We are going to insist peacefully on our rights to continue to meet for worship in our mosque under the Azerbaijani constitution and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights."

On the orders of the general procuracy, city officials have given the Muslims of the historic Juma mosque in Baku's walled old city until the end of January to vacate the building. The mosque's imam, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev, is being held in Baku's Bayil prison accused of organising and participating in opposition demonstrations which followed the rigged presidential election in mid-October, charges he denies. "The Muslim community regards the demand to leave the mosque as illegal," the imam's brother Najaf Allahverdiev told Forum 18 from Baku on 19 January. "It is unjust punishment and reprisal for my brother's religious and human rights activity."

In a 16 January statement, the Committee to Defend Ilgar Ibrahimoglu and the Community of the Juma Mosque continues to insist that their imam should be freed immediately, declaring his 1 December arrest "illegal" and the charges against him as "unfounded" (see F18News 8 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=223).

While vowing that it will resist the expulsion, Najaf Allahverdiev said the Muslim community is determined to respond calmly. "We are going to insist peacefully on our rights to continue to meet for worship in our mosque under the Azerbaijani constitution and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights."

Nigar Mamedova, aide to Rafik Aliev, the chairman of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, declined to discuss the proposed seizure of the Juma mosque. "I can't say anything about this as I have no information," she told Forum 18 from Baku on 19 January. "Only Rafik Aliev is authorised to speak about it."

Nubaris Kuliev, an official of the city administration responsible for the Icherisheher (Old City) architectural zone, wrote to the mosque leaders on 15 January to tell them that because of information received from the general procuracy that Ibrahimoglu had participated in the post-election riots the Muslim community had to leave the mosque within 15 days and hand it over to the "appropriate authorities". No precise deadline was given.

Attached to Kuliev's letter were two other letters, one from the general procuracy to the city administration detailing what it claimed was Ibrahimoglu's guilt (though he has not been found guilty by any court), and one from the city administration declaring that it wanted the mosque once again to be used to house a carpet museum, as it had during the later Soviet period.

The officials also insisted that the mosque is breaking the law by functioning independently outside the framework of the state-approved Caucasian Muslim Board (Article 9 of the religion law requires all Muslim communities to be subject to the Board in defiance of international religious freedom commitments).

Reached by telephone on 19 January, one of Kuliev's colleagues, who declined to be named, said Kuliev has been ill for some months and only appears in the office from time to time. The colleague denied that Kuliev had any responsibility for the decision to evict the Muslim community. "He got a letter from on high instructing him to pass on the decision, so he passed it on. Why is he guilty?"

Although officials made clear they wanted the mosque to be used as a carpet museum, Najaf Allahverdiev says they are now backtracking. "They think this maybe sounds too much like the old Soviet atheist regime, so they are now saying on television they

want to hand it over to the Muslim Board for them to use as a mosque."

Allahverdiev expressed his community's appreciation for support they have received from other Muslims across the country, the local Baptist community and the Azerbaijan chapter of the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA), of which Ibrahimoglu is secretary general.

The thousand-year-old Juma mosque, which was closed down during the Soviet period, only revived its religious activity after the collapse of the Soviet regime. It registered as a religious community with the justice ministry in 1992. Its re-registration application in 2001 was verbally rejected by the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations because of its refusal to subjugate itself to the Caucasian Muslim Board.

Najaf Allahverdiev told Forum 18 that on Fridays between 1,000 and 2,000 worshippers attend prayers. He said on major festivals up to 4,000 people attend. Since Ilgar Ibrahimoglu's arrest, prayers have been led by acting imam Abil Huseinov.

For more background information see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=92

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