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AZERBAIJAN: Government still keeps Mosque, Baptist church, and Georgian Orthodox churches closed

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Five months after the authorities closed the Abu-Bekr Mosque in Azerbaijan's capital Baku, the mosque community is still banned from worshipping in it, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Another appeal is due to be heard on 19 February. No official has been able to explain to Forum 18 why the Mosque should remain closed, or why a Baptist church is also kept closed. A court has told the Mosque's lawyer that giving reasons is "not appropriate." The authorities have also refused to explain to Forum 18 why an unpublished nationwide ban on praying outside mosques, when mosques are full, remains in force. Also banned from meeting in their own place of worship are Georgian Orthodox villagers in north-west Azerbaijan. The Georgian Orthodox Church would like to fully reopen four churches in the region, and establish a monastery. At present the authorities allow worship lasting no more than 30 minutes in only three of the churches only. "But our services need at least an hour and a half," Bishop Sergi Chekurishvili told Forum 18. He fears that many Georgian Orthodox are deprived of the sacraments, and can die without access to communion.

More than five months after their mosque was hit by an August 2008 grenade attack, the community of Abu-Bekr Mosque in Baku's Narimanov District seem no nearer to overturning the unwritten ban on its reopening for worship, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The community's lawyer Javanshir Suleymanov told Forum 18 on 28 January that the community lodged an appeal against the decision of the Narimanov District Court that the Mosque should remain closed. He said the appeal is due to be heard by Baku Appeal Court on 19 February. No official has been willing to explain to Forum 18 why the Mosque should remain closed. Officials are similarly unwilling to explain why the unpublished nationwide ban on praying in the area around mosques, when mosques are full, remains in force.

Suleymanov complained that the Narimanov District Court decision gave no reasons for the ban. "It merely said this was 'not appropriate' – what's that supposed to mean?" he exclaimed to Forum 18. "There's been no document, no order mandating the continued closure." He said the National Security Ministry (NSM) secret police had, in December 2008, repeated its written assurance that it was not behind the ban on the Mosque reopening.

The ban on reopening the Abu-Bekr Mosque comes as Georgian Orthodox Christians in the north-west of Azerbaijan remain unable to regain for regular worship historic Georgian churches closed during the Soviet period. Baku's Baptist congregation is among other religious communities unable to regain places of worship confiscated by the Soviet regime.

Among other continuing problems for religious communities, police raided a Jehovah's Witness meeting near Gyanja [Ganca] on 18 January, while Baptist pastor Hamid Shabanov is due again in court on 4 February to face criminal charges which he and his congregation insist were fabricated to punish him for his religious work with his congregation (see 28 January 2009 F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1245).

The duty officer at the Narimanov District Police station referred all enquiries about the continued closure of the Abu-Bekr Mosque to the police chief. However, neither Muradali Babaev, the District Police chief, nor his deputy Alekper Ismailov were available when Forum 18 called on 28 and 29 January.

Lieutenant-Colonel Ahsan Zahidov of the Interior Ministry, told Forum 18 in October 2008 that the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations had ordered the mosque closure, and that no one was preventing the Mosque from reopening (see F18News 17 October 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1205). He refused to explain why the mosque cannot reopen. "You're disturbing my work," he told Forum 18 on 29 January before putting the phone down.

Nor was any official at the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in Baku prepared to speak to Forum 18 about the Abu-Bekr Mosque on 28 and 29 January.

The grenade attack on the Sunni Abu-Bekr Mosque in August 2008 killed several congregation members and wounded a number of others, including the imam, Gamet Suleymanov (no relation of the lawyer). The authorities closed the Mosque while the crime was investigated, but have repeatedly refused to allow it to reopen. The community challenged the refusal and also sought to establish

who had issued the ban on the reopening. However, numerous court hearings failed to achieve the reopening (see F18News 13 November 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1217).

