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AZERBAIJAN: "We're not criminals," fined Baptists insist

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Police and local officials raided a Baptist Sunday service on 13 July in a private flat in Gyanja, interrupting the sermon and declaring the service "illegal". They confiscated all the religious literature they could find before singling out the two ethnic Azeris – Zaur Ismailov and Magomet Musayev – to be fined. "They're not criminals, so they have told the authorities they will not pay," Pastor Pavel Byakov, who leads a church in Sumgait, told Forum 18 News Service. "They didn't have registration so their service was illegal," Firdovsi Karimov, head of the local department of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, told Forum 18.

Two Baptists fined after a raid on a Baptist Sunday service on 13 July in a private flat in Azerbaijan's second city Gyanja have refused to pay the fines. "They're not criminals, so they have told the authorities they will not pay," Pastor Pavel Byakov, who leads a church in Sumgait, told Forum 18 News Service on 22 July. He points out that although about a dozen Baptists were present, the authorities singled out the two ethnic Azeris – Zaur Ismailov and Magomet Musayev – to be fined. But Firdovsi Karimov, head of the local department of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations insisted the authorities have done nothing wrong in raiding the service and handing down the fines. "They didn't have registration so their service was illegal," he told Forum 18 from Gyanja on 22 July.

Byakov reported that the service was being held at the home of local Baptist Anna Antushina. Rasim Gadzhiev, senior inspector for law and order, accompanied by two police officers and two city officials, raided the service, interrupting the sermon. "They declared the service illegal and stopped it." The police confiscated religious literature from the flat, including Bibles, hymn-books and copies of the Baptists' Russian-language journal Vestnik Istiny (Herald of Truth). "They took everything that was there," Byakov told Forum 18. They drew up a police record about the "illegal meeting", but the Baptists refused to sign it.

They then took Ismailov, who leads the church, and Musayev to the police station, where they were interrogated for three hours. Their identity documents were confiscated. They were also filmed and this film was later shown in local television broadcasts. In a programme on 19 July, Space TV portrayed the men as being engaged in "illegal activity" which the authorities had "uncovered".

Ismailov was fined under Article 299 of the code of administrative offences, which punishes "violation of the regulations on the creation and functioning of religious associations", including "avoiding the procedure of state registration of religious organisations". He was fined 65,000 manats (97 Norwegian kroner, 12 Euros or 13 US dollars). Musayev, an ethnic Azeri who has recently returned to Azerbaijan from Russia, was fined 165,000 manats under Article 300 of the administrative code, which punishes "religious propaganda by foreigners". He was also ordered to undergo local residence registration, which he has been trying to obtain.

Karimov said that Antushina "should be fined also", but she had "disappeared" so the authorities were unable to do so.

Despite the imposition of fines on Ismailov and Musayev, police kept summoning the two men for each of the next few days, continuing to interrogate them for three hours each time before releasing them.

The Gyanja Baptist church belongs to the International Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians/Baptists, whose congregations reject registration on principle in all the former Soviet republics where they operate, believing such registration leads to state interference and unacceptable restrictions on their activity.

Karimov concedes that believers have the right to "meet privately", but insisted that as it functions without registration, the church's activity is illegal (though Azerbaijan's religion law does not make registration compulsory and Azerbaijan's international human rights commitments do not allow it to restrict rights to freedom of worship and freedom of assembly). "The church must apply to the State Committee for registration," he insisted to Forum 18. He said there are Christian churches in Gyanja with registration, citing another Baptist church as well as an Adventist church, a Pentecostal church Star in the East and the Church of Jesus Christ. "These function with registration perfectly freely."

Karimov stressed that Article 1 of Azerbaijan's religion law bans foreigners and people without citizenship from conducting

"religious propaganda", adding that it was right that Musayev should be fined for this. But he failed to explain to Forum 18 how Musayev's attendance or participation in a religious service in a private home constituted "propaganda". He also declined to say why the police had singled out the ethnic Azeris for fines, though he rejected any suggestions that the authorities discriminate against ethnic Azeri Christians.

Karimov admitted that the two men had not paid the fines, but claimed that their identity documents have already been returned. Asked about when the confiscated books will be returned he declared: "We will talk about this with them again."

Byakov said that his congregations have not faced "serious incidents" recently, although he noted that the congregation in Khachmaz had been "visited". "But it was fairly friendly and it is not worth writing about this," he told Forum 18. But he complained about the continuing confiscation of religious literature. He cited the recent confiscation of 120 copies of Herald of Truth from an individual Baptist returning to Azerbaijan from Russia. "I don't know how many copies of the magazine have been seized in recent years."

Azerbaijan retains compulsory prior censorship of all religious literature, in defiance of its international obligations, and religious literature being imported without specific authorisation is frequently confiscated.

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