

29 September 2003

AZERBAIJAN: Catholics "shocked" by undiplomatic warning

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Fr Daniel Pravda, head of the small Catholic community in Azerbaijan, said he is shocked by the reported warning by the government's senior religious affairs official that he has been conducting "illegal religious propaganda", an offence under Azerbaijani law punishable by deportation. "I don't know what Rafik Aliyev means by propaganda, but all I do is serve our Catholics," Fr Pravda told Forum 18 News Service. According to the local media, Aliyev issued the warning to visiting Vatican foreign minister Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran on 24 September. Forum 18 was unable to reach Aliyev to find out whether he had indeed warned Fr Pravda, if so why he had done so and why Azerbaijani law bans foreigners and people without citizenship from conducting "religious propaganda" in defiance of international human rights conventions.

The head of the Catholic Church in Azerbaijan has expressed his shock over remarks attributed by the local media to Rafik Aliyev, the head of the government's State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, accusing him of engaging in "illegal religious propaganda". "This was a little unexpected," Fr Daniel Pravda told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Baku on 29 September. "I don't know what Rafik Aliyev means by propaganda, but all I do is serve our Catholics." He insisted that everything he has done is in accordance with Azerbaijani law.

Aliyev issued the warning during a meeting with the visiting Vatican Secretary for Relations with States, Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran, in Baku on 24 September. Fr Pravda told Forum 18 that Archbishop Tauran had told him nothing of the apparent warning and that he had only read of it in press articles.

Forum 18 was unable to reach Rafik Aliyev to find out whether he had indeed warned Fr Pravda as reported, if so why he had done so and why Azerbaijani law bans foreigners and people without citizenship from conducting "religious propaganda" in defiance of international human rights conventions to which the country is a signatory. Officials at the State Committee told Forum 18 on 29 September that Aliyev had begun a one-month holiday, and his assistant, Namik Allahverdiev, was not in his office.

The Azerbaijani news agency Trend reported on 24 September that Aliyev had asked Archbishop Tauran for the Vatican "to specify the mandate of its representative in Azerbaijan who is violating the Azerbaijani law on religious propaganda".

Aliyev pointed out that Azerbaijani law allows only Azerbaijani citizens to conduct religious propaganda. "Up till now, he said, several representative offices of foreign religious missions have been closed, but nothing of the sort has happened with regard to the Catholic Church," the agency quoted Aliyev as having told the archbishop. "The Baku government's loyal policy can be explained by its respect for the Vatican, he said." The Interfax-Azerbaijan news agency carried a similar report.

The Trend agency said that Archbishop Tauran promised that "the issue raised by Aliyev would be urgently solved".

The Catholic Church has one registered parish in Azerbaijan – in Baku – with about 200 members. In October 2000 the Vatican upgraded its representation in the country to a "missio sui iuris", which means that it is directly subject to the Vatican. In addition, the Azerbaijani state maintains full diplomatic relations with the Vatican, whose nuncio, Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti, lives in neighbouring Georgia.

Fr Pravda – a Slovak-born Belgian citizen - told Forum 18 he was surprised by the reported remarks because relations between Rafik Aliyev and the Catholic Church have been "very good". "We are grateful that we Catholics enjoy respect, while relations with others – such as Protestants – are not so respectful." He said he and his colleagues – another priest and a monk – have had no indications of any official dissatisfaction with their activity. He believes the press reports of Aliyev's remarks might have been made up by the journalists.

Aliyev has a history of issuing warnings to religious communities through the press. He told Lider television in May that his State Committee was preparing a list of religious organisations which "violate the law", declaring that the Baku-based Greater Grace Protestant Church was "top of the list". "Both the Interior Ministry and the committee have seriously warned the church. If the latest warning does not have any effect, serious measures will be taken." Greater Grace leaders told Forum 18 they never received any complaint in writing and so ignored Aliyev's threats.

In the same interview, Aliyev declared that he would be recalling the more than 600 Azerbaijani students receiving religious education abroad "illegally". He said he would be submitting the list of their names to the Ministry of Education. However, it remains unclear why he believed he had the power to order the students to abandon their studies and return home and whether any attempt was made to enforce his threat.

In a December 2002 interview, also to Lider television, Aliyev claimed that the Jehovah's Witnesses had had their registration stripped from them, although Jehovah's Witness representatives told Forum 18 this is not true and the community is still listed as registered on the State Committee website (www.addk.net).

In defiance of international commitments to free speech and religious freedom, the ban on foreigners and people without citizenship – even if legally resident in the country – from engaging in "religious propaganda" is enshrined in Azerbaijani law, although the term is never defined. "Foreigners and persons without citizenship shall be prohibited to conduct religious propaganda," Article 1 of the religion law declares.

Article 300 of the Code of Administrative Offences punishes such religious propaganda by foreigners and persons without citizenship with a fine of between 20 and 25 times the minimum monthly wage or deportation from Azerbaijan. This article has been used on a number of occasions. Numerous Iranian Muslim clerics, Lutheran pastor Gunther Oborski and some Western Protestant religious workers have been deported from the country in recent years. In the most recent known case Nina Koptseva, a Russian citizen living in Baku by invitation of the Greater Grace Protestant Church, was forcibly deported in April 2002 after being accused of conducting "religious propaganda".

In an apparent move to avoid similar problems the Russian Orthodox hierarch in Azerbaijan, Bishop Aleksandr (Ishchein), renounced his Russian citizenship and took Azerbaijani citizenship in November 2001. (Azerbaijan does not allow dual citizenship.) The Russian-born Bishop Aleksandr only came to Azerbaijan to take up a fulltime position in 1995.

Fr Pravda is among those who believe this ban on "religious propaganda" by foreign citizens and people without citizenship is "not compatible" with internationally-accepted values. "This provision should be abolished," he declared.

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