Those who used to attend the Abu-Bekr Mosque have been forced to worship in private homes since the mosque's closure, Suleymanov told Forum 18. He said police at the city's three other Sunni mosques turn away many of those seeking to attend Friday prayers, saying they are full.

Muslims have told Forum 18 that a nationwide "temporary" ban on praying outside mosques, imposed in August 2008 also remains in force (see F18News 17 October 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1205).

Also unable to meet in their own place of worship, as well as to restore and reopen it, are Georgian Orthodox villagers in Kurmukh, in Kakh [Qax] District, not far from Azerbaijan's north-western border with Georgia. Local villagers – who are overwhelmingly ethnic Georgians - reopened the 100-year-old St George's Church several years ago, but the authorities sealed it in 2007, claiming that as a historical monument it could not be used. Local Georgians told Forum 18 on 28 January that the authorities have since then allowed the community to hold services at the Church twice a year – on the feasts of St George in May and November.

However, the authorities have not yet allowed the community to restore the Church or to reopen it regularly. "Of course we want to restart regular services," one local Georgian told Forum 18. "Discussions with the authorities are still underway. As soon as agreement is reached we would like to start restoration – the church is still ruined on the inside." The Georgian said discussions are now underway at the interstate level between Azerbaijan and Georgia, and that local Georgian Orthodox hope for a positive outcome.

Pushing for a resolution to the problem is Sozar Subari, Georgia's Human Rights Ombudsperson. He travelled to the village in November 2007 with his Azeri colleague Elmira Suleymanova, but failed to reach a solution, as he told Forum 18 in the Georgian capital Tbilisi on 9 December 2008. "The authorities won't allow the Orthodox to pray there," he lamented.

The Azerbaijani authorities have allowed only one Georgian Orthodox church in the country – in Gakhinglov, also in Kakh District – to reopen and gain state registration, served by one priest from Georgia, currently Fr Badri Archvadze.

Bishop Sergi Chekurishvili of Nekrisi, whose diocese in eastern Georgia includes the Kakh District and who estimates he has visited the District more than twenty times, was also present when the two Ombudspersons visited Kurmukh. He insists that friendly mutual relations between Georgians and Azeris are the way to resolve the problems for his flock in western Azerbaijan. "We have helped local ethnic Azeris here in eastern Georgia build mosques and not obstructed them – it's a question of mutual respect," he told Forum 18 from Georgia on 29 January.

Bishop Sergi said the Church would like to establish a monastery at Kurmukh once the Church is returned and restoration complete. He said that the Church would also like to reopen a further three historic churches in ethnic Georgian villages in the District. "At the moment Fr Badri is allowed to hold a service in any of these village churches lasting no more than half an hour," he reported. "But our services need at least an hour and a half. And it is difficult and takes a long time for our faithful to reach the Gakhinglov church – especially the elderly."

Bishop Sergi also fears that with only one priest, many Georgian Orthodox are deprived of the sacraments, especially the elderly in more remote villages who can die without access to communion.

Anar Alizade, who handles non-Muslim religious communities at the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in Baku, refused to explain why Georgian Orthodox villagers cannot pray regularly in their churches, including in Kurmukh. "You're not neutral," he told Forum 18 from Baku on 28 January. "Why can't Azeris pray in Nagorno-Karabakh?" he asked, without explaining what this had to do with the Georgian Orthodox in Kurmukh. "I'm a refugee from Karabakh myself." He then said he had no more time and put the phone down.

The authorities' long-running refusal to return the historic Baptist church close to the main railway station in central Baku was one of the topics raised with the State Committee by a visiting European Baptist Federation delegation in mid-January. The dilapidated church building has been used as a cinema, games hall and repair workshop in recent years.

One of those who helped build the church a century ago was the grandfather of the current head of the Baptist Union, Ilya Zenchenko. The Baptist Union has been seeking its return since 1989 so that it can be reopened as a place of worship (see F18News 23 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=694). (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=1192.

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>.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
[f18news @ editor.forum18.org](mailto:f18news@editor.forum18.org)

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY