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AZERBAIJAN: Beatings, rape threats and pressure to renounce faith

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

The local police chief whose forces raided a Jehovah's Witness meeting in the capital Baku on 3 June insisted to Forum 18 News Service that the meeting had been "illegal" and that they should not meet in a private house. "They collect people together and teach them," Colonel Sahib Babaev complained to Forum 18. The Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that nine men who had been present were taken to the police station, beaten, threatened with rape and pressured to renounce their faith. Colonel Babaev denied this. But he said a Spanish Jehovah's Witness present at the meeting will "probably" be expelled from Azerbaijan. Muslim and Protestant communities have also seen intermittent police and NSM secret police raids on their meetings in recent years. One Protestant told Forum 18 that after their congregation in Sumgait was raided in autumn 2007, police brought in the local imam and pressured the 30 or so detained church members to renounce their faith under a copy of the Koran.

A police raid on a Jehovah's Witness meeting in the capital Baku on 3 June is the latest of a series of intermittent raids on peaceful meetings of a variety of faiths across Azerbaijan. Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 News Service that nine male adherents were held for up to six and a half hours, beaten and threatened with rape. Local police chief Colonel Sahib Babaev of the Surakhani district police department No. 32 insisted that the Jehovah's Witnesses had been holding an "illegal" meeting where religious education was being conducted and religious literature read. "They collect people together and teach them," he complained to Forum 18 from Baku on 9 June. "They shouldn't meet in a private house – there are special places for this, like mosques and madrassas [Islamic colleges]."

Azerbaijani law does not ban religious activity in private homes, although state officials generally believe that it does. Colonel Babaev was unable to say what law the Jehovah's Witnesses had been violating by holding the meeting.

Colonel Babaev denied that the nine Jehovah's Witnesses had been beaten and threatened. "I can officially tell you as head of the district police that they were not beaten," he told Forum 18. "Why should they have been beaten? All we did was question them and get them to write statements."

Colonel Babaev insisted that the police were merely checking up. "We have the right to bring in anyone and question them, whether or not they have committed an offence," he maintained. "This is not a dictatorship – we're fulfilling the laws passed by the Milli Majlis [parliament]."

Colonel Babaev added that what he called the "check-up" was initiated by the National Security Ministry (NSM) secret police which, he said, was hunting for a Spanish citizen Jaime Bouza Paz. "He is wanted by Interpol and is living illegally in Azerbaijan," Babaev claimed. Forum 18 was unable on 9 June to reach Ikhtiyar (last name unknown), the NSM officer identified by Colonel Babaev as initiating the action against the Jehovah's Witnesses.

"We can confirm that Jaime Bouza Paz is one of Jehovah's Witnesses and that he stays in Azerbaijan legally," the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "Regarding any search from Interpol, we had a good laugh about that."

Colonel Babaev told Forum 18 that Bouza Paz is still living in Baku and will "probably" be expelled from Azerbaijan. In defiance of Azerbaijan's international human rights commitments, Article 1 of the country's Religion Law bans "religious propaganda" by foreigners, while Article 300 of the code of administrative offences punishes offenders with fines of up to 25 times the minimum monthly wage or deportation.

The 3 June raid on the Jehovah's Witnesses in Baku began at about 7.30 pm, while a congregation meeting was underway in the private house of Bahaddin Ismaylov. "A policeman climbed over the fence and opened the gate from the inside, allowing more than ten men, some of them in police uniform, to enter the courtyard," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

They say Ibrahim Uzbekov, who was conducting the meeting, went out and asked the policemen for the reasons of this raid. "Nobody identified himself or presented any documents," Jehovah's Witnesses reported. "These men went inside the house and

searched all the rooms, filmed the interior with mobile phones and said these recordings would be shown on television."

After this nine of the men present at the meeting were detained and taken to the Surakhani district police department No. 32. "There they were insulted and beaten on their face and body, though this was done in a way no marks remained," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "The policemen told them the religious meeting was unlawful, and tried to force them to renounce their faith. They threatened our brothers saying they will be put in prison and will be raped." Some of them were not released until 2.00 in the morning.

Religious communities of a variety of faiths have faced raids, with police often alleging that their activities are "illegal". Seventh-day Adventist communities were raided in December 2007 in Baku and in Azerbaijan's second city Gyanja [Gäncä] (see F18News 6 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1082).

Members of Baku's Azeri-language Baptist congregation report that several of their small groups in other parts of the country have been raided by police this year. "The police tell them not to meet and warn that they will be punished if they do so," they told Forum 18 in late May. "We have to move the meetings to other places. Other times the police just look in for a few minutes to check up – but it's still a form of psychological pressure. It's definitely harder for groups in the regions than here in Baku."

Baptists in the village of Aliabad in the Zakatala [Zaqatala] Region of north-western Azerbaijan have faced particular pressure over meeting without state registration. Pastor Zaur Balaev was freed from prison on 19 March (see F18News 19 March 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1102). However, he has since been threatened with re-imprisonment because local Baptists continue to meet for worship (see F18News 12 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1142).

Baku-based Protestant pastor Rasim Hasanov, who leads an Assemblies of God congregation, said the last time the church has been able to meet together for worship publicly – in a rented cafe in the city's Nasimi District in June 2007 – police arrived to halt the worship. Hasanov told Forum 18 on 23 May that he and two colleagues were taken to the police station, where the police chief told them: "You don't have the right to meet here. This is my area – get out!" The church has been denied state registration since May 2006 (see F18News 6 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1082).

One Baku-based Protestant who did not want to be identified said police in the city of Sumgait near Baku launched a major raid on their congregation in autumn 2007. Some 30 church members were detained, put in buses and taken to the police station, where they were held for many hours. "At the police station officers called in the local imam," the Protestant told Forum 18 in late May. "The imam held up a copy of the Koran and police tried to force church members to pass underneath it and deny their faith. They do this from time to time to frighten us."

The Protestant told Forum 18 that each time they conduct a raid on their congregations in any part of Azerbaijan, the police and local officials ask: "Do you have registration with the State Committee?" The Protestant added that there was no point in complaining publicly about the Sumgait or other raids as this could lead to further threats and harassment.

Other Protestants have been threatened that they could be imprisoned as Pastor Balaev was (see F18News 10 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1059 and 20 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1065). However, these threats have not so far been carried out.

Nine Baku-based Muslims – led by Said Dadashbeyli – were given long prison sentences in December 2007 on what his family and lawyer insist are trumped-up charges to punish them for participating in an unapproved Muslim group Nima (see F18News 28 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1134).

Jeyhun Mamedov of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations refused adamantly to discuss any specific raids on religious communities with Forum 18 in his office in Baku on 21 May. "All citizens are equal under the law regardless of their faith," was all he would say. Mamedov's telephone has gone unanswered every time Forum 18 has called since then.

Condemning such raids unequivocally is Arzu Abullaeva, head of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, a human rights group. "Groups of Christians and Muslims are being persecuted," she told Forum 18 at her office in Baku on 22 May. "This persecution is strange and not necessary." She complained that when such raids occur the State Committee "does nothing" to defend such communities. "They say there is no problem, but there is a problem – and it's getting worse. These are kind and peaceful citizens who have full rights. The State Committee has no modern understanding."

Azerbaijan's Jehovah's Witness community has faced serious raids before, especially in Baku on 24 December 2006, again in Baku on 13 December 2007 and in the central town of Barda on 30 January 2008 (see F18News 6 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1082).

After going through all the local courts over the December 2006 police raid, the Jehovah's Witness community filed an application with the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in Strasbourg against the Azerbaijan government on 16 November 2007 (application No. 52682/07). The Court has not yet ruled on whether the case is admissible. A Court official told Forum 18 from

Strasbourg on 9 June that an admissibility ruling could take "a considerable time", given the "over 100,000 pending cases" the Court has to process.

After the December 2007 and January 2008 police raids, the Jehovah's Witnesses notified the ECtHR on 11 February 2008 about what they describe as "ongoing persecution". Even though the Court declined to take urgent "interim measures" in the wake of the fresh raids, the President of the Court chamber notified the Azerbaijani government on 12 February that the Jehovah's Witnesses had filed this application.

"However, as you can see from the events of 3 June, unfortunately the persecution still continues," one Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18. "But still, Jehovah's Witnesses in Azerbaijan are attempting to have constructive dialogue with the government in an effort to resolve any misunderstandings and put an end to these raids." (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>.

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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