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AZERBAIJAN: "There is no discrimination" ?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

After Azerbaijan's deportation of a former leader of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Russian citizen Ivan Uzun, and the denial of re-entry to Moldovan citizen Gheorghiy Sobor, Adventists have told Forum 18 News Service they are trying to resolve problems with the government through dialogue. Sobor lives in the capital Baku with his Azerbaijani wife and their three young children. He thinks he may have been denied re-entry as he helped Adventists gain state permission to import books. His wife Aida told Forum 18 that: "Without any court decision and without the possibility for him to respond, they have separated Gheorghiy from his family and children. Such an action contradicts basic human rights and international law at the same time as Azerbaijan considers itself a democratic country". Yusif Askerov of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations claimed that "there is no discrimination". Adventists stress that they have been present in the country for more than a century. An Adventist told Forum 18 that: "We're working to build bridges with the government".

After the deportation on 24 January of the former leader of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Azerbaijan, Russian citizen Ivan Uzun, and the denial of re-entry to Moldovan citizen Gheorghiy Sobor, Adventist leaders have insisted to Forum 18 News Service that they are seeking to resolve the problems with the Azerbaijani government through dialogue. Sobor lives in the capital Baku with his Azerbaijani wife and their three young children. "We're working to build bridges with the government and forge a relationship", an official of the Adventists' Trans-Caucasus Union Mission told Forum 18 from the Georgian capital Tbilisi on 25 January.

Regional Adventist leaders hope a 31 January meeting with officials of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in Baku will at least allow Sobor to be reunited with his family in Azerbaijan. They also hope it will help achieve the long-awaited re-registration of their community, and recognition of the role of the regional Church body in the life of their churches in Azerbaijan.

Adventists stress that they have been present in the country for more than a century. "We have always been well accepted in Azerbaijan," they told Forum 18.

Yusif Askerov, head of the Registration Department at the State Committee, who has been involved in Sobor's case, dismisses any concerns about the way the Adventist Church, and other religious communities in the country, are being treated. "There is no discrimination against the Adventists," he insisted to Forum 18 from Baku on 25 January. Asked why foreigners of any faith legally resident in Azerbaijan cannot take part in religious activity, he responded: "It's the law. It's not we who decided their deportation but the courts."

Sobor has not faced any court proceedings, and Migration Service officials told his wife that the State Committee had identified her husband as someone to be denied entry as a foreign citizen involved in religious activity. An 11 January letter to Baku's Adventist congregation from Ali Merdanov, head of the Department for Countering Illegal Migration of the Interior Ministry's Passport, Registration and Migration Department - seen by Forum 18 - confirms that Sobor was denied entry to Azerbaijan following a State Committee letter identifying him as a foreigner who has conducted "illegal religious activity". When Forum 18 put these points to Askerov, he put the phone down.

Rising number of deportations?

Uzun's deportation is the latest in what appears to be a growing number of expulsions from Azerbaijan to punish foreign citizens – both visitors and legal residents – who exercise the right to freedom of religion or belief. Article 300 of the Code of Administrative Offences prescribes a fine and deportation for foreign citizens who engage in "religious propaganda". However, officials interpret this very broadly, and even foreigners present at religious events risk deportation.

Among people deported from Azerbaijan for exercising freedom of religion or belief in recent years – which include Muslims, Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses - were a number of long-term residents who had foreign passports. For example, Baptist Javid Shingarov (who holds a Russian passport) was cut off from his wife, father and children in his native village near Yalama in northern Azerbaijan when he was deported to Russia in September 2009. The deportation happened as Shingarov held religious worship in his home, and police refused to tell Forum 18 why the decision was not given in writing and why the Migration Service was apparently not involved (see F18News 1 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1357).

Most recently, two Jehovah's Witness visitors – both Georgian citizens – were deported in December 2010 after police raided a meeting in Gyanja [Gäncä] (see F18News 7 January 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1527).

Arrested when worship service raided

Two plain clothes officers from the 16th Police Station, in Baku's Narimanov District where the Adventist church is located, attended the Saturday morning worship service on 22 January 2011, Baku-based Protestants told Forum 18. Uzun was not preaching or leading the service, but as it was his birthday the congregation prayed for him during the service. As soon as he sat down, the two men in plain clothes telephoned their colleagues, two of whom in uniform came to arrest him.

Later that day, Uzun was tried at Narimanov District Court and found guilty of violating Article 300.0.4 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes "religious propaganda" by foreigners or people without citizenship with fines and deportation. Three witnesses were summoned to court, but none testified against him. One witness sent a message that she was ill, while a local resident and a church member separately declined to testify. However, the judge found Uzun guilty. He was not fined but was ordered deported.

The Migration Service held him in detention until 24 January, when they took him direct to Baku Airport. There he was joined by his wife Natalya and their son, both also Russian citizens, and they were put on a plane to Moscow. Uzun's passport was stamped "deported". "All Natalya was able to bring with her was what she could carry," one friend told Forum 18.

An officer of the 16th Police Station of Narimanov District refused to explain why his fellow officers had been sent to raid the church during its worship service. "Ivan Petrovich [Uzun] was sentenced by a court, not by us," the officer – who would not give his name – insisted to Forum 18 on 25 January. He then put the phone down.

