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AZERBAIJAN: What is the "Plan to Prevent the Spread of Religious Extremism"?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Azerbaijan's Interior Ministry has issued – but apparently not published - a "Plan to Prevent the Spread of Religious Extremism by Radical Sects", Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Senior Ministry officials have refused to say what is in the Plan, however police in Gyanja have claimed that a raid on a Jehovah's Witness meeting marking their most important festival is part of the Plan. Police insisted that the meeting was "illegal" as the community does not have state registration in the city. Asked why this makes their meeting "illegal", officers – who did not give their names – only repeated the "illegal" claim. It is unclear whether a raid on a Baptist meeting, publishing full names, addresses and birthdates of victims of such raids, and refusal to allow a mosque in the capital Baku to reopen are also linked to the Plan. Human rights defenders and religious communities are especially concerned about officials publicising the personal details of their victims, one defender stating it could be regarded as "a kind of hate speech". No official has been able to explain to Forum 18 how these official actions "prevent the spread of religious extremism".

Three weeks after Azerbaijan's Interior Ministry issued a "Plan to Prevent the Spread of Religious Extremism by Radical Sects", the only known outcome so far has been a 9 April raid on the Jehovah's Witnesses in the country's second city Gyanja [Ganca], Forum 18 News Service notes. It is unclear whether a 25 March raid on a Baptist congregation in the central town of Agdash and the continued refusal to reopen the Abu Bekr mosque in the capital Baku are also linked to the 17 March Plan. In what appears to be a new development, local journalists are publishing the full names, year of birth and full home addresses of victims of such raids, causing concern to religious communities and human rights defenders.

Officers of Gyanja City Police raided the home of local Jehovah's Witness Yegyana Gahramanova on 9 April, the Interior Ministry website stated the following day. Jehovah's Witnesses pointed out to Forum 18 on 15 April that the raid occurred on the day Jehovah's Witnesses mark the Memorial of Christ's death, their most important religious event of the year. Yashar Ismailov, an aide to the head of the City Police, told the local APA news agency on 10 April that the raid was conducted in accordance with the Interior Ministry Plan to Prevent the Spread of Religious Extremism by Radical Sects.

Ismailov of Gyanja Police refused to discuss the raid with Forum 18 on 16 April, how it fitted in with the Plan or his presentation of the raid to the APA news agency. Forum 18 was unable to reach the head of the City Police, Rasim Musaev, on 16 April.

Neither General Emin Shekinsky, head of the Interior Ministry's Criminal Investigation Department, nor Sadig Gezalov, the head of the Ministry's Press Service, were able to explain what is in the Plan or why at least one peaceful religious community has been raided as part of the Plan. "It is for official use only," General Shekinsky told Forum 18 from Baku on 16 April. He claimed not to have seen the Plan, which appears not to have been published. Forum 18 submitted its request for the text of the Plan in writing, but had not received it by the end of the working day on 16 April.

No one at the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations was prepared to talk to Forum 18 on 16 April. As is the Committee's usual custom, the woman who answered the phone of Yagut Alieva, the Committee spokesperson, hung up as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself. Likewise on 16 April, the man who answered the phone of the Committee's official in Gyanja, Firdovsi Kerimov, hung up as soon as Forum 18 had introduced itself.

Raids on the Jehovah's Witnesses have been frequent, with the most recent police raid on 22 February on a meeting in a private home in a Baku suburb. The 25 March raid on a Baptist congregation in Agdash was conducted not only by the local police but by officers of the National Security Ministry (NSM) secret police, although the Ministry in Baku denied this to Forum 18. The Abu Bekr mosque in Baku has been closed by the authorities since a grenade attack in August 2008, despite repeated attempts by the community to have it reopened (see F18News 1 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1277).

The raid on the Jehovah's Witnesses

Gyanja City Police told Forum 18 on 16 April that the Jehovah's Witness meeting they raided on 9 April was "illegal" as the community does not have state registration in the city. Asked why this makes their meeting "illegal", officers – who did not give

their names – repeated that such meetings are "illegal". "We committed no violation," they insisted to Forum 18.

The APA news agency report, which also wrongly described the meeting as "illegal" and wrongly claimed the Jehovah's Witnesses are "banned" in Azerbaijan, said 76 people had been present at the meeting, 39 of them women, 16 of them men and 21 of them children. It said the police are investigating the home owner as well as three other people present and that they have been "brought to administrative responsibility". It said the police gave all the other people present a "verbal warning".

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that none of those present at the meeting has faced any charges under the Code of Administrative Offences or the Criminal Code. "The authorities often claim through the media that charges will follow, but they rarely do."

"Dangerous" publication of personal details

The APA report gave Gahramanova's full name and home address even though she has not been found guilty of any offence, something that the Jehovah's Witnesses say is a new development in such media coverage. "Of course our main concern is that police keep raiding our meetings," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "But publishing individuals' full addresses is a concern and could have consequences for them."

Forum 18 notes that the publication of personal addresses for victims of police and NSM secret police raids on religious communities – even if they have not been found guilty of any offence - appears to be a new trend. In the wake of the 25 March raid on the Baptist community in Agdash, the same APA agency published the years of birth, full names and full home addresses of four of the Baptists present when the home was raided. Unlike the Jehovah's Witnesses in Gyanja, three of the four Baptists whose details were published were fined. Baptists told Forum 18 in the wake of the raid that they were highly concerned that the four individuals' home addresses were given, describing it as "dangerous" (see F18News 1 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1277).

