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AZERBAIJAN: "We have long been after you and now we've caught you!"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Police, the NSM secret police and the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in Azerbaijan have all refused to explain why they raided a peaceful religious meeting. "We never engage in such acts," the NSM secret police told Forum 18 News Service. Officials raided the home of a 78-year old Baptist, church members told Forum 18. Hostile local press and TV coverage – using police material - identified the eight male officials as being from the police, NSM secret police and the State Committee. Also with the eight were two cameramen. One of the police stated: "We have long been after you and now we've caught you!" 12 children were present, listening to Bible stories with their parents' specific permission. Police questioned the children, who cried under the stress of this, but police refused to allow parents to be present or to take their children home. Three Baptists were detained and fined for "illegally spreading Christianity and other faiths". Raids also continue on Jehovah's Witnesses, and the NSM secret police also denied to Forum 18 any involvement in the continued closure of Baku's Abu Bekr mosque. Constitutional changes last month, the State Committee states, will make it easier to crack down on "harmful" religious groups.

Police in the central town of Agdash, near Göycay, have refused to explain why eight officials, including their officers, raided a peaceful religious meeting in a private home in the town on 25 March. The town police refused to discuss the raid with Forum 18 News Service, while the head of the Department for Communications with the Public at the National Security Ministry secret police in the capital Baku, Arif Babaev, denied that his Ministry had been involved. "We never engage in such acts," he told Forum 18 on 1 April. "We don't carry out such operations – this is false information." Told that local press reports quoted the local police as declaring that Ministry officers were also involved in a "joint operation", he repeated his denial.

Babaev also denied that his Ministry is involved in the refusal to allow the Abu Bekr Mosque in Baku to reopen. "It is not within our competence to open or close mosques," he claimed.

Others remain sceptical about the Ministry's blanket denial of involvement in these two cases and other religious freedom restrictions. "Their work is in secret – they never say when they are involved in activity against religious organisations," one commentator who asked not to be identified told Forum 18 from Baku.

As is their custom, officials at the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations refused to speak to Forum 18 on 1 April. Yagut Alieva, the Committee spokesperson, put down the phone four times when Forum 18 introduced itself. The office of the State Committee representative covering the Sheki-Shirvan region, which includes Agdash, also put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 had introduced itself on 1 April.

In the afternoon of 25 March, eight men raided the Agdash home of long-standing Baptist Vera Zhuchaeva, who is in her seventies. Church members told Forum 18 that the seven officers were accompanied by the local official of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations (the only one to identify himself). Also with the eight were two cameramen.

The Baptists told Forum 18 that officers insulted them for their faith. During the raid, one of the police officers told them: "We have long been after you and now we've caught you!"

The Baptists say that parents had been invited to send their children to Zhuchaeva's home to listen to Bible stories over the Novruz spring festival holiday. They say the 12 children were all present with their parents' specific permission.

"The police came in and put all the children in one room," Lilia Hudaverdieva, a visiting member of the Baptist congregation in Baku, told Forum 18 on 1 April. "A police officer, the State Committee official and a teacher questioned the children without allowing the parents to be present, even though some of the children were crying and parents in the homes round about could hear them. They refused to allow the parents to collect their children." Only once they had written down all the children's names did they allow their parents to take them away.

Police confiscated 508 books and 40 film recordings, as well as a player for the recordings. The Baptists insist there was nothing

illegal among the books and films – they point out that many were Hollywood films on Biblical themes.

Hudaverdieva and two other visitors from the Baku congregation, Sara Babaeva and Ofelia Yakulova, were taken to the police station. There they were questioned for four hours and their identity documents were seized. Hudaverdieva said police asked them "provocative" questions, but that she and her friends "told them the exact truth". She said they were not freed until midnight.

The three were told to return the following day to the police station to collect their documents. The police took them to the Prosecutor's Office next door, where they were again insulted for their faith and fined. Agdash District Prosecutor Munis Abuzarli told Forum 18 from the town that the three were found guilty of violating Article 299 of the Code of Administrative Offences for "illegally spreading Christianity and other faiths". He said each was fined 10 Manats (84 Norwegian Kroner, 9 Euros or 12 US Dollars).

Asked how the three Baptists had violated the law, Abuzarli complained that they taught religion to children. "You can't attract children to religious activity," he insisted to Forum 18. Asked why the women had committed an offence, given that the children were present with the specific permission of their parents, he responded: "The law regards this as an offence. If they committed this offence they should be fined in accordance with the law."

Hudaverdieva complained that because banks were not open over the Novruz holiday, police told the three women that they had to hand over the fines to them in cash. "We were given no documents about being fined or any receipt when we paid," she told Forum 18.

She also complained about how the Agdash police presented information about the Baptists' activity to the local media. The raid was shown several times on television, including on the private ATV channel's evening news broadcast on 27 March. A report also appeared on the website of the Azeri Press Agency (APA) on 26 March, which was widely picked up by other news outlets, which said the raid had been a "joint operation" of the Agdash District Police and the Agdash District Ministry of National Security.

Included in the APA report were the ages and full home addresses of Zhuchaeva and the three women from Baku. "This was very unfortunate," Hudaverdieva told Forum 18.

