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AZERBAIJAN: Jehovah's Witnesses deported, Baptist next

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

On 10 September Javid Shingarov, a Baptist from the small town of Yalama in northern Azerbaijan, was fined and ordered deported for hosting religious events in his home. "I fined him – he violated the procedure for foreign citizens to live in Azerbaijan by propagandizing for his faith," police chief Gazanfar Huseinov told Forum 18 News Service. "He invited friends and neighbours for religious events at his home." Shingarov told Forum 18 he was born in Azerbaijan but has a Russian passport. He said Yalama is his only home and is where his wife, two children and elderly father live. "It is 99 per cent certain that they will deport me." In July, two Jehovah's Witnesses – both Georgian citizens - were deported with no documentation for alleged "religious propaganda". One was an ethnic Georgian born and brought up in Azerbaijan, the other an ethnic Azeri, born and brought up in Georgia.

After the deportation of two Jehovah's Witnesses who are Georgian citizens from Azerbaijan in July for "illegal religious propaganda", police on 10 September fined and ordered the deportation of an Azerbaijan-born Baptist from Yalama in the north of the country after accusing him of "illegally propagandizing his faith" in his home. "It is 99 per cent certain that they will deport me, even though this is my only home," Javid Shingarov told Forum 18 from Yalama on 11 September. "They could give me just fifteen minutes notice." Yalama's police chief Gazanfar Huseinov defended the fine and order to deport Shingarov. "I fined him – he violated the procedure for foreign citizens to live in Azerbaijan by propagandizing for his faith," he told Forum 18.

Asked what Shingarov had done wrong, Huseinov declared: "He invited friends and neighbours for religious events at his home." Asked whether these people had attended voluntarily, he admitted that they had. Asked how he had known that religious events had taken place, he responded: "We conducted an investigation. We questioned those who had been there." Asked why this was a matter for the police, he responded: "It's our duty." He described Shingarov as a "religious radical", but refused to explain why he believes this.

As is their usual custom, the officials who answered the telephones of Gunduz Ismailov and Yagut Alieva, spokespersons at the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, hung up as soon as Forum 18 had asked about the deportations and other recent harassment of religious communities.

The deportation orders appear to be part of a growing crackdown by the authorities on a variety of faiths. Numerous Muslim, Protestant and Jehovah's Witness gatherings have been raided and three adherents of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi were sentenced to prison terms of five to seven days in late August (see F18News 14 September 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1348).

The past year has also seen numerous mosques closed down on various pretexts in the capital Baku and elsewhere (see F18News 18 September 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1350).

On 19 August the authorities arrested a Jehovah's Witness, Mushfiq Mammedov, for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience. He is in detention awaiting trial (see F18News 3 December 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1382).

Twice this year the Religion Law has been amended, each time restricting religious activity still further. Under the amendments, all religious communities that have been able to gain state registration will have to undergo re-registration yet again by 1 January 2010.

As many communities have been denied registration so far and as each time re-registration has been imposed since the country became independent in 1991 the process has become more difficult, many communities are likely to be stripped of legal status and more vulnerable to state attacks (see F18News 22 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1330).

Baptist ordered deported

Shingarov, a local Baptist leader in the small town of Yalama close to Azerbaijan's northern border with Russia, was fined and ordered deported after a police raid on his home at 11.10 pm on 9 September. "The police turned everything upside down in my house and accused me of holding illegal books," he complained. He said they confiscated some 300 books, including Bibles and

children's Bibles, as well as DVDs and he was detained.

Shingarov was freed late on 10 September after being held for nearly 24 hours, though police retained his identity documents. He said that without a court hearing he was given the maximum fine of 400 Manats [2,955 Norwegian Kroner, 341 Euros or 498 US Dollars] under Article 300 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes "religious propaganda" by a foreign citizen. As allowed under the Article, Shingarov was also ordered deported as he is a Russian citizen. For reasons he does not understand, police told him that although the fine is 400 Manats, he has to pay 500 Manats. Asked if he will pay, he told Forum 18: "What else can I do? They have my identity documents."

