

6 February 2008

AZERBAIJAN: Raid and beatings for "illegal" religious meeting – but police deny it

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

The police raid on a Jehovah's Witness meeting in a private home in Barda on 30 January is the latest attempt to suppress religious meetings in private homes, Forum 18 News Service has found. "If this was a religious group, why were they meeting in a private house?" Orhan Mansuzade of the Interior Ministry in Baku told Forum 18. "The Jehovah's Witnesses don't have registration with the Justice Ministry, so their activity is illegal." No law bans unregistered religious activity or religious meetings in private homes. Local police denied conducting the raid or beating six of those attending. Baptists and Seventh-day Adventists are among others who have faced recent raids. In the exclave of Nakhichevan, no religious minorities - whether Baha'i, Hare Krishna or Adventist communities - are allowed to function. "There is no possibility for us to do anything in Nakhichevan," a Baha'i told Forum 18. "Of course our people would like to be able to meet."

Despite a massive raid on a Jehovah's Witness meeting in a private house in the central town of Barda on 30 January involving some 30 police officers, two local police officers have independently denied to Forum 18 News Service that any raid took place. "There wasn't a raid," Magerram Ahmedov told Forum 18 from Barda on 6 February. "You have incorrect information." His colleague, Major Farid Kuliev, separately denied that any religious meeting had been raided or that any religious believers had been beaten. "Nothing happened," he told Forum 18 later the same day. "We checked."

Orhan Mansuzade, a press officer at the Interior Ministry, which oversees the police, confirmed the incident but denied that this was a raid. "It was a police operation," he told Forum 18 from the capital Baku on 6 February. "The police have the right to conduct such operations. If this was a religious group, why were they meeting in a private house? The Jehovah's Witnesses don't have registration with the Justice Ministry, so their activity is illegal. They should abide by the law."

Azerbaijan's Jehovah's Witnesses have only been able to get state registration for one community in Baku.

Asked why a religious meeting in a private house is illegal, Mansuzade responded: "They don't have state approval for their activity. Without registration they can't meet. The Religion Law says so." However, he was unable to specify which article of the Religion Law requires registration.

Mansuzade went on to attack the Jehovah's Witnesses. "They conduct illegal propaganda, trick people and disturb people's peace," he claimed to Forum 18. "People complain – they are afraid." He refused to give examples of alleged wrongdoing by the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Despite conceding that Azerbaijan commits itself to freedom of religion and freedom of speech, Mansuzade insisted these freedoms do not extend to the Jehovah's Witnesses. "We have freedom of speech, but this doesn't allow propaganda among the population. They're illegal missionaries. Our religion is Islam."

Jehovah's Witnesses, who preferred not to be identified, told Forum 18 on 4 February that about 30 police officers, some of them armed, raided the home of a Jehovah's Witness, Nasiba Gulieva, on 30 January. A Jehovah's Witness meeting was underway. They reported that a police officer entered Gulieva's yard, but she refused to open the door of the house. The police officer slapped her in the face. The officers waited in her yard for five hours.

Finally Gulieva opened the door, hoping all who attended the meeting could go home. The police entered the house, refusing to let anyone leave. The police invited colleagues from the school where Gulieva works to witness the raid. "After these 'witnesses' signed a document stating that policemen did not use physical force against anyone or stop them leaving the house, policemen severely beat six of the male believers," Jehovah's Witnesses reported. "Policemen threw them on the floor and hit them, witnessed by all the others who were present at the meeting." They say that among those beaten was 17-year-old Fuad Mekhtiev.

The police took all the men present to the police station. "Fuad Mekhtiev, Ilham Gasanov and Maarif Mekhtiev were again beaten in a way that no traces of this violence can be found on their bodies," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Police tried to force those

detained to sign statements incriminating themselves. However, they refused. "Instead of that they wrote that they are Jehovah's Witnesses and refuse to change their beliefs." They were not freed until after midnight.

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that the victims plan to file a complaint over the maltreatment to the Prosecutor's Office.

Despite the Jehovah's Witnesses' report that police beat six of the men present at the meeting, Major Kuliev of Barda police adamantly denied this to Forum 18. He specifically denied that anyone named Fuad Mekhtiev had been held in the police station.

Mansuzade of the Interior Ministry also denied the Jehovah's Witness report that six of those held suffered beatings. "We don't have information that any were beaten," he told Forum 18. "If they have any complaints they can appeal to higher authorities."

As is their usual practice, officials at the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in Baku refused to discuss the harassment of Jehovah's Witness congregations – or violations of the religious freedom of any other religious communities – with Forum 18 on 4, 5 or 6 February.

