

22 November 2004

AZERBAIJAN: Police raid Adventist service, fine and threaten leader, connive at hostile TV interviews of children

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

While a Council of Europe delegation was examining whether Azerbaijan meets human rights commitments, police in the country's second city, Gyanja [Gäncä], raided a worship service being held by a registered Adventist congregation, arrested and interrogated two leaders, fining and threatening one with deportation, and connived at a local TV crew conducting hostile interviews with children against the protests of their parents. Interviewed by Forum 18 News Service, Firdovsi Kerimov, local representative of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, who took part in the interrogations and TV interviews, claimed that he defends the rights of believers, "but only if they act in accordance with the law" and insisted that "everything was done in accordance with the law." The Azeri ban on foreigners conducting "religious propaganda" violates international human rights law, which does not distinguish between anyone legally resident in a country.

Embarrassingly for the Azerbaijani authorities, police have raided a Seventh Day Adventist service, in the country's second city Gyanja [Gäncä], at the same time that a delegation from the Council of Europe was finishing a visit to Azerbaijan, to examine whether the country is meeting its human rights commitments.

Fifteen police officers raided the service at the registered Adventist church at about 11 am on Saturday 20 November (Adventists mark their Sabbath on Saturdays). The police then brought in a film crew from ANS (Azerbaijan News Service) television – a local station noted for its aggressively hostile coverage of religious minorities – as Azerbaijan's Adventist leader Yahya Zavrichko complained to Forum 18 News Service from the capital Baku on 20 November. Against the wishes of their parents, the journalists interviewed children present at the service asking if they had been forced to attend. Despite the parents' clear objections, the police did nothing to prevent the children being questioned by the film crew.

Firdovsi Kerimov, the representative in Gyanja of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, admitted to Forum 18 from Gyanja on 20 November that he had joined the interrogation at the police station of two Adventist leaders detained after the service, but denied suggestions that the raid represented harassment of the Adventist community. "Everything was done in accordance with the law," he insisted. He referred all further enquiries to the police officer who led the raid and interrogation, the deputy head of the city police, Ilgar (last name unknown), but a man answering his telephone on 22 November claimed that Forum 18 had reached a wrong number.

Police then after the raid took two Adventist leaders, Rustam Akhmedov and Vidadi Huseinov, for interrogation at the city police headquarters. After accusing Akhmedov of conducting "religious propaganda", they threatened him with punishment under Article 300 of the code of administrative offences. This article prescribes punishment of fines of between 20 and 25 times the minimum monthly wage, or deportation for foreigners or those without citizenship who conduct "religious propaganda" in the country. An Azerbaijani native who has a temporary residence permit to live in Gyanja, Akhmedov has Moldovan citizenship.

"The police told me I can't talk about religion and spoke about deportation," Akhmedov told Forum 18 from Gyanja on 20 November, "although I have local residence registration." He said police confiscated his passport, but after two hours of questioning, let him and Huseinov go. He said they were instructed to return for punishment on 22 November.

Akhmedov was again summoned both on 21 and 22 November, with his wife Gulnara, and their landlord. On 22 November police deputy head Ilgar threatened and abused Akhmedov, declaring that he had "betrayed his country and his religion" by becoming an Adventist and insisted he should be a Muslim. He alleged that Akhmedov had changed his faith because of money and then fined Akhmedov 140,000 manats (178 Norwegian Kroner, 22 Euros, or 29 US Dollars) under Article 300, and returned his passport. This is about 5 times the monthly minimum wage.

Akhmedov noted that all people legally resident in Azerbaijan should have the same rights to religious freedom, but nonetheless paid the fine. "Many Azerbaijanis live in Iran, Turkey or Western Europe, and I never heard of any penalties on them for conducting religious activity," Akhmedov told Forum 18.

Deputy police chief Ilgar said he was not ordering Akhmedov's deportation on this occasion, because his wife is an Azerbaijani citizen, but warned him that if he conducts "illegal religious propaganda" again he will be deported. "He told me I can attend church, but not preach," Akhmedov told Forum 18.

In a bizarre move, Ilgar also threatened to deprive Akhmedov's landlord of Azerbaijani citizenship and deport him from the country. "Of course he cannot do this, but he was using this as a way to threaten him," Akhmedov commented.

Akhmedov is particularly upset by the ANS film crew's persistence, with the police's connivance, in interviewing the children despite the protests of parents. "ANS gives false information," he complained. He said that all the children who were present had attended the service with the permission of their parents, who were also present at the service. He was afraid ANS would selectively broadcast footage of parents objecting to their children being interviewed, making Adventists appear to be aggressive. Akhmedov said he had declined to be interviewed, but that the film crew still persisted in filming him and Huseinov at the police station, before interviewing Firdovsi Kerimov, the local representative of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations. It is believed that ANS is preparing to broadcast the report later today (22 November).

Azerbaijani media often broadcast or publish attacks on religious minorities, who are permitted very little right of reply to false broadcast allegations. Zavrishko said that for the past few months a Gyanja television station, Kepes, has been running a weekly programme called Drop in the Ocean, presented by Ilgar Agaev, which blames Adventists "for all manner of sins".

The controversial ban on foreigners and those without citizenship conducting "religious propaganda", which is also specified in Article 1 of the religion law, violates international human rights norms, which make no distinction between the rights of citizens and other individuals legally in a country. Azerbaijani authorities have deported or warned a number of foreign citizens, including Muslims and Protestants.

In the most recent known case, Nina Koptseva, a Russian living in Baku by invitation of the Greater Grace Protestant Church was forcibly deported in April 2002. In September 2003, Rafik Aliev, head of the State Committee, accused the then Catholic priest in Baku, Belgian citizen Fr Daniel Pravda, of conducting "illegal religious propaganda" (see F18News 29 September 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=146).

Gyanja's state committee official Kerimov insisted to Forum 18 that his office defends the rights of believers, "but only if they act in accordance with the law". He refused to say why a peaceful Adventist service on private property represented a violation of the law and why police had the right to raid such a service. (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=92

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<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=azerba>

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