

18 September 2009

AZERBAIJAN: Mosque closed four days before Ramadan ends

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Four days before the feast marking the end of Ramadan, religious affairs official Firdovsi Kerimov and the police closed the only Sunni Muslim mosque in Azerbaijan's second city, Gyanja, claiming it was not registered. Imam Ilham Ibrahimov told Forum 18 News Service the mosque has registration under the old Religion Law and has applied for re-registration under the new Religion Law, for which the deadline is 1 January 2010. He said Kerimov "believes it's his role to control religious communities". He added that police warned that if the community prays on the street they will be arrested. Most of the mosques closed over the last year have been Sunni. Meanwhile, Deputy Police Chief Elman Mamedov denied to Forum 18 that violence was used in breaking up a Baptist children's summer camp near Kusar: "No-one was beaten, no-one was insulted, nothing was confiscated. Do you think we're bandits?" One Baptist told Forum 18: "He's completely lying."

Just days before the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, the authorities in Azerbaijan's second city, Gyanja [Gäncä], suddenly closed a Sunni Muslim mosque which had functioned for the previous 12 years. "We had no warning," the imam Ilham Ibrahimov told Forum 18 News Service from the city on 18 September. "I asked if they could at least hold off until after the end of Ramadan, but they refused." This is the latest in a string of enforced mosque closures on various pretexts over the past year. Meanwhile, police defended the expulsion of a Baptist children's summer camp from a village in northern Azerbaijan but denied absolutely the Baptists' claims to Forum 18 that violence was used. Baptists rejected this. "He's completely lying," one told Forum 18.

As is their usual custom, the officials who answered the telephones on 18 September 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 latest harassment of religious communities.

Gyanja mosque closure

Officials led by local religious affairs official Firdovsi Kerimov arrived at the Juma Mosque in Gyanja's Shahsevenler district mid-morning on 16 September, accompanied by police officers and Nazim Guliev, an official of the Culture and Tourism Ministry. Imam Ibrahimov told Forum 18 that he received a call summoning him to the mosque once the officials had arrived. He found police confiscating all the books they could find, apart from the Koran. "The police just told us the mosque would be closed and they sealed the door."

Imam Ibrahimov said the officials claimed that the mosque had not lodged a registration application, though he told Forum 18 the mosque has registration under the old Religion Law and has applied for re-registration under the new Religion Law adopted this year. This gives a deadline of 1 January 2010 for religious communities to gain re-registration (see F18News 30 June 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1320).

"When we gave the application to Firdovsi Kerimov he told us we should wait – he wanted us to delay the application, I don't know why," Ibrahimov told Forum 18. "He believes it's his role to control religious communities."

Forum 18 was unable to speak to religious affairs official Kerimov on 17 or 18 September. Whoever answered his phone hung up as soon as Forum 18 began to ask about the mosque closure.

The building had once been a Christian church but was closed during the Soviet period. It was then used as a warehouse before being used by the state as the People's Friendship Museum. Guliev of the Culture and Tourism Ministry told the local APA news agency that the building had been handed over for temporary Muslim worship a decade ago, while remaining the property of the Ministry as an ancient monument. "I was given the order to take and seal the building," APA quoted him as saying.

Ismailov of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations told APA that the Juma Mosque community had several times broken the law and not gained registration. He said several warnings had been issued. He also said the people at the mosque did not have the required authorisation from the Muslim Board and that the building belongs to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. He claimed that a "normal mosque community functioning within the law" could function there in future.

Ibrahimov's predecessor as imam, Kazim Aliev, who had been named by the state-approved Caucasian Muslim Board as imam of the mosque in 1997, was arrested in 2002 on charges of organising an armed uprising. His community and human rights defenders insisted to Forum 18 the charges were trumped-up. Sentenced the following year, Aliev was freed under a presidential amnesty in January 2006. On his release, though, the authorities refused to allow him to return to serve the Gyanja mosque (see F18News 10 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=741).

Imam Ibrahimov says he does not know where his mosque community will celebrate the feast of Bayram Ramazan (Id al-Fitr), which marks the end of Ramadan, on 20 September. "We'll apply to the local authorities to allow us somewhere to hold it, but I don't think they'll allow us," he told Forum 18. He said police told him that if they pray on the street they will be arrested. "They said we can pray at home."

Ibrahimov added that his community has no money to engage a lawyer to challenge the closure in court.

Series of mosque confiscations and demolitions

The closure of the Juma Mosque in Gyanja is the latest in a series of state-ordered mosque closures on various pretexts.

Most recently, the Economic Court No. 2 ruled on 31 August that the still unfinished Fatima Zahra Mosque – the only mosque in Baku's Yeni Guneshli residential district – is to be demolished, the community is to be expelled from the site and the land transferred back to the Surakhany District authorities, who had originally brought the suit. The mosque community's lawyer, Rovshan Shiraliev, said it would challenge the court ruling. On 1 September police dispersed a group of demonstrators protesting against the court ruling.

The then mayor of Baku originally gave the mosque community the 30.6 hectare site back in 1996 and construction began in 1998. However, in 2002 the new city mayor, appointed the previous year, decided to take the site back, complaining that the mosque construction had not been completed, and ordered the site be used to build a sports complex. However, after protests the decision was verbally overturned and the community allowed to keep the site and continue building the mosque.

