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AZERBAIJAN: Schoolboy prayer ban leads to two-day prison sentence

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Boys of school age were prevented from attending Friday prayers at the Juma Mosque in the central town of Yevlakh on 21 January, local Muslims complained to Forum 18 News Service. Barring entry was a town administration official and the head teacher of a local school, but both refused to explain to Forum 18 why they had done so. A young man, Elvin Mamedov, was given a two-day prison sentence for failing to abide by police orders after he protested against the local police officer forcing entry into the home of a father who had defied the ban and taken his son to pray. Meanwhile, Seventh-day Adventist Gheorghiy Sobor was allowed to return to his family and home after being barred for eight weeks from returning to Azerbaijan. A Moldovan citizen, he and his wife have been required to pledge in writing that he will not conduct religious activity. "Of course we are not happy about this," Aida Sobor told Forum 18. "It's like living without an arm or a leg."

A town administration official and several teachers – including a school head teacher - prevented schoolboys from attending Friday prayers at the mosque in the central Azerbaijani town of Yevlakh [Yevlax] on 21 January, local Muslims who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 News Service. After one parent insisted on taking his son in, the local police officer came to his flat and broke his way in. A young man present - Elvin Mamedov – complained about the forced entry and was then sentenced to two days' imprisonment. Meanwhile, Gheorghiy Sobor, a Seventh-day Adventist banned from re-entering Azerbaijan to punish him for his religious activity as a foreign citizen, has been allowed to return, but has been banned from further religious activity.

The moves come as a fine has been imposed in her absence on a Jehovah's Witness in the north-western town of Gakh [Qax] to punish her for religious activity (see F18News 21 February 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1543), and imprisoned Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Farid Mammedov has had his Supreme Court challenge to the sentence rejected (see F18News 22 February 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1544).

No one at the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations was prepared to discuss with Forum 18 why schoolchildren were prevented from attending Friday prayers at Yevlakh's Juma Mosque on 21 January or why Gheorghiy Sobor's religious activity is restricted.

Schoolchildren banned from praying?

Ahead of Friday prayers on 21 January, an official of Yevlakh town administration, Hasan Abdullaev, and the Director of School No. 7, Rashad Asadov, and several of the school's teachers stood outside the town's Juma Mosque. They tried to prevent any boys of school age from joining the prayers and wrote down names of those trying to do so, local Muslims complained to Forum 18. (Women do not attend.) One parent however, Arif Yunusov, was there with his 15-year-old son Parvin, and refused to heed their ban on children entering. They went through so that the two could join the prayers.

Local Muslims say the school day finishes somewhere between 12 noon and 1 pm, while prayers start at 1.15 pm. They insisted to Forum 18 that as they are outside school hours, boys should be free to attend.

On 26 January, the local police officer Kurban Kasimov came to Yunusov's home, but as he was not there those present – including the 20-year-old Elvin Mamedov - refused to open the door. They told Kasimov to come back 15 minutes later when he would be back. However, the officer banged on the door, breaking the lock, and two police officers rushed in, shouting at those present about why they had not opened the door.

Those present in the flat then wrote a complaint against the police officers, and Mamedov wrote a statement that the police had broken the lock and forcibly entered the home.

Two-day prison term

Police came to Mamedov's home on the morning of 4 February, summoning him to give testimony. He went with his father Nazar, who waited outside the police station for some three hours. After Friday prayers, the father was told that his son had insulted police officer Kasimov and failed to abide by his instructions. Elvin Mamedov had been taken to Yevlakh District Court and given a two-day prison term under Article 310.1 of the Code of Administrative Offences (refusal to submit to police orders).

Local Muslims told Forum 18 that Mamedov had recorded officer Kasimov on his mobile phone warning that if he failed to retract his earlier testimony that the officer had broken the lock on the door, Kasimov would testify that Mamedov had broken the law and "get him locked up".

Officials refuse to discuss complaints

Both school director Asadov and town administration official Abdullaev refused to discuss the Muslims' complaints. Reached on 15 February, Asadov put the phone down after Forum 18 asked why he had stood outside the mosque to block school-age boys from attending. Reached the following day, Abdullaev handed the phone to an assistant, who told Forum 18: "This can't have taken place – you must be mistaken." When Forum 18 repeated its questions, the man responded: "Maybe it was someone else." He refused to answer any other questions.

Police officer Kasimov refused to discuss with Forum 18 on 16 February why he had broken the lock on the door and why he had threatened Mamedov.