The Barda raid is the latest of several on Jehovah's Witness communities, as well as communities of other faiths. On 13 December 2007, police in Baku's Nizami District raided a Jehovah's Witness meeting in a private home. Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that 20 people had gathered to study the Bible when the police raided the home. "This was accompanied by insults, unfounded accusations and even physical violence. In the police station those detained were ordered to stand in line against the wall and not to move, as if they were especially dangerous criminals."

The Jehovah's Witnesses say Roman Mukhtarov, Fariz Mamedov and Vusal Amirli were beaten "just because they make use of the freedom of religion provided to us by the Constitution and the law". They report the police as telling each other: "Beat them in a way that no traces can be found."

All those at the meeting were questioned and forced to write statements dictated by the police that Jehovah's Witness activity is illegal. Police and National Security Ministry officers then told them that they will be fined under the Code of Administrative Violations, though no proceedings have taken place.

"Police did not heed the fact that under-age children were with them and that several of them were feeling ill," the Jehovah's Witnesses complained. "Most were held in the police station against their will for over seven hours, till 2 o'clock in the morning. Each of them was required to hear insults, unprintable words and threats."

On 7 January, thirteen of the Jehovah's Witnesses filed a complaint against the police with the General Prosecutor's office. Copies were sent to the Prosecutor of the Nizami District and to the Human Rights Ombudsperson. Jehovah's Witnesses reported that as of 6 February the thirteen had received no response to their complaint.

Firdovsi Kerimov, the representative of the State Committee in the central city of Gyanja [Gäncä], warned the local Jehovah's Witnesses on 25 January through the media that all meetings in the city were "illegal" and that the police would take measures if they "violate the law". Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that there have been no new raids in the wake of the comments, although the community has been raided in the past. "We fear a raid there at any time."

Baptists and Seventh-day Adventists in Gyanja have also been raided in recent years (see F18News 20 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1065). Also in Gyanja, the imam of a Sunni Muslim mosque was imprisoned on what mosque members believe were trumped-up charges. On his release in early 2006 he was not allowed to return to serve the mosque community (see F18News 10 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=741).

Restrictions on religious communities remain, especially outside Baku. Baha'i representatives told Forum 18 that no Baha'i activity is allowed in Nakhichevan [Naxçıvan], an exclave separated from the rest of Azerbaijan. "There is no possibility for us to do anything in Nakhichevan – this problem is still continuing," one Baha'i who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18 from Baku on 6 February. "Of course our people would like to be able to meet."

There has long been a de facto ban on religious activity by non-Muslim communities in Nakhichevan. A small Adventist congregation and a Hare Krishna community were also banned. Muslim communities too are under strong control by the Nakhichevan authorities (see F18News 16 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=689).

Among other communities to have faced recent official harassment are the Council of Churches Baptists. Baptists told Forum 18 that the leader of the embattled congregation in the village of Aliabad in north-western Azerbaijan, Novruz Eyvazov, had his tractor confiscated in September 2007 to punish him for leading religious meetings. "He was threatened and given a small fine, but they gave him back his tractor," one Baptist told Forum 18 on 4 February. "Things have calmed down there a little." Eyvazov has faced problems registering the birth of several of his children as officials object to the Christian names he and his wife have given them (see F18News 3 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1028).

The Baptist added that a camp was raided by police in summer 2007, but after checking the identity of all those present allowed them to leave as the camp was ending.

Another Baptist congregation in Aliabad led by Zaur Balaev has also faced persecution in recent years. Balaev is serving a two year prison sentence in Baku on charges of attacking police who came to break up a service. He and his congregation vigorously deny the charges (see F18News 22 January 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1075).

A Pentecostal congregation in Baku's Nasimi District, the Temple of the Lord, was visited by the local policeman during its Sunday service on 24 June 2007. After the service, the pastor Rasim Hasanov was told to go to the head of the district police, who told him that as the congregation does not have registration it cannot meet in the Nasimi District. "I told him that this is in no law, but he said that what he says is the law," Hasanov told Forum 18 from Baku on 6 February. "We had to move out of the place we were meeting."

Hasanov complained that the State Committee has been stalling over the congregation's registration application since May 2006. He said it claimed the statute needed revising and gave it back, but since January 2007 the documents have been with the State Committee. "They're supposed to handle the application within 40 days, but this is more than a year with no response."

Hasanov said he visited the State Committee in late January 2008 and officials said the congregation cannot use a private home as a legal address. He asked the State Committee to put this in writing but they refused. "They said we have to meet in a club or cafe and sign a legal contract with them," he told Forum 18. "But they know we can't sign a legal contract if we don't have registration."

The objection to the holding of religious meetings in private homes – which is not based in law - appears to be the same problem that the Jehovah's Witnesses are facing in Barda. (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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