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AZERBAIJAN: Muslims can't pray at home, says police chief

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

The policeman responsible for breaking up a Muslim prayer service in a private home, Colonel Chingiz Mamedov, has insisted to Forum 18 News Service that Muslims cannot hold prayer services at home. Asked by Forum 18 why believers of any faith cannot meet in homes for worship, he said that the meeting was in a basement with no running water, and then put the phone down. This is the latest attack on members of the Juma Mosque and its religious freedom activist imam, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, whose mosque was taken over after an attack by police. Colonel Mamedov threatened the home owner where the prayer meeting happened that if the mosque community met there again, "it would be worse for him".

Colonel Chingiz Mamedov, acting chief of police of Baku's Yasamal district who broke up a Muslim prayer service in a private home on the evening of 30 July and detained all 26 people present for two hours, has insisted that Muslims are not allowed to hold prayer services in private homes. "There are seven functioning mosques in my district of the capital – if they want to pray they can go there," he told Forum 18 News Service from Baku on 2 August. "Muslim law requires believers to pray in a mosque."

Asked why he, as a state official, was concerned about whether or not the community was abiding by Muslim requirements, Colonel Mamedov then complained that the community's leader, imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev, was conducting "agitation and propaganda against the government" and that the community is not registered with the Justice Ministry (the community was registered in 1993). "His thoughts are anti-government," Mamedov told Forum 18. "I have tapes of his sermons where he speaks out against the authorities. It is my job as a state employee to defend the government."

As Colonel Mamedov insisted that Azerbaijan respects freedom of worship, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, Forum 18 asked why he maintains that believers of any faith cannot meet for worship in private homes. He responded by declaring that the community had been meeting in a basement with no running water. "A cellar is not suitable for religious meetings," he declared. Asked why this was a matter for state officials he put the phone down.

Those detained are members of the Juma (Friday) Mosque in Baku's Old City who had been ousted by police from their place of worship on 30 June (see F18News 7 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=357). One month later, they appear no nearer to regaining their mosque – which has now been closed for "repairs" – and are still being subjected to pressure.

The community has responded with outrage to what they regard as a "new bout of persecutions" against the community. "It is clear that the believers of Juma Mosque are not allowed to pray even at their homes," community members told Forum 18 from Baku on 30 July.

Community members were meeting in the home of Haji Alekber for prayers led by Ibrahimoglu after a funeral service. The police surrounded the house at about 8 pm while prayers were underway. "When the police began rushing into the premises, the owner of the premises informed them that their actions were illegal and that they had no right to rush into private property without any legal reason," the community told Forum 18. "He explained that the religious service connected with the funeral repast was taking place and the believers were performing the religious rituals without disturbing anyone. However, the police, having pushed the owner of the premises away, rushed inside and without any explanations started arresting all the believers who were there, including Ilgar Ibrahimoglu."

Those detained were taken to the city's 26th police station, where they had their personal details recorded. Colonel Mamedov threatened the home owner that if community members gathered there again, "it would be worse for him".

After human rights activists from the Devamm religious freedom group and the local chapter of the International Religious Liberty Association intervened all were freed at about 10 pm.

"Devamm and IRLA Azerbaijan Chapter consider this situation as the grossest violation of the religious freedom and as the next bout of repressions against Ibrahimoglu and the Juma Mosque religious community," complained a joint statement from the two organisations.

Since the mosque was seized, some community members have been fined. In mid-July a member of the mosque community who continued to support Ibrahimoglu as the imam was sacked from his job at Baku's Interior Ministry hospital (see F18News 22 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=369).

For more background information see Forum 18's 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