Nevertheless, earlier this year the Surakhany District authorities brought the suit. Officials closed the mosque in mid-June. "The time the community had to complete construction work is over," local police chief Jovdat Mamedov told Forum 18 (see F18News 26 June 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1319).

The Prophet Muhammad mosque in Baku's Yasamal District was demolished in April after officials claimed it had been built illegally. A mosque on the manmade Oily Rocks island in the Caspian Sea was demolished in May after oil company officials and state officials claimed it was unsafe. Muslim activists dispute these claims.

A Turkish mosque in central Baku was closed for restoration in May 2009.

Abu-Bekr Mosque in Baku's Narimanov District was closed in August 2008 after a grenade attack, and officials have repeatedly refused to reopen it, despite repeated attempts by the community to gain its reopening through the courts (see F18News 18 June 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1314).

The community's lawyer, Javanshir Suleymanov, said that in the wake of the failure of their appeal to the Supreme Court in May, the community lodged an appeal to the Plenum of the Supreme Court. He said no response has been received, even though such responses are usually given within 15 days. "I don't know what the delay is, but I'm sure the decision won't be positive," he told Forum 18 from Baku on 17 September. If the eventual Plenum ruling is unsuccessful, the community will then lodge a final appeal to the Constitutional Court. He believes this could rule in the community's favour.

Suleymanov said police still guard the closed mosque to prevent anyone gaining access. He added that community members now have to go to other mosques to pray or meet in private homes.

He declined to speculate on whether the mosques closures and demolitions are linked, but pointed out that Sunni mosques (including the Abu-Bekr mosque) figure prominently among those affected (most Muslims in Azerbaijan are Shia). Asked who had ultimately been behind the closures, he also declined to comment. "My business is only to get the Abu-Bekr mosque reopened and to see the Religion Law applied," he told Forum 18.

Growing concern over mosque closures

On 4 September, in the wake of the court decision to demolish the Fatima Zahra mosque, a new Centre for the Defence of Baku's Mosques held its first press conference, the Baku newspaper Zerkalo reported the following day. Shiraliev, the lawyer for the Fatima Zahra mosque, was among those condemning the closures.

Perhaps in response to this growing concern, Ali Hasanov, a senior official in the Presidential Administration, denied to the APA news agency on 17 September that demolishing "illegal" or "unfinished" mosques represented closure of mosques. He insisted that mosques need permission and must abide by the law. He claimed that suitable "explanations" had been given for the temporary closure of other mosques.

An aide at the Presidential Administration told Forum 18 on 18 September that Hasanov was unavailable all day. "He has made his comments, everything he said is true and we have nothing further to add."

Children's camp broken up with violence

Meanwhile, Council of Churches Baptists complained that in July the authorities broke up the children's Christian summer camp they had planned to hold in the village of Avaran near Kusar [Qusar], close to Azerbaijan's northern border with Russia.

Baptists told Forum 18 that they arrived at the private home of church member Ilgar Mamedov on 23 July and set up the camp in the forest ten metres (yards) from the edge of his land. However, they say that on 25 July, as they were complying with orders from a forest official to move the tents back onto Ilgar Mamedov's land, four cars full of police officers – led by Kusar's Deputy Police Chief Elman Mamedov - "unexpectedly" arrived at the camp.

"Without the approval of the Prosecutor's Office, they searched church members' personal belongings and cars," Baptists complained. Police confiscated CDs and Christian books. "Crudely using physical force and swearing, they forced church members to take down the tents."

One police officer, whose first name the Baptists say was Firuddin, threatened Ilgar Mamedov and the other Baptists present. "He then grabbed 24-year-old church member Pavel Dubrovin by the hair and kicked him in the stomach," they added. "All this happened within sight of young children."

The Baptists say police refused to allow them to put up the tents on church member Ilgar Mamedov's land. "They ordered us out of the whole village," they told Forum 18. They added that they discovered later that the local authorities had given an order not to allow the children to gather.

On 8 September, Ilgar Mamedov was summoned and told that he had been found guilty by an administrative court on accusations that he had allowed too much noise on his land. "This is not true, it's all lies," he insisted to Forum 18 two days later. "They let me read the verdict but refused to let me have a copy." He said he asked them why he had not been summoned for any trial and why no church members who were witnesses were summoned either, but was given no answer.

Ilgar Mamedov said he refused to pay the fine of 17.60 Manats (130 Norwegian Kroner, 15 Euros or 22 US Dollars). "They wanted me to pay the fine as a way of admitting my guilt, but as I was not guilty of anything I refused to pay."

Deputy police chief Elman Mamedov denied absolutely the Baptists' accusations. "It was not a raid," he insisted to Forum 18 on 14 September. "No-one was beaten, no-one was insulted, nothing was confiscated. Do you think we're bandits? We acted in accordance with the law." He said only four police officers had been present and stood on one side while local authority officials dealt with the Baptists.

Asked why - if the Baptists were not allowed to camp in the state-owned forest - they were not allowed to camp on Ilgar Mamedov's own land, the deputy police chief insisted that they had been prevented only from camping on state-owned land.

Other church members told Forum 18 that the approximately 120 children who had been due to attend had no summer camp this year. "All we could do was offer one day out after the camp was banned," one told Forum 18. "All the money we had collected from church members and spent on the camp was wasted."

Baptists and other religious communities continue to face frequent harassment, arrests and other violations of their freedom of religion or belief by the authorities (see eg. F18News 14 September 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1348). (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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