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AZERBAIJAN: Why are religious communities in Nakhichevan "crushed"?

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

Adventist leaders have told Forum 18 News Service that their community in Nakhichevan (Naxçivan), an exclave between Armenia, Turkey and Iran, has been "crushed," and the police have banned them from meeting. Baha'is have told Forum 18 that "we can't do anything in Nakhichevan," and the imprisonment of one Baha'i and 18 Muslim imams has been reported. Imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu told Forum 18 that "in Nakhichevan officials are more open about persecution than elsewhere." This opinion was backed by Professor Ali Abasov, president of the Azerbaijani branch of the International Religious Liberty Association, who said that "there is no democracy, no free media and no human rights in Nakhichevan." Asked by Forum 18 why, he responded with a grim laugh: "The authorities don't want it," insisting that the Nakhichevan authorities are doing what the authorities in the rest of Azerbaijan would like to do. The authorities have repeatedly denied any religious persecution and have declined to talk to Forum 18.

Adventist leaders have complained to Forum 18 News Service that their community in Nakhichevan (Naxçivan), an autonomous exclave wedged between Armenia, Turkey and Iran, has been "crushed". Baha'is have told Forum 18 that one of their members, Tavachur Aliev, was jailed for ten days in September on trumped-up charges and warned not to teach his faith to others. "We can't do anything in Nakhichevan," one Baha'i who preferred not to be named said.

Eighteen Muslims were imprisoned for up to two weeks in September, Forum 18 has learnt (see F18News 13 December http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=475).

As an autonomous republic, Nakhichevan has its own government and parliament. It has a population of some 350,000. Idris Abbasov, head of the Nakhichevan branch of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, has always denied any persecution of believers in the exclave (see F18News 8 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=49). He declined to talk to Forum 18 on 10 December. Although officials in the main part of Azerbaijan have described the re-registration of religious organisations launched in August 2001 as "completed", the process has not even begun in Nakhichevan.

"In Nakhichevan the state of religious freedom is very bad," stated Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev, the imam of the Muslim community forcibly ousted in June by the police from the Juma mosque in the capital Baku (see F18News 2 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=354). Like other observers, he regarded the suppression of independent religious activity as part of the general climate of repression in the exclave. "There is no civil society there at all – in Nakhichevan officials are more open about persecution than elsewhere."

Ali Abasov, a professor at the National Academy of Sciences and president of the Azerbaijani branch of the International Religious Liberty Association, agreed. "There is no democracy, no free media and no human rights in Nakhichevan," he told Forum 18 in Baku on 29 November. Asked why, he responded with a grim laugh: "The authorities don't want it." He insisted the Nakhichevan authorities are merely exercising the controls the authorities would like to institute in the rest of the country.

The Baha'i community in Nakhichevan gained registration as a religious organisation in 1997 but, its members report, this registration was annulled within a year "under false accusations". The official reason was that one of the founding members was not in fact a member. "Under pressure he was forced to sign a statement that he was not a Baha'i," sources told Forum 18. "That brought the official number of founders down to nine – not enough to maintain registration."

Subsequently at least one local Baha'i was fined for leading unregistered meetings, which the authorities (wrongly) described as "illegal". In 2002 a meeting in a private home was raided by the police and broken up. "Since then we have not held meetings in Nakhichevan. We Baha'is try to resolve problems with the authorities. If the government says don't do something, we don't do it. It's our principle to obey the government."

The Baha'i community is determined to resume its work in Nakhichevan and intends to seek the help of the State Committee in Baku to try to bypass the obstruction to registration of any religious organisations from the Nakhichevan branch of the State Committee. In any case, the Baha'is believe the official registration of their National Spiritual Assembly as a nationwide religious body in

September 2004 covers the activity of their community in Nakhichevan, though the Nakhichevan authorities reject this.

With Islam the majority faith in Nakhichevan, Muslims are generally not directly obstructed in their religious life and mosques function fairly freely despite the lack of registration. However, several years ago the Nakhichevan authorities closed all Turkish and Iranian mosques in the exclave. Ibrahimoglu complained that the mosques that do function are not allowed to issue the call for prayer over loudspeakers from minarets.

Haji Akif Agaev, spokesman for the Caucasian Muslim Board in Baku to which all mosques in Azerbaijan are forced to belong, denied that mosques in Nakhichevan are restricted in any way. "We live normally there as anywhere in Azerbaijan," he told Forum 18 on 10 December. He said the head of the Board, Sheikh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, and other Muslim leaders regularly travel there from Baku, while the Board is represented in the exclave by Haji Sultan.

Of the 236 mosques in the exclave, none have been re-registered, Haji Sultan told Forum 18 from Nakhichevan on 10 December. "We gave in our documents some time ago to Idris Abbasov, and he promises us they will soon get registration." Haji Sultan was unable to explain why it has taken so long, but insisted that the Muslim community wants its mosques re-registered. He said only about 25 mosques were registered previously by the Justice Ministry under the old registration system.

The small Adventist church in Nakhichevan – repeatedly denied registration by the authorities – has been closed down by the authorities (see F18News 8 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=48). "Our members there have been banned from meeting," Yahya Zavrichko, leader of Azerbaijan's Adventists, told Forum 18 in Baku on 24 November. "When we travel there, the police bar us from visiting our church. I was in Nakhichevan at Easter and the local police chief did allow us to hold a meeting in our church – once." Zavrichko said of the eight members present, many were elderly. Also present was church member Zinaida Ushakhova, who lost her son in the war against Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh in the early 1990s.

The last resident Adventist pastor, Khalid Babaev, was forced to flee from Nakhichevan with his family in February after police refused to protect them in the face of repeated threats from unknown local people (see F18News 1 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=265). A previous pastor, Vahid Nagiev, was deported with his family from the exclave in June 2002, although Azerbaijani law has no provisions for internal deportation.

One source told Forum 18 that the refusal to register religious communities in Nakhichevan stems from the battle for authority between Baku and Nakhichevan. "The local State Committee branch wanted the power to register religious organisations, but the Cabinet of Ministers refused to grant this. Only the State Committee in Baku has this right." However, under the burdensome registration regulations all religious communities throughout Azerbaijan have to go through, local authorities have to approve all registration applications before they are sent on to the State Committee in Baku, so it is easy for the Nakhichevan authorities to obstruct them.

One religious community told Forum 18 it had asked the State Committee in Baku back in 2002 whether Nakhichevan registrations would be carried out locally or in the capital, but was told the State Committee was awaiting a decision of the Cabinet of Ministers. (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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