The General Secretary of Azerbaijan's Baptist Union, Elnur Jabiev, went further. "This is dangerous," he told Forum 18 from Baku on 31 March. "Nationalists will know their addresses. The police should not have given journalists this information." Given the refusal of Agdash Police to discuss the raid with Forum 18, it remains unclear whether this was done deliberately to intimidate the Baptists even further. The authorities have often used journalists to intimidate members of religious minorities, including children (see eg. F18News 21 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=590).

Hudaverdieva faced further problems when she returned to work after Novruz. She told Forum 18 that the National Security Ministry had told the parent company of the state-owned firm where she works about her activity in Agdash and the administrative penalty. She said the parent company had contacted her boss, telling him that the company could not have employees who behave in this way. "I was threatened with losing my job," she told Forum 18. "But my own boss is good and I was able to explain to him that this was all slander and tell him what actually happened. I told him I'm no criminal."

Ilya Zenchenko, the head of the Baptist Union, told Forum 18 that leaders from the Baku Baptist church will continue to visit church members in their branch congregation in Agdash.

More raids on Jehovah's Witnesses

The authorities in various parts of Azerbaijan have also frequently raided Jehovah's Witness meetings in recent months. In the afternoon of 22 February in the Garachakhuri district of Baku, some 20 people had gathered in the home of Gyulsira Akchurina, on the 9th floor of a block of flats. About ten police officers came up and started to knock at the door, demanding that it be opened, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. When this did not happen, the police, from the hallway outside the flat, turned off the electricity and gas in the apartment. After two hours the policemen went down one floor and waited there.

In the early evening, when the meeting was over, those present left the flat together. However, the police were waiting for them on the next floor down. They detained and questioned the group for half an hour, after which they were released. When half an hour later Akchurina and Rashida Ismaylova returned to the block of flats, some seven police officers detained them on the 5th floor. "These policemen, some of whom were in a state of intoxication, behaved very rudely, pushed the women and insulted them," Jehovah's Witnesses complained.

One of the officers told the two women he was a representative of the Migration Service. He said the police were there because they had information that foreigners attend these meetings.

The following morning, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18, police arrived at the place of work of Rinat Sadigov, who is not a Jehovah's Witness but whose mother Tamilla Sadigova attended the meeting the previous day. The police took Sadigov as well as

his manager away to the Sabail District police station No. 8, where he was "insulted and hit in the face". The police told Sadigov that he should invite his mother and brother to the police station. Also during the questioning he was asked whether he knows Mushfig Mammedov. Mammedov is a conscientious objector whose case has been filed with the ECtHR. Sadigov was not freed until late afternoon.

On 29 January police raided a Jehovah's Witness meeting elsewhere in Baku, eleven days after a Jehovah's Witness meeting in the village of Sevinj near Gyanja was raided (see F18News 12 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1254).

Continued closure of mosque

Meanwhile, members of the Abu Bekr mosque in Baku's Narimanov District are struggling to try to get the mosque reopened. It was closed by the authorities in the wake of a grenade attack in August 2008 which left several members of the community dead and others injured. Police, the National Security Ministry and the State Committee have said the others ordered it closed (see F18News 29 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1246).

The mosque community's lawyer, Javanshir Suleymanov, says that the investigation into the attack is long over, so no obstacle to reopening the mosque should remain. "It should be allowed to reopen now," told Forum 18 from Baku on 1 April. "They said that it could reopen once the investigation is over, and the National Security Ministry confirmed at the beginning of March that it is indeed over. But a police car and a police post guard the mosque round the clock and it cannot reopen."

Suleymanov said the community lodged its final appeal to the Supreme Court on 30 March over the authorities' refusal to allow it to reopen. On 19 February, Baku's Appeal Court had rejected the community's appeal against a Narimanov District Court decision that the community cannot challenge the closure order. He pledged that if the community loses at the Supreme Court it will take its case to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in Strasbourg.

Officials who answered the phones of Muradali Babaev, the police chief of the Narimanov District, and his deputy Alekper Ismailov told Forum 18 each time it rang on 1 April that neither was there. The duty officer declined comment.

Constitutional changes to crack down on "harmful" religious groups

Amid the Constitutional changes put to a referendum on 18 March were several that touched on religion. Article 18 Part 2 of the Constitution was amended with the addition of "religious tendencies" and now reads "Banned is the spread and propaganda of religions (religious tendencies) degrading the worth of the individual and contradicting the principles of humanity". A new Part 5 was added to Article 48, reading "No one may be forced to express (demonstrate) their religious faith and religious convictions, carry out religious rites or take part in them". The Central Election Commission in Baku claims that both of these amendments were backed by more than 87 percent of those who took part in the referendum, according to its website.

In the run-up to the referendum, state officials claimed these changes would protect religious freedom and would make it easier to crack down on "harmful" religious groups. Elchin Askerov, the deputy head of the State Committee, told the Day.az news agency on 4 March that the amendments would "prevent the activity of destructive so-called religious groups". He did not explain which groups he believes are "harmful", nor how he believes these Constitutional amendments will be used in practice. (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>.

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