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AZERBAIJAN: "They hold services and pray there, but without a congregation"

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

Azerbaijani military forces have blocked Armenian Apostolic Church pilgrims' access to Sunday worship at Dadivank Monastery since 2 May, citing first coronavirus, then a blocked road because of a landslide. "They do not want Dadivank to function as a Christian monastery, but they can't say directly that they don't want this," Nagorno-Karabakh's Bishop Vrtanes Abrahamian stated. "So they use technical issues." The Monastery, in Azerbaijani territory close to the ethnic Armenian-controlled unrecognised entity of Nagorno-Karabakh, is home to six monks and is protected by Russian peacekeepers.

Since early May, Azerbaijani military forces have blocked Armenian Apostolic Church pilgrims' access to Sunday worship services at Dadivank Monastery. The Monastery, close to the ethnic Armenian-controlled unrecognised entity of Nagorno-Karabakh, is in Azerbaijani territory. A Russian peacekeeping post is located outside the entrance to the monastery, to protect it and the six monks who continue to live and serve there.

The 9th century Dadivank Monastery – located just west of Nagorno-Karabakh's Soviet-era borders – was in territory handed back to Azerbaijan in late November 2020. The Armenian monastic community chose to remain in the Monastery after the handover (see below).

Each week, the Armenian Apostolic Church prepares lists of up to 10 people who wish to travel to Dadivank Monastery for Sunday worship. It hands the lists to the Russian peacekeeping forces, which hand them to the Azerbaijani military. "The Russian peacekeepers pass back to us the rejection," Nagorno-Karabakh's Bishop, Vrtanes Abrahamian, told Forum 18 on 6 July. "Sometimes the Azerbaijanis cite the coronavirus, other times they said the road was still blocked because of a landslide" (see below).

The three monks and three deacons who currently live at Dadivank Monastery "hold services and pray there, but without a congregation", Bishop Vrtanes told Forum 18. He added that the Church is able to send food via the Russian peacekeepers (see below).

Azerbaijan's Defence Ministry has not replied to Forum 18's question about why it is blocking the pilgrims' access to Dadivank Monastery (see below).

Armenians complain that the Azerbaijani military's action is contrary to the November 2020 verbal agreement between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev that access to Christian sites would be guaranteed (see below).

The verbal agreement followed the 9 November 2020 tripartite agreement that ended a bitter 44-day war between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces over control of Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories (see below).

There have also been concerns about destruction by Azerbaijan of historic Armenian places of worship and other monuments. Azerbaijani human rights defenders have noted that this may be aimed at cementing the regime's grip on power. One Azerbaijani historian, who wished to remain anonymous, stated that Azerbaijanis who object to the destruction of Armenian heritage "prefer silent rage over jail time" (see below).

No visits since Sunday 2 May

There has been an increasing pattern of Azerbaijan blocking pilgrims to Dadivank. On 18 April 2021, Russian peacekeepers told Armenian Apostolic Church leaders that Azerbaijan had stated that only 15 pilgrims would be allowed to visit the monastery on the following Sunday, not the planned 25 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2654).

Then on the evening of 23 April, the Church was informed that only 10 pilgrims, including Bishop Vrtanes, Deacon Manvel Sargsyan (who was due to be ordained as Fr Atanas at the Monastery on the Sunday), and his parents, would be allowed through.

On 25 April, the 10 pilgrims – accompanied by Russian peacekeeping forces – arrived at the Azerbaijani checkpoint just before the monastery. After a delay of 15-20 minutes – as against the usual 5 minute wait – Azerbaijan refused to allow the pilgrims through, blaming the coronavirus pandemic (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2654). Despite the Azerbaijani military's claims about the coronavirus pandemic, the Azerbaijani soldiers at the checkpoint were not wearing masks or maintaining social distance, Bishop Vrtanes told Forum 18.

Sunday 2 May was the last time the Azerbaijani military allowed Armenian Apostolic pilgrims to travel to Dadivank Monastery from Nagorno-Karabakh, the Russian peacekeeping forces noted on their website the following day.

Since then, the Azerbaijani military have rejected all further visits by Armenian pilgrims from Nagorno-Karabakh, Bishop Vrtanes told Forum 18 on 6 July.