Uzun led the Adventist church in Azerbaijan until 2010, when a new leader was chosen. "Police said they had information he had preached at a church service," one Adventist told Forum 18. "It is terrible that foreign citizens can't even preach inside a church."

No reason given for re-entry denial

Denied re-entry to Azerbaijan since 19 December 2010 is another Baku-based Adventist Gheorghiy Sobor. This separates him from his wife Aida and their three children, who are aged 11, 9 and 18 months. As he and his wife separately confirmed to Forum 18, the couple and their elder two children travelled to neighbouring Georgia by car on 24 November. Aida and the two children returned to Azerbaijan on 27 November.

However, when Gheorghiy Sobor tried to re-enter Azerbaijan by car at the Red Bridge crossing point on 19 December, Azerbaijani border guards told him he was denied entry. "This was the first I knew that I had been barred," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 21 January 2011. "They gave me no reason, just saying my relatives would find out in Baku." He said the Georgian border guards had already stamped his passport to leave Georgia, but they cancelled the exit stamp so that he could remain in Georgia. "Thank God Georgia retains respect for international law and individuals' dignity as human beings."

Sobor – a Moldovan citizen who completed a law degree in his home country - told Forum 18 he has lived in Azerbaijan with legal registration since 1995, initially working for the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA). He married Aida – an Azerbaijani citizen - in 1998. In the past decade he has earned his living in building work. He says that in his spare time, he has helped in his Baku church, particularly on the upkeep of the building and on filling in forms, given his legal education, but is not the pastor.

Sobor believes he may have come to the attention of the State Committee as he helped the Baku congregation gain the necessary permission from the State Committee to import Christian books for the internal use of the congregation. His name was put on the parcels.

Under Azerbaijan's harsh religious censorship laws, all religious literature published in or imported into the country requires specific approval – both of the content and the quantity – from the State Committee (see F18News 24 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1259). Religious literature – whether approved by the State Committee or not – is often confiscated during raids (see eg. F18News 12 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1420).

Plea for family reunification

Both Gheorghiy and Aida Sobor are urging the Azerbaijani authorities to allow him to return to his family. "My children are crying and my mother-in-law is old and infirm," Gheorghiy told Forum 18. Aida echoed his words. "Without any court decision and without the possibility for him to respond, they have separated Gheorghiy from his family and children. Such an action contradicts basic human rights and international law at the same time as Azerbaijan considers itself a democratic country."

Since the denial of entry, Aida Sobor has written appeals to various state agencies, including the State Migration Committee and the Interior Ministry Department of Passports, Registration and Migration, as well as the State Committee and the Presidential Administration.

On 28 December 2010 she tried to meet Hidayat Orujev, Chair of the State Committee, but waited from 9 am to 2 pm without being given a meeting. However, as Orujev was leaving his office they met on the stairs, she told Forum 18. "He accused my husband of being a missionary and said he would not be allowed to return. Then I burst into tears. He responded: 'See what your Christian religion does to you'", Aida Sobor recounted.

She added that officials of the Interior Ministry Department of Passports, Registration and Migration had told her that the State Committee had informed them that her husband was a missionary and should not be allowed to remain. They said that if the State Committee said he could re-enter the country, they would allow him in. They added he has been denied entry for five years, although nowhere has this been given in writing.

Aida Sobor told Forum 18 that she has an appointment on 28 January to meet an aide to Mehriban Aliyeva, a parliamentary deputy and wife of President Ilham Aliyev. She said she hopes the president's wife will be able to help reunite the family.

Interference in family life

Gheorghiy Sobor complained to Forum 18 that a number of Interior Ministry officials have asked his wife inappropriate questions, such as: When did you meet your husband and in what circumstances? Why did you marry a Christian? Why did you become a Christian? Are all your children his children? "This is clear interference in our personal lives."

Raids increasing

The raid on the Baku Adventist congregation came as police appear to be stepping up raids on and threats to religious communities for holding worship services without state registration.

Azerbaijan appears to be increasing raids on and threats to religious communities for worshipping without state permission. There were police raids in December 2010 on the Adventist congregation in Sumgait and a Jehovah's Witness meeting in Gyanja, both of which were followed by fines. The same month an imam near Baku received threats that he would be imprisoned if his mosque continues to hold prayers. In mid-January 2011 a Protestant in northern Azerbaijan was fined three weeks' average local wages for leading unregistered worship at a service raided by police in November 2010. Police watch outside private homes in Gyanja where members of a Sunni mosque forcibly closed in September 2009 meet in small groups for prayers (see F18News 24 January 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1531).

Increased fines for exercising freedom of religion or belief

Azerbaijan has also increased penalties for exercising the internationally-recognised right to freedom of religion or belief. Amendments to increase fines under two Articles of the Administrative Code that create offences for exercising freedom of religion or belief – Article 299 and Article 300 - were signed into law by President Aliyev in December 2010. "These Articles punish what can be considered as normal religious activity," Eldar Zeynalov, head of the Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan, told Forum 18. He said that the increased fines are "massive", and those fined, especially those without access to higher-paid work, will struggle to pay them. Zeynalov also warned that finding defence lawyers for those accused could be difficult. (END)

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.

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.

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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