Only one mosque

The Juma Mosque, located in the centre of Yevlakh, is the town's only mosque. Local Muslims told Forum 18 that it was built in 1995 with financial support from the Turkish government's Diyanet (Presidency of Religious Affairs), and handed to "the people" when complete. They say it is a Sunni mosque, but is also used by Shias, who hold their separate prayers there.

Local Muslims complained to Forum 18 that although the town has a population of some 65,000, no other mosques have been built. They also complained that the town mayor, Elmar Valiev, has repeatedly tried to take away some of the mosque's land to use for new commercial buildings.

"He took some of the land last year, claiming the mosque did not need it, but after protests he backed away from this," one local Muslim – who asked not to be identified – told Forum 18 from Yevlakh on 19 January. "But this is not resolved. The mayor is still pledging to do so." The Muslim added that the mosque is not allowed to broadcast the azan, the call to prayer.

Forum 18 was unable to put these complaints to Abdullaev of the town administration or his assistant. No other official either was prepared to discuss them.

However, local Muslims told Forum 18 that no attempt was made to prevent school-age boys attending Friday prayers since 21 January.

Hijab protests

Protests have taken place on the streets of the capital Baku, Azerbaijan's second city Gyanja [Gäncä] and elsewhere since an announcement on 9 December 2010 by Education Minister Misir Mardanov that girls should abide by a compulsory new school uniform that allows no possibility to wear the hijab head covering worn by some Muslim women.

Radio Free Europe reported on 23 December 2010 that hundreds of girls are believed to have stopped attending school in defiance of the ban. "I'll never give up my hijab," RFE quoted Vusala Quliyeva, an 11th-year student in Baku. "They haven't shown us any official papers restricting our head scarves. I don't understand their verbal instructions, and I can't follow their order."

A 13 January Cabinet of Ministers Decree confirming the Model Statute of Schools affirms that all schools must be secular, bans activity of religious organisations in them and confirms the standard school uniform.

On 28 January, Interior Minister Ramil Usubov told the "Azerbaijan" newspaper that the imposition of a single uniform for schoolchildren was right for a "secular, civilised society". "Those [parents] who wish their daughters to cover their head can make them do so outside school, in every day life and at home," he maintained.

Despite the many restrictions on freedom of religion and belief in Azerbaijan, Usubov declared: "In our country there are no restrictions on a member of any faith from conducting any religious rituals of their faith or the wearing of [religious] clothes. In this sense, our women and girls freely use headscarves, the wearing of which is not subject to any ban."

Adventist returns

Meanwhile, Seventh-day Adventist Gheorghiy Sobor has returned to his home and family in Baku, eight weeks after being denied re-entry to Azerbaijan, as he told Forum 18 from Baku on 15 February. Sobor, a Moldovan citizen who is married to an Azerbaijani citizen, with whom he has three young children, has lived in Azerbaijan since 1995. However, he was suddenly barred from re-entry on 19 December 2010 for conducting religious activity. Under Azerbaijani law, and in defiance of the country's international human rights commitments, religious activity by foreign citizens is illegal.

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" (see F18News 26 January 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1533).

Sobor – who had been denied re-entry on the border from Georgia – was able to cross the same border by car on 11 February and drive back to Baku. "My children cried with joy on my return," he told Forum 18. "Our children had lost hope of my return." He said he had written letters of thanks to various state officials.

Sobor's wife Aida told Forum 18 on 15 February that she received a telephone call from the Interior Ministry's Migration Service on 9 February telling her that her husband could return to the country. She believes the official change of heart came after she had a meeting with aides to Mehriban Aliyeva, a member of parliament and wife of President Ilham Aliyev, as well as after publication of the case by Forum 18.

Gheorghiy Sobor is now preparing all the documents he needs to apply for Azerbaijani citizenship, something officials have now told him they will consider.

But with no right to conduct religious activity

However, while Sobor is allowed to resume living in Azerbaijan, State Committee officials Gunduz Ismailov and Yusif Askerov told him in a meeting on 14 February that – as a foreign citizen – he is not allowed to conduct any religious activity. "When I asked them what this meant I could and could not do, they told me verbally that I can attend church services, but can't engage in any preaching," Sobor told Forum 18. He said he asked them to explain this in writing and is awaiting the State Committee's letter.

Aida Sobor was also required to write to the Migration Service to declare that her husband would not take part in religious activity.

"Of course we are not happy about this," Aida Sobor told Forum 18. "It's like living without an arm or a leg, as they say here. I hope my husband will get Azerbaijani citizenship so that he will get full rights, including to religious freedom." (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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