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AZERBAIJAN: Nakhichevan authorities crack down on Ashura commemorations

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Authorities in the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan warned employees of state enterprises and students not to attend mosque during Shia Muslim commemorations of Ashura in December, local human rights activist Malahat Nasibova told Forum 18 News Service. She said she had seen plain clothes police officers turning away young men from a Nakhichevan city mosque. A massive crackdown in the Nakhichevan village of Bananyar the day after the Ashura commemorations saw dozens detained, including some in psychiatric hospital. It is not clear if this was official punishment for their Ashura commemoration or to prevent potential opposition. Parliamentary deputy Ismail Hajiev denied to Forum 18 any crackdown in Bananyar, adding: "All mosques in Nakhichevan are working normally." Nasibova also said three young men who attended the Turkish-built Sunni mosque in Nakhichevan city were detained for 15-days in November and told to go to a Shia mosque instead. Forum 18 notes that small Adventist and Baha'i minorities have already been forced out of Nakhichevan.

The authorities in the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan prevented young men from attending mosques to commemorate the Shia Muslim festival of Ashura on 26 and 27 December 2009, local human rights defender Malahat Nasibova complained. "I was at one of the mosques in Nakhichevan city to mark Ashura and saw with my own eyes young lads being turned away by plain clothes police and told to go home," she told Forum 18 News Service from Nakhichevan city on 21 January 2010. "Most of those present were women or older men." She said that employees of state enterprises had been warned at work not to attend Ashura commemorations, as had students. She added that apart from in a few villages in Nakhichevan, commemorations were confined to mosques and were not allowed on the streets.

Nasibova's comments came amid continuing debate over why the authorities launched a massive crackdown in the village of Bananyar in Nakhichevan's Julfa District on 28 December 2009, the day after some 2,000 villagers had held a mass Ashura commemoration. Many villagers were detained and a number were held for several days in psychiatric hospitals. The village was sealed off by Interior Ministry troops as well as police, the Azerbaijani press reported.

Nasibova - who heads the Democracy and NGO Development Resource Centre - believes the Nakhichevan authorities are trying to prevent crowds from gathering and would have cracked down whether it had been a religious or a political meeting. "This was a violation of freedom of assembly and freedom of religion," she told Forum 18.

The Day of Ashura, the tenth day of the month of Muharram, is for Shia Muslims a day of mourning. The Azerbaijani authorities have banned Muslims from beating themselves with whips until the blood flows and banned the import of whips from Iran and other countries. They have instead organised blood donor sessions at larger mosques.

The Bananyar crackdown

Press reports, as well as Nasibova and Baku-based human rights defender Saadat Bananyarli (whose grandfather was from the village), say police did not intervene during Ashura commemorations on 26 and 27 December 2009. However, on 28 December they arrested about five participants and non-participants and took them to the police station at a nearby village, questioning them about their participation in the Ashura commemoration. Some of those held were beaten, Bananyarli quoted residents as telling her.

Relatives, mainly women, went to the police station trying to find out what had happened to those the police had detained and to call for their release. "They too were intimidated," Bananyarli told Forum 18. Yunis Aliev, the son of one of the detainees, then threatened to douse himself in petrol and set himself on fire. When police told him to go ahead and do so, he did. Relatives and the police then doused the flames, though not before Aliev had sustained serious burns. In early January 2010 he was transferred to a hospital in Tabriz in neighbouring Iran, where Bananyarli said he is recovering and is now able to talk to relatives.

As a number of villagers remained in detention, on the night of 4 to 5 January Interior Ministry troops moved into Bananyar. "It was a punitive measure," Bananyarli told Forum 18. "People were detained, some in their night clothes. If they refused to open the door the troops just broke it down." She estimates up to 150 people were held, with women being freed some three days later and then

most of the men. The village was sealed off.

Nasibova told Forum 18 that about seven of those detained were held in psychiatric hospital. She added that they were not forcibly treated with any harmful drugs and are all now free. She said it is not the first time the Nakhichevan authorities have detained people in psychiatric hospitals as punishment. "We have a custom not to put people in prison but in psychiatric hospital."

After publicity about the crackdown in the Azerbaijani media in early January and a visit to Baku by representatives of the families, who visited the office of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office, the Interior Ministry troops were withdrawn. However, police control of the village remained tight.

Diplomats denied access

Norwegian and American diplomats tried to visit Bananyar on 13 January but, as a statement on the Royal Norwegian Embassy website noted the following day, "a group stopped their vehicle as it entered the village, verbally threatened them and forced them to leave before any contacts with village residents were made". The two embassies called for a full investigation into the incidents in the village.

The heads of the two embassies were summoned to the Foreign Ministry on 15 January, where according to the Turan agency Deputy Foreign Minister Vagif Sadikhov accused their diplomats of violating the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations.

Human rights defender Nasibova said she had heard on 21 January that all but one of the detainees have now been freed.

What was behind the crackdown?

