FORUM 18 NEWS SERVICE, Oslo, Norway
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18 June 2008

AZERBAIJAN: Second raid this month on Jehovah's Witnesses

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

Police in Azerbaijan have now raided two Jehovah's Witness communities this month, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The second raid was on "a small peaceful religious meeting" in a home in the capital Baku. Fifteen police officers took part in this raid and detained all of the congregation, beating up three detainees. After the first raid, nine Jehovah's Witnesses caught up in it wrote to the General Prosecutor, pointing out that the raid was a violation of their rights to freedom of thought, speech and conscience guaranteed under the Azerbaijani Constitution and Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights. They asked for "urgent and effective measures" to halt such violations, for the actions of officials to be legally verified, and for criminal prosecutions of officials who have violated the law. The number of raids seems to have increased in the past year, primarily targeting Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, Adventists and other Protestants. Communities of other faiths have also been raided and warned by officials in 2008; these communities have asked Forum 18 not to identify them for fear of further repression.

Police in Azerbaijan have now raided two Jehovah's Witness communities since the beginning of June, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that the second raid was on "a small peaceful religious meeting" in a private home in Lokbatan, a suburb of the capital Baku. Fifteen police officers took part in the raid on the evening of 11 June and detained all of the congregation, beating up three detainees. Neither the local police nor the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations have been prepared to explain to the Jehovah's Witnesses or to Forum 18 why this happened.

A similar Jehovah's Witness meeting in a private home in the Baku suburb of Surakhani was raided by police on 3 June. Nine men who were present were taken to the police station, beaten, threatened with rape and pressured to renounce their faith (see F18News 9 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1140).

In the wake of the Surakhani raid, nine Jehovah's Witnesses caught up in the raid wrote a complaint to the General Prosecutor, of which Forum 18 has received a copy. They insisted that the raid was a violation of their rights to freedom of thought, speech and conscience guaranteed under Articles 47 and 48 of the Azerbaijani Constitution and Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights. They asked the General Prosecutor to take "urgent and effective measures" to halt the violation of Jehovah's Witnesses' rights, to verify the legality of the actions of the officials and if they have violated the law to bring them to criminal responsibility,

The Jehovah's Witnesses copied their appeal to the Human Rights Ombudsperson Elmira Suleymanova, the head of the State Committee Hidayat Orujev, other state officials and human rights activists.

As is her usual practice, the spokesperson for the State Committee, Yagut Aliyeva, repeatedly put down the phone each time Forum 18 introduced itself on 18 June and asked why the two Jehovah's Witness communities had been raided.

Aliyeva's colleague Jeyhun Mamedov, who had told Forum 18 that Aliyeva would give the State Committee's response, said he had no information either about the 11 June raid in Lokbatan or about the 3 June raid in Surakhani, despite the fact that the Jehovah's Witnesses 13 June complaint about the Surakhani raid had been copied to the State Committee.

One Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18 on 18 June that they "have no clue" why the two meetings were raided in June. "The officers always say in these cases that these meetings are illegal, but when we ask them under what law they cannot explain."

Azerbaijani law contains no ban on religious meetings in private homes. Nor is unregistered religious activity illegal, although many state officials believe that it is.

Asked by Forum 18 as to why police and National Security Ministry (NSM) secret police officers repeatedly regard such religious meetings as "illegal" and raid them, Mamedov of the State Committee responded: "We have the law." Asked several times whether he believes such religious meetings in private homes are illegal, he eventually replied: "No they're not banned. However, we need to look at the individual situation of each case." Asked to clarify what he meant, Mamedov added; "Maybe there was some incident or problem." He refused to explain what he meant or to discuss this further.

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Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that at approximately 7.30 pm on 11 June, some 15 police officers, some of them in civilian clothing and some of them armed, burst into the Lokbatan home of Eldar Aliyev. They requested all those present to show their identification documents.

"After forcing the door of another room they searched the whole house and confiscated religious literature, videocassettes and documentation of the congregation," the Jehovah's Witnesses reported. "Of these confiscated items, only some of the religious literature was returned the next day." They say the police showed no warrant.

"The policemen detained Aliyev and without even giving him time to put on his shoes brought him to Lokbatan police station No. 10, soon followed by others who had attended the meeting." Among those detained was Sakit Zohrabov (who was also taken to the police station barefoot), as well as children and pregnant women. The Jehovah's Witnesses report that police also went to the house of Aliyev's neighbour, Rovshan Mursalov, and detained him, even though he was not even present at the meeting.

At the police station officers demanded that Aliyev hand over the keys of his house. When he refused, officers put handcuffs on him and brought him back home. There the police also detained his wife Maryam and the other female Jehovah's Witnesses who were still there. "In total more then 30 persons were detained and brought to the police station."

At about 10 pm all were released except for Aliyev, Mursalov and Zohrabov. The Jehovah's Witnesses say these three were "insulted and beaten on their faces and bodies". Finally they were released at 11.30 pm. "Though marks of the beating still could be seen on their bodies," they report, "their efforts to receive a medical examination in one of the local hospitals were without result, since the hospital personnel told them they should have a note from the police requesting such an examination."

The duty officer at Lokbatan's police station No. 10 told Forum 18 on 17 June that he had not been on duty on the evening of 11 June. He referred all enquiries to another number. However, despite Forum 18's repeated calls on 17 and 18 June the officers who answered the phone refused to explain why Aliyev's home had been raided. The head of the police station, Sabit Veliev, was not present or available on 17 and 18 June.

Muslim and Protestant communities have also seen intermittent police and NSM secret police raids on their meetings in recent years. However, the number of raids seems to have stepped up in the past year, with raids on other Jehovah's Witness communities, as well as Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists and other Protestants. Communities of other faiths have also been raided and warned for peaceful religious activity by officials in 2008; these communities have asked Forum 18 not to identify them for fear of further repression. Such raids have been condemned by human rights activists in Baku (see F18News 9 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1140).

Some religious leaders have been imprisoned for peaceful religious activity. Zaur Balaev was freed in March 2008 after being imprisoned for leading his Baptist congregation in the village of Aliabad in the north-western region of Zakatala [Zaqatala]. He has been threatened with a new prison term if his congregation continues to meet (see F18News 12 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1142).

Still imprisoned is Said Dadashbeyli, a Baku-based Muslim teacher who received a 14-year sentence at a closed trial in December 2007. His lawyer and family insist that he and eight of those sentenced with him are innocent of the serious terrorism-related charges levelled against them. Dadashbeyli founded an Islamic group called Nima in 2005 and, his family say, promoted a "European style of Islam", mutual respect and unity between Shias (the largest Muslim tendency in Azerbaijan) and Sunnis, and rejected fundamentalism (see F18News 28 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1134). (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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f18news @ editor.forum18.org

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Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY

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