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AZERBAIJAN: Pastor threatened with jail for allowing children in church

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Police in Azerbaijan's second city Gyanja have threatened Adventist pastor Elshan Samedov with prison, if he refuses to ban children from attending worship services and does not halt worship in two church-owned properties. "People don't have the right to meet for religious purposes just where they want," Major Alovset Mamedov told Forum 18 News Service, "they need to have permission." Mamedov "threatened to imprison me for turning people into Christians," Samedov stated. "He violates our rights to worship God – and he insulted my personal dignity. Who gave him the right to violate my rights?" Major Mamedov demanded that Pastor Samedov sign a statement that he would prevent children from attending services in future, but he refused to do this. Following a separate raid in the capital Baku, police tried to pressure eight Adventists into giving up their faith and fined them under the Administrative Code for holding meetings "not connected with the conducting of religious rituals with the aim of attracting young people and youth."

Police in Azerbaijan's second city Gyanja [Gäncä] have threatened a Seventh-day Adventist pastor Elshan Samedov with prison, if he refuses to ban school-age children from attending worship services and does not halt worship in two of the three church-owned properties in the city. "People don't have the right to meet for religious purposes just where they want," Major Alovset Mamedov of the police Criminal Investigation Department told Forum 18 News Service from Gyanja on 19 December, the day after he interrogated and threatened Samedov. "They need to have permission – and this needs to be recorded in the religious organisation's statute."

Pastor Samedov complains of the threats from Major Mamedov during the interrogation. "He threatened to imprison me for turning people into Christians," he told Forum 18 from Gyanja on 19 December. "He said he could find 'witnesses' to testify against me, plus they have photo and film 'evidence'. Maybe this wasn't a real threat, but he certainly wanted to intimidate me. He violates our rights to worship God – and he insulted my personal dignity. Who gave him the right to violate my rights?"

However, Major Mamedov vigorously denied making any threats. "I didn't threaten the pastor – I have no complaints against him," he claimed to Forum 18. "I just told him to act in accordance with the law."

The threats to Pastor Samedov followed a visit to his church by a police captain on 8 December, the same day that 13 police officers raided an Adventist service in the capital Baku. In the wake of the Baku raid, eight church members were held for five hours, insulted, threatened and fined (see F18News 10 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1059).

"We don't know if the raids in Baku and Gyanja on the same day are connected," Adventist leaders told Forum 18 from Baku on 19 December. "However, it is notable that two days later, the opposition paper Yeni Musavat and the television station ANS both had libellous material accusing us of being connected with Armenians." Azerbaijan and Armenia are involved in a long-running conflict over the sovereignty of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Adventists told Forum 18 that they have been present in Azerbaijan for about 110 years and currently have about 700 baptised adult members in the country. They say they have about 200 baptised adult members in Gyanja, with children of members also attending worship. They say that all children who attend worship services have permission from their parents to be there and in the overwhelming majority of cases the parents are present in services also.

As is their normal practice, no officials of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in Baku were available on 19 December to explain to Forum 18 why a second Adventist community is now facing threats.

The police captain who visited the Gyanja church during worship on 8 December later wrote a report to the head of the city police's Criminal Investigation Department alleging that the presence of children at the service was illegal, Pastor Samedov told Forum 18.

During the three-hour interrogation on 18 December, Major Mamedov accused Pastor Samedov of allowing children to attend church. "Children should be attending school on Saturday," Mamedov told Forum 18. "There's a city instruction that children aren't

allowed to attend the mosque or any other religious venue in school time."

However, Pastor Samedov insisted to Forum 18 that as elsewhere in Azerbaijan, only about a tenth of Gyanja's schools still have lessons on Saturdays, the day Adventists mark as their holy day. "All those who attended on 8 December when a police captain visited were children who did not have school on a Saturday."

Major Mamedov demanded that Pastor Samedov sign a statement that he would prevent children from attending worship services in future, but he refused. "I explained to him that parents bring their children along with them – they do this voluntarily," he explained to Forum 18. "How can we ban them from doing this?"