Echoing the Baptist and Jehovah's Witness concerns is human rights defender Eldar Zeynalov, who heads the Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan. "This is very dangerous," he told Forum 18 from Baku on 15 April. "Their neighbours know they are Baptists or Jehovah's Witnesses, but tomorrow if there are campaigns against such religious communities mobs would have concrete addresses to come to and attack." He believes it could be regarded as "a kind of hate speech".

Zeynalov points out that among the Constitutional changes approved in March were a number defending the private lives of citizens, especially the amendments to Article 32. "For the police to give this private information to journalists for them to publish appears to be contrary to government attempts to protect private life," he told Forum 18. He believes this could be grounds for the individuals concerned to bring a case against the police and the media who have published such information. "But they probably wouldn't get very far – local courts refuse to accept lawsuits against officials."

Editors at the APA news agency refused to give Forum 18 the contact details for their local journalists who had published the information about the April raid on the Jehovah's Witnesses and the March raid on the Baptists. "No one is allowed to speak to our individual journalists." However, Nurshan Guliev, APA's editor for political and social issues, insisted to Forum 18 from Baku on 16 April that all the information their correspondent had published on the Jehovah's Witness raid had come from the police. He did not explain why the journalist had not sought comment from the Jehovah's Witnesses and merely republished police information.

Guliev saw nothing wrong in publishing personal information in an article on their website about people, whether or not they have been convicted of any offence. "It's not against the law," he told Forum 18. "They've been accused of wrongdoing." Told that they have not been convicted he responded, wrongly: "Jehovah's Witnesses are banned in Azerbaijan. If they're not registered they're not allowed." Told that no Azerbaijani law prohibits unregistered religious activity and that the Jehovah's Witnesses have registration in Baku, he insisted that they are illegal.

Told that one of the victims has told Forum 18 of her concern about her home details being published and Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses and human rights defender Zeynalov had complained about the practice, Guliev said his agency has received no complaints from those it has named.

Also dismissing concerns was General Shekinsky of the Interior Ministry. He insisted to Forum 18 that police only give out information "in accordance with the law". He added that journalists are independent and the police have no control over what they publish.

Trial to begin of relative of convicted pastor

Meanwhile, a preliminary hearing took place on 14 April in the north-western town of Zakatala [Zaqatala] in the criminal trial against Teyyub Eyvazov, an official of Zakatala District Court told Forum 18 on 16 April. The trial – under Article 234 part 1 of the Criminal Code, which punishes illegal possession of drugs – is due to begin under Judge Elchin Huseinov on 28 April, he added.

Eyvazov is the brother of one of the pastors of a much-persecuted Baptist congregation in the nearby small town of Aliabad. Another

of his relatives, Pastor Hamid Shabanov, was found guilty in February by the same judge at the same court of illegal possession of a weapon under Article 228 Part 1 of the Criminal Code, but is now back at home. Another pastor, Zaur Balaev, also served a prison term from 2007 to 2008 (see F18News 12 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1254).

Church members insisted to Forum 18 that, like the charges against Balaev and Shabanov, the charges against Eyvazov of possessing drugs have been fabricated by the police. "It is 100 percent certain that Teyyub did not have drugs – he is not the kind. He didn't even know what they were."

Teyyub Eyvazov, who has suffered psychiatric difficulties since a family tragedy and is not responsible for his actions, is not himself a Baptist. However, church members strongly suspect that the charges were lodged against him as a way of punishing the congregation. "The authorities wanted to do something against his brother Novruz," one church member told Forum 18 on 12 April. "The other possibility is that this is being done as a way of extracting money."

Eyvazov's lawyer, Mirman Aliev, told Forum 18 from Baku on 16 April that he believes his client is being punished as a relative of Shabanov. "I will be there in court on 28 April to defend his rights."

Aliev added that the same day he will attend Shabanov's appeal hearing at Sheki [Saki] Appeal Court.

The Aliabad church member told Forum 18 that the authorities had said they have an order "from above" to imprison another member of the congregation. However, the official at Zakatala District Court dismissed this suggestion. "There's no order from Baku. This couldn't happen." He claimed to Forum 18 that the cases against Eyvazov, Shabanov and Balaev were all "completely separate" and "unconnected".

Human rights defender Zeynalov doubts if the authorities in Baku would have given the Zakatala authorities any specific instructions against the Aliabad Baptists, but says they are likely to have given a "general instruction" to move against religious minority communities.

Call for mosque reopening

Zeynalov of the Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan also called for the immediate reopening of the Abu Bekr mosque in Baku's Narimanov District. He says that the mosque was widely known as a "Wahhabi" mosque – following the strand of Islam which predominates in Saudi Arabia – and that Wahhabis with a dangerous agenda do exist in Azerbaijan. However, Zeynalov thinks this does not allow the authorities to keep the mosque closed. "I believe it should be reopened at once," he told Forum 18.

The authorities have repeatedly refused to clarify to Forum 18 which agency has ordered the mosque to remain closed and why it should remain closed (see F18News 1 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1277).

Zeynalov also rejects the government's insistence that all mosques must be subordinated to the Muslim Board. "Half the Muslim communities in Azerbaijan are not subject to the Board," he told Forum 18. "They could be closed down at any time." However, Abu Bekr mosque was closed down despite being under the supervision of the Board.

A nationwide "temporary" ban on praying outside mosques, imposed in August 2008, along with bans on some Georgian Orthodox and Baptist churches reopening still remain in force (see F18News 29 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1246). (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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