In sharp contrast, on Tuesday 4 May there was a visit to Dadivank from Azerbaijan's capital Baku by 30 Udis, Protestants, journalists and Azerbaijani officials, two days after Russian Orthodox Easter. The visit was – like all visits - accompanied by Russian peacekeepers, the Russian peacekeeping forces website noted.

Requests denied every week since 2 May

Each week since 2 May, the Armenian Apostolic Church prepares lists of up to 10 people who wish to travel to Dadivank Monastery for Sunday worship. It hands the lists to the Russian peacekeeping forces, which hand them to the Azerbaijani military. "The Russian peacekeepers pass back to us the rejection," Bishop Vrtanes told Forum 18. "Sometimes the Azerbaijanis cite the coronavirus, other times they said the road was still blocked because of a landslide."

The area where the Monastery is located suffered heavy rains in May, which caused the landslide, Bishop Vrtanes said. "But the road was quickly rebuilt."

A member of the Russian peacekeeping forces told Forum 18 that following the heavy rain and landslide in early May, the road from Nagorno-Karabakh to the Monastery was left unrepaired for about three weeks. "The Azerbaijani authorities then completed the necessary repairs and the road was passable again."

Bishop Vrtanes thinks the Azerbaijani military are using excuses to prevent access by Armenian pilgrims to the Monastery. "They do not want Dadivank to function as a Christian monastery, but they can't say directly that they don't want this," he insisted. "So they use technical issues."

Three monks and three deacons currently live at Dadivank Monastery. "They hold services and pray there, but without a congregation," Bishop Vrtanes told Forum 18. He added that the Church is able to send food via the Russian peacekeepers.

Two Armenian residents of Stepanakert told Isabella Sargsyan of the Eurasia Partnership Foundation in Yerevan on 8 July that they knew of no one who had been able to visit Dadivank Monastery since May. They added that no one now knows if they can or cannot go to the Monastery and are very unhappy about this.

On the afternoon of 6 July, Forum 18 asked the Azerbaijani Defence Ministry Press Office in Baku in writing why Azerbaijani military personnel prevent Armenian pilgrims from travelling to Dadivank Monastery for worship on Sundays when there is an agreement that people can visit religious sites. Forum 18 received no response by the end of the working day in Baku of 8 July.

The Defence Ministry has also not replied to Forum 18's questions about why it stopped pilgrims visiting the Monastery on 25 April (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2654). The question was – at the Defence Ministry's request – made in writing on 28 April.

The headquarters of the Russian peacekeeping contingent in Stepanakert, the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, declined to comment to Forum 18 on 7 July.

The unrecognised Nagorno-Karabakh entity's Human Rights Ombudsperson, Gegham Stepanyan, condemned in April the Azerbaijani military's "artificial obstacles" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2654) over access to Dadivank Monastery. He warned that Azerbaijan was "hardening its position", pointing to earlier attempts by the Azerbaijani military to take passports from pilgrims for the duration of the visit to Dadivank rather than simply comparing their names against the agreed list. "Something should be done to make Azerbaijan abide by the agreement," he told Forum 18.

"We're told everything will soon be OK and the road will be open"

Bishop Vrtanes said that he has no direct contact with the Azerbaijani military. However, he said he meets the commanders of the Russian peacekeeping forces and the Russian Orthodox military chaplain Fr Boris Grishin regularly. Fr Grishin – who is currently based in Nagorno-Karabakh - has himself also visited the Monastery.

"We're told everything will soon be OK and the road will be open," Bishop Vrtanes told Forum 18. The Russians point to "political questions" which are currently obstructing Armenian pilgrims' access to Dadivank Monastery, he added. "But politics and pilgrimage are different issues."

Accompanying pilgrims

From November 2020, Russian peacekeepers have accompanied pilgrims to Dadivank. The convoys also brought supplies of food and other necessities for the monks.

"We only accompany the pilgrims so that there won't be conflict," the Russian peacekeeping forces official told Forum 18 in April 2021 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2654).

Russian peacekeeping forces also accompany Armenian pilgrims to the monastery at Amaras in south-eastern Nagorno-Karabakh. The monastery is located within the borders of the Soviet-era Nagorno-Karabakh, but following the November 2020 ceasefire it is close to the line of contact between the two sides.