Bananyar was known for its Islamic devotion even during the Soviet period, Bananyarli told Forum 18. Many natives of the village return there during Ashura to be with their families.

Some speculate that local tensions were as much behind the authorities' desire to crack down as religious issues, pointing out that several opposition Popular Front activists - who appear not to have participated prominently or at all at the Ashura commemoration - were detained. Some believe that the crackdown and detentions were timed for Ashura as this was when many people would be present in the village.

But even those who believe the crackdown was motivated by an official desire to suppress potential political opposition or clan rivals point out that this could make villagers afraid to commemorate Ashura or other religious festivals so prominently in Bananyar in future.

Official denials of crackdown and restrictions

Azeri officials denied to Forum 18 that any crackdown had taken place in Bananyar or that Muslims had been pressured or prevented from attending Ashura commemorations in Nakhichevan. "Nothing happened in Bananyar," member of the Azerbaijani parliament from Julfa and member of its human rights committee Ismail Hajiev told Forum 18 from Nakhichevan on 21 January. "Everything is normal there. All mosques in Nakhichevan are working normally." Asked about the mass detentions in Bananyar, he responded: "It's not true. Only journalists said this. A normal person never tells lies."

Forum 18 was unable to reach anyone at the Nakhichevan Interior Ministry on 21 January. The same day, a colleague of Idris Abbasov, head of Nakhichevan's Department for Work with Religious Organisations, said that he was out of the office and that no-one else could answer Forum 18's questions.

The telephone of Ali Alizade, the head of the Nakhichevan Department of Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry, which is located in the exclave, went unanswered the same day. However, an official of the Political Department there, who asked that his name not be given, insisted to Forum 18 that "no-one was arrested because of Ashura". He said an investigation is still underway, but believed the problems were caused by an individual "who had personal problems". The official said foreign diplomats visiting Nakhichevan "are hosted well" and said he did not know what had happened to the Norwegian and US diplomats.

Equally insistent that "nothing happened" in Bananyar is Mirjafar Seidov, Nakhichevan's Chief Mufti since late 2009. "Diplomats and journalists say a lot," he told Forum 18 from Nakhichevan city on 21 January. "Nakhichevan is a good place. The government is very good." He then put the phone down before Forum 18 could ask why the authorities also restricted access to Ashura commemorations elsewhere in the exclave.

The Nakhichevan exception

Nakhichevan - an exclave wedged between Armenia, Iran and Turkey - is an Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan. However, it often appears to operate as an independent entity not subject to control from the government in the Azerbaijani capital Baku even though

its political leader, Vasif Talybov, is a relative by marriage of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliiev.

Human rights defenders and journalists have long complained that Nakhichevan is even more authoritarian and restrictive than the rest of Azerbaijan. Opposition political parties and non-governmental organisations have been crushed or face severe restrictions, while journalists have been harassed.

Religious policy is run locally, not from Baku. Faik Farajov, an assistant to the head of Nakhichevan's Department for Work with Religious Organisations Abbasov, told Forum 18 in December 2009 that the compulsory re-registration required of all religious communities across Azerbaijan in the wake of the highly restrictive new Religion Law does not apply in Nakhichevan. Elchin Askerov, the Deputy Chair of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in Baku, told Forum 18 on 21 January that Abbasov reports directly to Nakhichevan's Supreme Soviet, not to his Committee. He added that he did not know if re-registration is being undertaken in Nakhichevan or not.

The Nakhichevan authorities have cracked down hard on small communities of Seventh-day Adventists and Baha'is. Farajov of Nakhichevan's Department for Work with Religious Organisations told Forum 18 that no non-Muslim communities exist. "The Adventists and Baha'is have all left," he claimed, insisting that "of course" they would be allowed to function (see F18News 21 December 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1389>).

Farajov said the approximately 250 mosques in the exclave are all Shia, with the exception of one Sunni mosque in Nakhichevan city. The Turkish Consulate General in Nakhichevan confirmed to Forum 18 on 21 January that the Sunni mosque had been built with Turkish government funding, "but it belongs to Nakhichevan". One imam from Turkey serves at the mosque "as a missionary sent by the Turkish government", the Consulate General added.

Sunni mosque worshippers imprisoned for 15 days?

Three young men who attended the Sunni mosque in Nakhichevan city were arrested in November 2009 and sentenced to 15 days' detention, human rights defender Nasibova told Forum 18. She said they were probably punished on charges of hooliganism but which were in reality aimed at discouraging them from attending the mosque. "They were told to attend the Iranian [i.e. Shia] mosque instead," she said. "Many people are afraid to visit the mosque now."

Forum 18 has been unable to confirm the detentions independently. The Turkish Consulate General declined to comment. "Even if we had such information we would not comment on it," an official told Forum 18.

The official of the Foreign Ministry Department within Nakhichevan told Forum 18 he had no information on the reported detentions. Parliamentary deputy Hajiev told Forum 18 he had not heard of any detentions. (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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351>.

A personal commentary on the European Court of Human Rights and conscientious objection to military service is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1377>.

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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