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AZERBAIJAN: Baha'is and Baptists want confiscated property back

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Baha'is and Baptists in Azerbaijan have both told Forum 18 News Service of their concerns about buildings, confiscated from them in the Soviet period, which they want returned. Both communities have had evasive replies from the state. The Baha'is think that a house central to their community's history may be demolished, and the Baptists want a historic church in central Baku, the capital, back. Ilya Zenchenko, head of the Baptist Union, told Forum 18 that "it's not just a property we want to get back to sell - our church wants to worship there once again." The Baptists visited the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, but were told that "there is no law on restitution so it can't be returned." Other places of worship also remain in state hands, but not all the religious communities involved are unhappy with this. Lutherans in Baku, for example, have told Forum 18 that they are happy they can use their church - now a concert hall - for Sunday worship.

The Baha'i community in the capital Baku is pressing for the return of a house in the city confiscated during the Soviet anti-religious campaign which it says has key significance in the history of the Baha'is in Azerbaijan. "This house was bought in 1880 and was confiscated in the 1930s," Ramazan Askarov of the Baha'i community told Forum 18 News Service in Baku on 19 October. "We want it because it is the only building in the world named after Abdul Baba, the son of our prophet." As old buildings are being rapidly demolished in central Baku to make way for high-rise blocks, Askarov fears their house too could be destroyed. "This would wipe out all historical traces of the early Baha'i community here."

Similarly, the Baptist community is getting increasingly concerned about its historic church in central Baku, located close to the main railway station. "We regard it as a holy site," Ilya Zenchenko, head of Azerbaijan's Baptist Union, told Forum 18 in Baku on 19 October. "My grandfather was among those who built the church. It's not just a property we want to get back to sell - our church wants to worship there once again." He says it is the only historic church in Azerbaijan, as no other purpose-built churches were put up before the communists came to power.

Zenchenko said that after a fire in August, that he fears might have been started deliberately, and high-rise building next to the church which could damage it, the Baptists visited Mustafa Ibrahimov, an official at the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, to express their concern. "He tried to calm us, assuring us the building is recorded as a historical monument," Zenchenko told Forum 18. "But he told us there is no law on restitution so it can't be returned."

Built in the first decade of the twentieth century, the Baptist church was dedicated in 1911 but confiscated by the Soviet authorities in 1930. Although listed as a monument, the church is now the Shafag cinema. Visited by Forum 18, it is dilapidated and clearly deteriorating, and has been used in recent years as a computer game venue and for an electrical repair businesses.

Although the Baptists acquired copies of documents from the Azerbaijan State Archive, attesting that the church was built by the community and belonged to it until its confiscation by the Soviet regime, when the community first asked for the church back in the 1990s officials denied it had ever belonged to the Baptists.

The former Baha'i house has long been a kindergarten. "We didn't ask for it back before because of the country's economic difficulties, but now we believe the government has the capacity to move the kindergarten to another location," Askarov told Forum 18. He says the community wants to restore the house and use it as a meeting room and as a museum of the history of the Baha'i faith in the country. "Azerbaijan is the second cradle of the Baha'i faith," he told Forum 18.

Askarov said the community began asking for the return of the house in early 2005. The Education Ministry, Culture Ministry and Presidential Office all declared that they did not own the building. The State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations wrote to the Baha'is to say that without a law on restitution it could do nothing. The community finally learned that the Economic Development Ministry owns the building and wrote to it in August.

The general department of the Economic Development Ministry told Forum 18 on 21 November that it had received the Baha'is' letter of 16 August and passed it to the Committee for Privatisation of State Property. The privatisation committee told Forum 18 the

same day that Hikmet Mustafaev had prepared a reply, signed by committee chairman Keram Hasanov, which was sent on 13 September, but did not know what was in the reply. But Mustafaev denied to Forum 18 on 21 November that he had drafted the letter and claimed he had no knowledge of the Baha'i building.

Askarov confirmed to Forum 18 on 21 November that his community has received no reply to its August letter, adding that the community is planning to renew its request to the ministry for the building's return.

While the Muslim and Russian Orthodox communities in Baku and elsewhere have generally been able to regain places of worship confiscated during the Soviet period, several other surviving places of worship remain in state hands. Most notable are three in central Baku: the European or Ashkenazi synagogue, now a song theatre, the Lutheran Church (Kirche), a concert hall which the Lutherans are able to use for Sunday worship, and the Armenian Apostolic church, which remains burnt out in the wake of the Armenian-Azerbaijani war of the 1990s.

Gennadi Zelmanovich, head of the Ashkenazi Jewish community, says that because many Jews have left Azerbaijan in recent years and Baku's Ashkenazi community has just finished rebuilding another synagogue it is not asking for the return of its old synagogue. "Many people work in the theatre," he told Forum 18 from Baku on 1 November. "If we were in a position to suggest where they could go, we could apply for it back. But we're not raising the question at the moment. Let it remain a theatre."

However, Zelmanovich said if President Ilham Aliyev decided to give it back to the community and suitable alternative premises could be found for the theatre the Ashkenazi community would accept it.

The Lutherans – whose church is in the hands of the Culture Ministry – are also not unhappy. "Our church, built by the local German community, was closed down in 1936 and the practice of the faith banned," Natasha Gaidarova of the Baku Lutheran parish told Forum 18 in Baku on 18 October. "But we are happy that we can use it once again for our services." She believes the Culture Ministry would be prepared to return the building if the church asks for it, but is afraid it would be a great financial burden for the parish.

Other places of worship confiscated during the Soviet period include Baku's Catholic church. Built in 1912, the church was demolished in the 1930s and the Soviet KGB secret police's Dzerzhinsky club was later built on the site, but the priest's house next to the church still stands. At the time of the late Pope John Paul II's visit to Baku in 2002, the then president Heydar Aliyev gave the Catholic community a plot of land to build a new church.

"This was a gesture during the pontiff's visit – I don't know how far it was compensation for the destroyed church," the head of the Catholic Church in Azerbaijan, Fr Jan Capla, told Forum 18 on 19 October at the existing Catholic church. "If so it was very good compensation." However, he said local and foreign Catholics are paying to build the new church, whose foundation stone was laid by visiting Cardinal Crescenzo Sepe on 11 September.

Fr Capla noted that the only other known surviving Catholic church in Azerbaijan is in the north-western town of Zakatala [Zaqatala]. Seen by Forum 18, the church is locked and in a dilapidated state. "We haven't been able to find out if there are still any Catholics in the region to see if it is worth trying to regain the church," he told Forum 18.

One place of worship confiscated by the Soviet authorities and returned to religious believers in the early 1990s was the Juma mosque in Baku's Old City, used in the later Soviet period as a carpet museum. However, after the authorities began to distrust the imam, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev, and tried to insist that the mosque community subordinate itself to the Caucasian Muslim Board, they decided to expel the community from the Juma mosque and hand it over to the board (see F18News 12 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=541). The mosque is now closed and undergoing repairs.

Amongst the other problems religious communities in Azerbaijan experience from the state are a Sunni Muslim imam being jailed (see F18News 25 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=677), selective obstruction of foreign religious workers invited by local communities (see F18News 1 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=680), use of the state registration system to discriminate against communities (see F18News 3 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=681), and police raids on religious activities (see F18News 16 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=689). (END)

For a personal commentary, by an Azeri Protestant, on how the international community can help establish religious freedom in Azerbaijan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=482

For more background information see Forum 18's Azerbaijan 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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