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AZERBAIJAN: "Wasn't one prison term enough?"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Baptist former prisoner of conscience Zaur Balaev has been summoned and threatened with a new prison term, he has told Forum 18 News Service. "Haven't you learnt from your imprisonment?" Balaev quoted police officers as telling him. "Wasn't one prison term enough for you?" One officer added: "You may not be afraid, but you've forgotten you've got a wife, daughter and a son." Police banned Balaev's church from meeting, a ban the congregation has defied. Kamandar Hasanov, the deputy police chief in Azerbaijan's north-western Zakatala region, denied to Forum 18 that he had threatened Balaev. Hasanov also refused to discuss with Forum 18 the harassment of Balaev's Baptist congregation, why Muslim men with beards were forcibly shaved and banned from Zakatala's mosque in recent years, and why religious books were confiscated in a raid on a Jehovah's Witness home. A local resident told Forum 18 that the pressure to shave off beards has at present halted.

Baptist former prisoner of conscience Zaur Balaev – freed on 19 March after being held for nearly a year to punish him for leading his congregation – was summoned and threatened with a new prison term in early May, he told Forum 18 News Service on 12 June from his home village of Aliabad in the north-western region of Zakatala [Zaqatala]. "Haven't you learnt from your imprisonment?" Balaev quoted police officers as telling him. "Wasn't one prison term enough for you?" And, in what Balaev says was a clear threat, one officer added: "You may not be afraid, but you've forgotten you've got a wife, daughter and a son."

Balaev said the threats came from Kamandar Hasanov, the deputy regional police chief, and two of his colleagues in Hasanov's office in Zakatala. "They didn't hit me but they were very crude."

Balaev said the police banned his church from meeting, a ban the congregation has defied. Police have continued to visit his church during worship services. "They realise they can't drive us out," he told Forum 18, referring to the fact that all the church members are local people. "But they observe us closely."

Hasanov denied to Forum 18 that he had threatened Balaev. "There were no threats," he told Forum 18 from Zakatala on 12 June. "Who said there were any threats and raids?" He declined to say why the Baptist congregations in Aliabad cannot meet for worship without harassment, why Muslim men with beards were forcibly shaved and banned from Zakatala's mosque in recent years and why religious books were confiscated in a raid on a Jehovah's Witness home in Zakatala in March. "Call me back later," Hasanov said and put down the phone. He was not in the office later in the day.

Strongly backing Balaev and his congregation is Ilya Zenchenko, head of Azerbaijan's Baptist Union. "They used very bad threats against him," he told Forum 18 in the capital Baku in late May. "This must be reported. They definitely want to threaten him, telling him 'this is an Islamic country and Christians shouldn't be here'."

Balaev was arrested in May 2007 on charges of attacking five police officers and damaging a police car that he and his church insist were trumped up. He was sentenced to two years' imprisonment, but was freed under amnesty in March, perhaps as a result of international attention to his case (see F18News 19 March 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1102). Another prisoner of conscience, Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Samir Huseynov, was freed on 1 May (see F18News 14 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1129).

However, Said Dadashbeyli, a Muslim teacher on a 14 year jail term is still in prison. His lawyer and family have insisted to Forum 18 that he is "completely innocent." His lawyer, Elchin Gambarov, claims the Azerbaijani government wanted to show foreign governments that there was a serious Islamist threat. Dadashbeyli's family told Forum 18 that he promoted a "European style of Islam" and rejected fundamentalism (see F18News 28 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1134).

The 44-year-old Balaev told Forum 18 his health suffered during his imprisonment. He was held for four months in an investigation cell together with some twenty other prisoners who smoked constantly and some of whom suffered from tuberculosis (see F18News 9 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1005).

Like the overwhelming majority of Aliabad's inhabitants, Balaev is from the Georgian-speaking Ingilo minority, which was converted to Islam several centuries ago. The congregation he leads has existed for more than fifteen years and has repeatedly been

barred from gaining state registration (see eg. F18News 8 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=471). Forum 18 believes it to be Azerbaijan's religious community that holds the record for the longest denial of registration.