"We accompany pilgrims to Amaras to provide for their security," the Russian peacekeeping official told Forum 18. "But no lists of pilgrims are required."

The Russian peacekeeping forces contingent regularly notes on its website that it has accompanied Armenian pilgrims to Amaras Monastery and to another Monastery in Nagorno-Karabakh, Gandsasar.

War, ceasefire agreement, access to religious sites

On 27 September 2020, conflict broke out between Azerbaijan and both the ethnic Nagorno-Karabakh entity and Armenia. Azerbaijan reclaimed large areas that the unrecognised entity of Nagorno-Karabakh had held since a war over the enclave in the 1990s. Up to a total of around 10,000 soldiers and civilians from both sides were reported to have been killed in the 2020 conflict.

In 9 November 2020, the Azerbaijani, Armenian and Russian leaders agreed a ceasefire in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, which came into force the following day. The agreement required Armenian withdrawal from territories around Nagorno-Karabakh, and the arrival of Russian peacekeeping forces to oversee the ceasefire.

Over the days after the agreement was signed, negotiations continued over how it would be implemented.

"In a [telephone] conversation with Ilham Aliyev," the Kremlin website noted on 14 November 2020, "Vladimir Putin drew attention in particular to the presence of Christian churches and monasteries in areas which in accordance with the tripartite Agreement are being returned to the Azerbaijani Republic. In connection with this, he underlined the importance of guaranteeing the security and normal church activity of these shrines. The President of Azerbaijan showed understanding on this issue and said that the Azerbaijani side will act precisely in this vein."

A statement on the Azerbaijani presidential website the same day contained similar wording, noting President Putin's concern over Christian sites. "President Ilham Aliyev said that the Christian temples located in the territories returned to Azerbaijan in accordance with the trilateral statement, will be properly protected by the state. Christians living in Azerbaijan will be able to make use of these temples."

The Armenian Apostolic Church monastery of Dadivank – located in Kelbajar/Karvachar District just west of the Soviet-era boundaries of Nagorno-Karabakh - was one of the monasteries on territory returned to Azerbaijan's control. On 13 November 2020, Russian peacekeeping forces arrived at the monastery. The Abbot of the monastery, Fr Hovhanes Hovhanesian, announced that he and the other monks would remain at the monastery after the area was returned to Azerbaijani control.

Dadivank Monastery is in territory that was due to have been handed back to Azerbaijani control on 15 November 2020, but this was later changed to 25 November 2020.

Azerbaijan's then acting Culture Minister, Anar Kerimov, told the Russian news agency TASS on 30 November 2020 that Azerbaijan would protect all Christian sites and keep them accessible. On Dadivank Monastery, which the Azerbaijanis call Khudavang, he said: "Both the Armenian community and the Azerbaijani community will be allowed access. In Azerbaijan there is an ancient Christian community, the Udis, the ancestors of Caucasian Albania. And they, of course, also consider these shrines holy. Therefore access will be open for both the Armenian community and the Udi community."

Destruction of places of worship and other monuments

There are also concerns about the possible destruction of Armenian Apostolic Church churches and other monuments in Azerbaijan's

newly-regained territory (<https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-church-vankasar-satellite-imagery/31213704.html>). These concerns have been reinforced by past destruction of Armenian cemeteries in Azerbaijan's exclave of Nakhichevan and elsewhere in the country (<https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-azerbaijan-julfa-cemetery-destruction-unesco-cultural-heritage/30986581.html>).

Azerbaijani human rights defenders such as the exiled Arif Yunus and others within the country have condemned the destruction of Armenian monuments, noting that this may be aimed at cementing the regime's grip on power (<https://www.hyperallergic.com/482353/a-regime-conceals-its-erasure-of-indigenous-armenian-culture>).

One Azerbaijani historian, who wished to remain anonymous, told the Hyperallergic arts website in February 2019 that Azerbaijanis who object to the destruction of Armenian heritage "prefer silent rage over jail time" (<https://www.hyperallergic.com/482353/a-regime-conceals-its-erasure-of-indigenous-armenian-culture>). (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Azerbaijan
(<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=23>)

For more background, see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429)

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in the unrecognised entity of Nagorno-Karabakh
(<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=22>)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments
(https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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