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AZERBAIJAN: "KGB methods" used to break up Sunday school

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Local police chief Mukhtar Mukhtarov used "Soviet, KGB methods" in breaking up the Sunday school attached to Baku's Greater Grace Protestant Church on 31 August, one of the church's pastors complained. "Mukhtarov said we do not have the right to teach kids and convert Azeri children," Pastor Fuad Tariverdi told Forum 18 News Service. But Mukhtarov rejected any criticism and blamed the church. "They're acting illegally," he told Forum 18. "There was nothing bad, but this must be done with the permission of the Committee for Work with Religious Organisations." The director of the club where the Sunday school met has told church leaders that he has been threatened that if he lets them in again he will be imprisoned.

Pastor Fuad Tariverdi of the Greater Grace Protestant Church in the capital Baku has accused the local police chief of using "Soviet, KGB methods" in breaking up the children's Sunday school last Sunday, 31 August. "Lieutenant-Colonel Mukhtar Mukhtarov said we do not have the right to teach kids and convert Azeri children," Pastor Tariverdi told Forum 18 News Service from Baku on 2 September. "He asked us to take the kids back to their parents." But Lieutenant-Colonel Mukhtarov, chief of police in Baku's Nasimi district where the church is located, vigorously denied doing anything wrong and blamed the church. "They're acting illegally," he told Forum 18 on 4 September.

The raid came as the Sunday school was almost ending. Pastor Tariverdi said the only children present in a club near the church were the children of church members. "Actually the parents asked us to take care of their children while they sit in the church service," he reported. "We even had written permission from each parent."

He said Mukhtarov had ordered the local police to make sure that the director of the club where the Sunday school is held "never lets us back in again". Pastor Tariverdi quoted Mukhtarov as saying that the church and its members are bad and "should be out of his area".

But Mukhtarov insists all he did was to call the Sunday school leaders to act in accordance with the law. "There was nothing bad, but this must be done with the permission of the Committee for Work with Religious Organisations," he told Forum 18. "They must list all the parameters of what they are doing, all the subjects they are teaching." He brushed aside as irrelevant church claims that all the parents had given written permission for their children to be present.

Mukhtarov then complained that the club where the Sunday school was held "is not designated for such use". But he denied that he had banned the Sunday school from meeting again and insisted he was not "against the church".

Pastor Tariverdi told Forum 18 that the church can no longer use the club, as the director is now too afraid to lend it. "We met him on Tuesday. He's been told if he lets us in he'll be imprisoned." The church does not know where it will take the fifty or so children for the Sunday school from now on.

Pastor Tariverdi claimed Mukhtarov has been "persecuting our church for years". "He always sends people to invite our leadership to talk to him and tries to prove to us that we are wrong, bad, illegal and tries to intimidate us, using Soviet/KGB ways and mentality," Pastor Tariverdi maintained. He said Mukhtarov had even turned up at the church one Sunday – a day when he was not working - and summoned the elders. "The elders have been summoned four times since January – each time without anything in writing."

Pastor Tariverdi believes Mukhtarov hates his church and is abusing his position to push his own private views. "He violates the Constitution of Azerbaijan and human rights, using his power and putting his personal dislikes ahead of Azeri law and government policy."

Azerbaijani officials at all levels have obstructed the work of many minority religious communities, especially Protestant churches which have many ethnic Azeris as members (see F18News 25 June 2003).

The Greater Grace church was registered with the Justice Ministry in 1993. It has been seeking re-registration with the Committee for Work with Religious Organisations for the past two years. "Hopefully we're now at the last stage of this re-registration process,"

Pastor Tariverdi declared.

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