Although police have not punished church members for continuing to meet, Balaev told Forum 18 that they have continued to visit services both of his congregation and of another Baptist congregation in the village led by Hamid Shabanov. "They visited us three times and other congregations twice," Balaev complained. "Pastor Hamid was also summoned by the police and threatened." He said police scrutiny had been particularly intense during a visit some two weeks earlier by fellow church members from Baku. "Police asked them why they had come and what they were doing. They demanded to see their identity documents and wrote down their details."

Balaev reported that Christian literature confiscated from Pastor Shabanov a year ago has still not been returned (see F18News 4 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=968).

After Balaev's release, church members accompanied by Zenchenko tried once more to have their signatures on the congregation's registration application officially notarised by Zakatala's notary. "But they absolutely refused to do this," Zenchenko told Forum 18. "This is how they have behaved for years."

Jeyhun Mamedov of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in Baku refused adamantly to discuss the threats to Balaev and harassment of his congregation and other religious communities in Zakatala Region with Forum 18 in his office in Baku on 21 May. However, he pledged to investigate the refusal of the notary to notarise the signatures on the registration application. Mamedov's telephone has gone unanswered every time Forum 18 has called since then.

Najiba Mamedova, Zakatala's notary, screamed down the phone at Forum 18 when it tried to find out why the notary's office is refusing to notarise the signatures on the registration application. "You've been going on about this for years," she told Forum 18 on 12 June. "You're a provocateur. It's none of your business. Armenians have occupied Nagorno-Karabakh for more than 15 years and we've spent blood over it. One Karabakh is enough." When Forum 18 pointed out that the Aliabad Baptist church has no connection with Armenians and that its members are Azerbaijani citizens she angrily put the phone down.

In November 2004 Mamedova angrily threw Forum 18 out of her office during a visit to try to find out why she was then refusing to notarise the signatures (see F18News 8 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=471).

Numerous religious communities of a variety of faiths have been denied registration over recent years (see eg. F18News 6 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1082).

Children given Christian first names by their parents in Aliabad have been denied birth certificates by officials angry at their choice of name (see F18News 19 March 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1102).

Meanwhile, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that four police officers and two official witnesses raided the Zakatala home of Matanat Gurbanova and her family at noon on 25 March. Although she and her husband were out, police ignored her daughter's request that they should come back and insisted on conducting a search. When the daughter fainted in shock the police gave her water to bring her round then threatened her physically when she continued to object to the raid, Jehovah's Witnesses reported. Police confiscated Gurbanova's religious literature.

Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestants in other parts of Azerbaijan also continue to experience raids and police threats against their members (see F18News 9 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1140).

Deputy police chief Hasanov told the media after the raid that 570 books and 78 brochures – which he described as "banned" literature - had been removed and that an investigation was underway.

Several days later, when Gurbanova was again out, a police officer again visited and said she could go to the investigator and collect the literature. "I did not go since I consider they acted unlawfully," Gurbanova wrote in a 2 April complaint to the Zakatala Regional Prosecutor's Office and the General Prosecutor's Office in the capital Baku. She insisted the raid violated her rights to freedom of thought, speech and conscience guaranteed in Articles 47 and 48 of Azerbaijan's Constitution and Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Zakatala's Muslim community has also faced official pressure in recent years. In October 2007 the APA press agency reported local Muslims as complaining that police officer Nasib Musaev had banned men with beards from praying at the prayer room at the town's market. They say he summoned all the men and ordered them to shave off their beards if they wanted to be allowed into the prayer room. APA said local Muslims had complained about the ban to the State Committee in Baku. Musaev denied to APA that he had issued any ban, claiming that anyone who wanted to could pray at the prayer room.

Local Muslims had earlier complained of close police scrutiny and pressure to shave off beards. However, one local resident told Forum 18 on 12 June that this problem seems to have at present halted. (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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