Shingarov added that while he was being held at the police station, he was filmed by ANS television station for a hostile news item about him. "They asked me what the literature was for and where I had got it from," he told Forum 18. "The police summoned the journalist. I could have done without it, but I gave the interview voluntarily." ANS showed the item nationally on the evening of 10 September.

The station has previously given hostile coverage of religious minorities, as have other media outlets, which often join the police or National Security Ministry (NSM) secret police on raids on religious communities (see F18News 1 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1277).

Shingarov was born in Azerbaijan, but has a Russian passport. His wife is an Azerbaijani citizen, as is one of their two children. His elderly father also lives locally.

Baptists say other church members in Yalama are also facing police pressure for their faith.

Police chief Huseinov insisted that Shingarov had been fined 400 Manats but could not explain why police were demanding 500 Manats. He said the written notification of the punishment has not yet been shown to Shingarov, but in any case he will not be given a copy. "He will be allowed to read it."

Jehovah's Witnesses deported

Two Jehovah's Witnesses who are Georgian citizens - Elguja Khutsishvili and Temur Aliev - were deported from Azerbaijan in July, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Neither was given any document authorising the deportation.

The deportation followed a 15 July raid on the family home in Gakh [Kakh], a town close to the border with Georgia which has a large ethnic Georgian population (see F18News 22 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1330).

Elguja Khutsishvili, an ethnic Georgian, was born and raised in Gakh. Later he moved to Georgia where, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, he received a Georgian passport. In 2000 he and his family returned to Azerbaijan. At the moment they have two children and his wife is eight-months pregnant.

When some eight police and NSM secret police officers raided Khutsishvili's home, they demanded that he hand over "the weapons". When he told them he did not have any weapons, he was told to hand over any religious literature. The police entered the house and confiscated all religious literature they could find. The policemen entered also the house of his brother, Givi Khutsishvili, who lives in the same courtyard, and also confiscated all the religious literature (some 45 books and 600 magazines). The police also confiscated the Azerbaijani passports of Tarana Khutsishvili (Elguja's wife) and of Givi Khutsishvili.

Givi and Elguja Khutsishvili were told to come to the police station the next day and from there Elguja Khutsishvili was brought to Prosecutor's Office. Because Khutsishvili does not know Azeri well, he could not understand the documents that the police forced him to sign. Later that day he was brought to the Migration Service in Baku. On 17 July he was taken to Baku's Narimanov District Court, where the judge told him that he had already ruled that he should be deported for conducting "religious propaganda". He was held at the Migration Service without access to his wife or lawyer and deported by aeroplane on 23 July.

Also deported with him was Aliev, an ethnic Azeri from Georgia who has a Georgian passport. He often travelled to Azerbaijan's second city, Gyanja [Gäncä], to sell watermelons, working together with Gyanja resident Vugar Abishev. On 13 July, a police officer came to their workplace and accused them of illegally doing business. Although they were prepared to show they have all the necessary documents, this was ignored and they were taken to the police station. "They were held in terrible conditions, being treated very rudely, being insulted and without any food given to them," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. During their stay the police searched Abishev's home and the place where Aliev was staying and confiscated religious literature they found there.

The following day Aliev was brought to the Migration Service in Baku, where he too was taken to Narimanov District Court, ordered deported for the same reason and was also detained without access to anyone else until his deportation.

Abishev was held by Gyanja police for three days without any explanation, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Police in Gyanja and Gakh refused to discuss the cases with Forum 18.

Nine Jehovah's Witnesses are known to have been deported for what the Azerbaijani authorities insist is "illegal" religious activity in the past three years (see F18News 27 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1179). Protestants and Muslims too are known to have been deported. (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 printer-friendly map of Azerbaijan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=azerba>.

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