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The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

30 June 2004

AZERBAIJAN: Police storm mosque, expelling & beating-up Muslims

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

Police today have twice forcibly expelled Muslims from a 1,000 year old Baku mosque that the authorities want to turn into a carpet museum, and tried to impose a new Imam on the community. However, community members were allowed back into the mosque for afternoon prayers, before being expelled again. The police attack was observed by Ambassador Steinar Gil of the Royal Norwegian Embassy, as well as diplomats from the British and US embassies, as well as the OSCE. Ambassador Gil told Forum 18 that the Muslims "behaved very calmly and with restraint, doing nothing to provoke further violence", and other witnesses told Forum 18 News Service that the police beat some community members up. The authorities' attempt to impose their own imam on the mosque community failed. The current imam, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, is strongly disliked by the authorities for his religious freedom and human rights campaigning for Christians and Muslims.

In what members of the Juma mosque community describe as "a terrible day" and "a return to Soviet practice", dozens of police officers this morning (30 June) stormed their mosque in the Old City of the capital Baku, beat the members inside and forcibly evicted them from the building. Forum 18 News Service has learnt that after some 700 mosque members arrived in a show of support for their embattled imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev the police were forced to allow the members back in for the 2 pm prayers.

Community members also refused to accept a new imam the Caucasian Muslim Board – to which the mosque is not subject – is trying to impose. "This was a terrorist action," human rights activist Eldar Zeynalov told Forum 18 from Baku on 30 June. "The community has challenged its court-ordered eviction at the European Court of Human Rights, so the government should wait for its judgment before taking any action. I see no urgent reason to expel the community now."

Ibrahimoglu told Forum 18 the police arrived at about nine o'clock in the morning to "storm" the mosque. He said the police beat him, his brother Najaf and another activist Seymur Rashidov, as well as some 20 other members present at the time. Najaf Allahverdiev told Forum 18 some of those beating the mosque members were in civilian clothes. "They caused destruction, turning things over and taking Ilgar's computer," he reported. He said police then expelled all the mosque members from the building.

As hundreds of the mosque's members gathered outside the building, diplomats from the Royal Norwegian, the United States and British embassies arrived, as well as an official of the Baku office of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Under pressure of numbers the police were forced to allow them in again.

"I saw the police at about 9 am as I was arriving for work," Ambassador Steinar Gil of the nearby Royal Norwegian embassy told Forum 18 on 30 June. He said he had seen some forty policemen outside the mosque, with more inside he could not see. The police were armed with the usual sidearms and were without truncheons. "I didn't see any violence except a little pushing as the police drove the crowd back. Members of the community behaved very calmly and with restraint, doing nothing to provoke further violence." He said he had spoken to one mosque member who had told him he had been beaten, though without "excessive brutality".

Ibrahimoglu told Forum 18 that the Caucasian Muslim Board's nominee to run the mosque, Imam Surkhai Mamedov, then arrived with a handful of supporters. "I allowed him to address the community, but the believers refused to support him as their imam. They were able to choose and chose me." He said Mamedov then left and prayers took place.

He said about 4 pm the police came in again and ordered the community out again. "To avoid any incidents I told them to leave and to come back for evening prayers at 8 pm."

The authorities have long disliked imam Ibrahimoglu and the mosque community, which insists on functioning independently of the Caucasian Muslim Board. The Sabail district court on 1 March ordered the community out of the 1000-year-old Juma mosque they regained for worship in 1992. The appeal court upheld the expulsion on 22 April. Court executor Nuridin Mustafaev told Forum 18 in April that expelling the Muslims from their mosque would be "unpleasant" but that he is obliged to carry out court orders (see

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F18News 26 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=306).

In a related case, Ibrahimoglu himself was only freed from prison on 2 April after being jailed and then given a five-year suspended sentence imposed in retaliation for his work as the mosque's imam and his religious freedom and human rights campaigning for Christians and Muslims (see F18News 5 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=294).

Court officials seeking to enforce the expulsion order interrupted Ibrahimoglu as he was leading prayers on 22 June. "Having entered God's temple without observing the necessary hygiene rituals, they came up to me in the presence of the believers during the prayer when I was reading the Holy Scripture, wanting to interrupt my prayer," Ibrahimoglu told Forum 18 on 25 June. "But I told the officers not to hinder me while I was performing the prayer in God's temple. If anyone wants to address me, he should wait till I finish." The officials then left.

On 23 June the community sued those officials for interrupting the prayer. "The believers are indignant that the officials who entered God's temple did not observe the necessary hygiene rituals and by doing so insulted believers' religious feelings," Ibrahimoglu told Forum 18. He said they also sent a complaint to the Ministry of Justice about the "illegal" actions of their officials.

Forum 18 could find no state official immediately prepared to discuss the storming of the mosque. Court executor Mustafaev was out on "work-related business", one of his colleagues told Forum 18 on 30 June. She declined to comment, saying that he was handling the Juma mosque case.

Faiq Gurbanov, head of the human rights department of the Justice Ministry told Forum 18 on 30 June that he was at a meeting away from Baku and said he would have to find out about the raid. "I can't answer on this until I have checked up through my own sources." However, he stressed that court executors were required to enforce court orders. "This is not about freedom of religion, freedom of speech or freedom of assembly," he insisted. He dismissed reports of police violence. "The police would not get involved in that." He stressed that if the mosque members have any complaints they can take up the issue through the courts.

Later, a spokesman for the justice ministry, Hussein Alikhanov, told the BBC that worshippers at the mosque were warned repeatedly to vacate the premises. "But they refused to do this... so this morning we carried out the decision of the court. There was no force and no violence used and we did not beat up any one."

Ambassador Gil told Forum 18 he believes the authorities will have learnt from the response of the Juma mosque's members. "I think the authorities realise they should not go too far in preventing believers from attending prayers in their mosque and that trying to install a replacement imam against the wishes of the community was a failure."

Zeynalov, who heads the Baku-based Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan, believes the authorities are intent on sending a warning signal to Muslims who want to function independently. "The government would like to terrorise religious communities that don't want to be subject to the authority of the Caucasian Muslim Board."

Ibrahimoglu said the community was upset that once again the police had come into the mosque without respect, storming in while wearing boots. He said that police officers repeatedly threatened that he would be arrested under the terms of his suspended sentence. But he insisted that despite the police brutality the mosque members will continue their firm stand of refusing to react with violence. "I told the believers not to respond to the provocations."

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

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