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AZERBAIJAN: OSCE discusses religious freedom minus a victim

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Azerbaijan has for the second time in a month stopped religious freedom activist and imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev from taking part in an Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) conference. Azerbaijan is a member of the OSCE, which aims to promote democracy and human rights. "He would have informed people about the real situation of religious freedom in Azerbaijan," human rights activist Eldar Zeynalov told Forum 18 News Service, from the conference in Warsaw. "That's why our government didn't want him here." Ibrahimoglu intended to tell the conference about the experience of the Juma mosque congregation, whose imam he is, which was forcibly expelled from its mosque in June. Eldar Zeynalov told Forum 18 that an Azerbaijani government representative at the conference said that Ibrahimoglu "has some freedom of movement but not freedom to leave the country." Zeynalov commented to Forum 18 that this "is a return to Soviet times when there was no freedom of movement and no freedom of speech."

For the second time in less than a month, border guards at Baku airport prevented religious freedom activist and imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev from travelling to take part in a conference of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), a body which aims to promote democracy and human rights and of which Azerbaijan is a member. The first OSCE conference which imam Ibrahimoglu was banned from travelling to was an OSCE conference on racism and discrimination (see F18News 16 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=413).

"He would have informed people here at the OSCE conference in Warsaw about the real situation of religious freedom in Azerbaijan," human rights activist Eldar Zeynalov told Forum 18 News Service from the OSCE human dimension implementation meeting in the Polish capital on 7 October. "That's why our government didn't want him here."

Zeynalov, who heads the Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan, said Ibrahimoglu would have told the conference of the violations of the rights of believers at his Juma mosque in Baku's Old City, who were forcibly expelled by the authorities in June (see F18News 2 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=354) after he had already been handed a suspended sentence on charges widely believed to have been fabricated (see F18News 5 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=294).

"He would also have spoken of the persecution of Adventists and members of other religious minorities as he doesn't just focus on the rights of Muslims," Zeynalov added.

Forum 18 was not immediately able to reach any officials in the Azerbaijani foreign ministry or border service to find out why Ibrahimoglu's travel to the OSCE conference was obstructed.

Urdur Gunnarsdottir, spokesperson for the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in Warsaw, which is organising the 4-15 October meeting, said she was not familiar with Ibrahimoglu's latest denial of permission to travel.

But she was clear about the importance the OSCE places on free participation by non-governmental representatives at OSCE conferences. "We really appreciate the active participation of NGOs and do everything we can to encourage them to attend and take part," she told Forum 18 from Warsaw on 7 October. "We regret it when such representatives are prohibited by their governments from attending."

Gunnarsdottir said that following the Azerbaijani authorities denial of permission to Ibrahimoglu to attend the conference on tolerance and non-discrimination held on 13 and 14 September in Brussels by the OSCE and the Belgian Foreign Ministry (see F18News 16 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=413), the OSCE mission in Baku had taken up the issue with the Azerbaijani authorities. "I don't know what came of it," she reported.

No officials at the Baku OSCE mission were immediately available for comment on the latest travel ban.

Ibrahimoglu told Forum 18 from Baku on 7 October that he had intended to attend and speak at the session on freedom of religion on 6 October. In the morning of 6 October, after informing the Justice Ministry of his forthcoming travel abroad, he checked in at Baku airport, received his boarding pass and went through customs, only to be denied permission to board his flight by the border

guards.

Ibrahimoglu told the border guards that he believed their actions were illegal and violated his fundamental human rights, including his freedom of movement. "No positive effect was achieved," he noted sadly.

"According to the law, even taking into account my illegal suspended sentence, the court decision does not contain any point limiting my departure from the country, and demands only the notice of the appropriate bodies concerning any change of my residence," he told Forum 18. "Despite the fact that I did not need to inform them about my departure to the conference because I had not changed my residence, I informed the appropriate structures of the Ministry of Justice in writing on 5 October."

He pointed out that since his release from prison, he has already travelled abroad to an international conference on religious freedom, held in May in the Ukrainian capital Kiev. "But for some reason it is already the second time that my freedom of movement illegally is deprived and in this way my human rights activity is restricted."

Zeynalov told Forum 18 he had challenged the Azerbaijani government representative about their obstruction of Ibrahimoglu's attendance at the conference at a plenary session. "Our official said that as someone serving a suspended sentence, Ibrahimoglu has some freedom of movement but not freedom to leave the country. He said he couldn't leave the country."

"Of course this looks bad for the Azerbaijani government," Zeynalov told Forum 18. "It is a return to Soviet times when there was no freedom of movement and no freedom of speech."

For more background information see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=92 and survey of serious abuses of religious freedom in some OSCE countries at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=407 .

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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