Police have previously directly targeted children who attend the church. In a November 2004 raid on a worship service, police 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. Firdovsi Kerimov, local representative of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, who took part in the interrogations and hostile TV interviews of children, claimed to Forum 18 at the time that "everything was done in accordance with the law" (see F18News 22 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=458).

One of the charges made against imprisoned Baptist prisoner of conscience Zaur Balaev was that he attracted children to meetings (see F18News 16 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=994). Pastor Balaev is currently serving a two year jail term and is still waiting to hear when his appeal to the Supreme Court against his conviction will be heard (see F18News 10 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1059).

Major Mamedov also told Pastor Samedov that worship services can only take place in the property where the Gyanja church's legal address is registered, not in two other church-owned properties. Mamedov claimed that this is because the church has not listed all three addresses of its churches in the city in its statute registered with the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations. "I've read their statute and it doesn't give this information," Mamedov told Forum 18.

The Adventists say that the Gyanja church's statute was registered in 2002 and that the church bought the two other properties in 2003. They say the statute defines the territory of the church's activity as "the city of Gyanja" and that the local authorities know that the church holds services at all three church-owned meeting places. The Adventists also point out that under Azerbaijani law, they also have the right to hold meetings in private homes and at other locations such as cemeteries.

In a charge frequently levelled at Protestant Christians in Azerbaijan, Mamedov also accused the Adventists of paying people to convert to Christianity. "The Adventists give 35 shirvans to each person who attends – they have massive funds," he claimed to Forum 18. (A shirvan is a popular name for 2 Manats, thus the sum represents 70 Manats [462 Norwegian Kroner, 58 Euros or 83 US Dollars].) Asked what proof he had, he responded: "There are people who have proved this – and I have photos." However, he refused to give Forum 18 any names or contact details of individuals who say they have received money to attend Adventist services.

Pastor Samedov vigorously refutes the accusation that his church gives money to anyone to attend. "First of all, and most importantly, it is not true and they have no facts that back up their claim," he told Forum 18. "Secondly, it is not against the law even if anyone does want to pay people to attend religious services."

Pastor Samedov said that also present during the 18 December interrogation was Ferdovsi Kerimov, who took part in the November 2004 raid, interrogations and hostile TV interviews of children against the protests of their parents. Kerimov is the Gyanja representative of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations. "However, he failed to defend me – and refused to explain this to me," Pastor Samedov told Forum 18.

Reached several times on 19 December, Kerimov refused to answer Forum 18's questions about his involvement in the case.

Adventist leaders told Forum 18 that in the wake of the 8 December raid on the Baku church, Pastor Rasim Bakhshiyev and seven other congregation members were fined under Article 299 part 3 of the Code of Administrative Offences. This states that "the holding by clergy and members of religious associations of meetings and the creation of labour, literary and other circles and groups not connected with the conducting of religious rituals with the aim of attracting young people and youth carries a fine of 10 to 15 times the minimum monthly wage for responsible figures."

"This doesn't even apply to us, as the four children present on 8 December were Pastor Rasim Bakhshiyev's own children," Adventist leaders said. "In addition, the police issued no documents about the fine – they just took the money."

In an account of her five-hour detention on 8 December, seen by Forum 18, one of the eight Adventists from Baku describes how police treated the group. "Police officers and people in civilian clothes asked us questions about our faith," Samira Karaeva reported. "When we answered they laughed at our responses, and they asked me to sing for them some religious songs. They tried to convince us that our religious convictions are untrue, that we are on the wrong path and that we should abandon this path."

Karaeva said she and her fellow-Adventists protested at the "insulting" way the police addressed their pastor and one elderly church member. "The police officers used disrespectful expressions about our freedom of belief and choice." She complained that books and church documents confiscated during the raid had not been returned.

Adventist leaders told Forum 18 that in the wake of the Baku raid they had written a letter of complaint to Hidayat Orujev, chair of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations. "However, we have had no response," they lamented. (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.

More coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Azerbaijan is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=23&results=50>.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806.

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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