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AZERBAIJAN: "True believers aren't concerned"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

As yet a further mosque is reported closed, parliamentarian Fazil Gazanfaroglu Mustafaeu complained to Forum 18 News Service of the continued enforced closure of places of worship. He cited the Turkish mosque near parliament where he regularly prayed, whose 2009 closure he termed "unfounded". Local Muslims told Forum 18 officials in Qobustan closed and sealed their mosque on 4 March with no explanation. They said denials to Forum 18 from Administration and local police officials were lies. Members of the only Sunni mosque in Azerbaijan's second city Gyanja are continuing their campaign to have it reopened, though the city's Administration chief told them it was not his business. Baku's Baptists are renewing their campaign for the return of their church ceremonially opened exactly a century ago but confiscated during Soviet rule. Rabiyyat Aslanova of Parliament's Human Rights Committee admitted mosques have been closed, but told Forum 18 that "true believers aren't concerned about this".

Rabiyyat Aslanova, Chair of the Human Rights Committee of Azerbaijan's Parliament, the Milli Mejlis, has dismissed concerns about the government's refusal to allow the reopening of mosques and other places of worship it has closed. "Some mosques have been closed, but true believers aren't concerned about this," she told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Baku on 5 April. "Muslims can pray anywhere, let them go to other mosques or pray at home.", the deputy from the ruling New Azerbaijan Party said. Members of several mosques have told Forum 18 they have requested the reopening of their mosques in vain, while Baptists told Forum 18 they are seeking permission to hold an Easter service in their century-old church in central Baku that they have long sought to regain.

However, Aslanova's fellow deputy Fazil Gazanfaroglu Mustafaeu of the opposition Great Formation Party insists that the continued enforced closure of places of worship is wrong. "Preventing the holding of religious rituals in places of worship should stop," he told Forum 18 from Baku on 5 April. "There should be no delay in their reopening."

Deputy Aslanova's comments come amid reports of a further mosque closure in early March in the town of Qobustan (Maraza), west of Baku, though local officials vehemently denied this to Forum 18.

No one from the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations was available to discuss the refusal to allow various religious communities to reopen their closed places of worship.

Unlike members of the closed mosques, Rahima Dadasheva, spokesperson for the state-backed Caucasian Muslim Board, appeared not to be too concerned by their closure. "Of course we want there to be more mosques and we want all mosques to be open," she told Forum 18 from Baku on 5 April. "But we want them to be legal. The trend is in the right direction."

Tight state controls

Azerbaijan imposes tight controls on all its religious communities. It has banned unregistered religious activity, in defiance of its international human rights obligations. At the same time it has so far failed to re-register many religious communities that applied for compulsory re-registration by the deadline of the end of 2009. Only mosques under the Caucasian Muslim Board are allowed to seek registration. Many mosques, Baku's Catholic community, and all Baptist, Adventist, Pentecostal and Jehovah's Witness communities remain in an uncertain legal position without the necessary re-registration (see F18News 7 April 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1559).

Muslims, Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses are among communities to face police raids, threats and fines for unregistered religious worship (see e.g. F18News 24 January 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1531). In one recent incident, two bus loads of riot police and ordinary police were used to stop Protestants worshipping. They are among three religious communities in Azerbaijan's second city Gyanja [Gäncä] who were in March banned from meeting for worship (see F18News 8 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1560).

New mosque closure?

Officials in the town of Qobustan tried to close the town's Juma Mosque on Friday 25 February, but community members managed

to get in to pray, local residents who asked not to be identified told Forum 18. The following Friday, 4 March, officials from Qobustan Regional Administration came and sealed the mosque before prayers began, telling local Muslims that this had been done on the orders of Administration Head Ismail Veliev. Officials refused to give any reason for their action, residents told Forum 18. However, they attributed the closure to officials' concern that Muslims gathering in the mosque could become involved in public protests.

After news of the closure, a photo of what local people said was the seal on the mosque door and a video of about 15 men praying outside in the snow was posted on the website of the opposition newspaper Azadliq on 4 March, police and the local Prosecutor's Office began hunting those who had provided the information, residents told Forum 18. "The police chief told people that if anyone gives further information about the mosque closure to the newspapers he will arrest them."

The Juma Mosque was built in 1994 and is under the jurisdiction of the Muslim Board. It appears on the current list of religious organisations registered with the State Committee. Forum 18 was unable to reach the mosque's imam, Haji Dergah.

Qobustan's other mosque is the Heydar Aliyev Mosque, named after Azerbaijan's late President. "Some believers won't go to pray there, because they believe that a mosque is the house of God, and should never be given the name of a political leader," one resident told Forum 18.

Officials deny mosque closure

However, officials totally denied that they had closed any mosque in Qobustan. "Both mosques in the town are functioning normally, as well as the Christian Molokan prayer house," Avtandil Ashikarov of the Culture, Sport and Health Department of Qobustan Regional Administration insisted to Forum 18 on 4 March. "Ismail Veliev gave no such order to close a mosque. The local authorities don't have the right to intervene in the affairs of religious organisations, so it could not have happened."

Similarly an officer of Qobustan Regional Police – who would not give his name or rank – denied any mosque closure. "No mosque has been closed or sealed. It's a lie – you've been given false information," he told Forum 18 on 5 April.

Dadasheva of the Caucasian Muslim Board told Forum 18 that after reading about the closure in the paper she had consulted a colleague, who did not confirm the closure. "As far as I know there is no problem there."

However, local residents insisted to Forum 18 the same day that the Juma Mosque remains sealed. They said police and Prosecutor's Office officials continue to harass local Muslims, who are preparing to launch public protests over the closure.

Gyanja's Sunni mosque remains closed

Members of the only Sunni mosque in Gyanja, known as the Albanian Mosque, have seen "no movement" in their campaign to achieve its reopening, community member Vidadi Abbasov told Forum 18 from city on 4 April. "The only hope we have is what God gives."

The Mosque – which opened in 1995 – was suddenly closed by the authorities in 2009 without explanation (see F18News 17 September 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1350). Mosque members are now forced to pray in small groups in private homes, though under often close police surveillance (see F18News 24 January 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1531).

Abbasov told Forum 18 that the Mosque building was given to the Culture Ministry for use as a library, though he said it has not yet opened.

But Rufat Nuriev, head of the Cultural Heritage Department at the Culture Ministry in Baku, denied that the building is in its hands. "The building was used illegally for religious purposes in the 1990s," he insisted to Forum 18 on 5 April. "We don't know who these people were and the community didn't have registration." He said the building is in the hands of the city Administration, which is in charge of establishing the library there.

Abbasov said that after earlier letters to President Ilham Aliyev, the State Committee, and the head of the Caucasian Muslim Board Sheikh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade failed to secure the building's return for worship, the community has continued its campaign. He said it has put its case to the new Head of the city Administration, Elmar Veliev, appointed in February 2011. "He told us the issue was not his business," Abbasov lamented to Forum 18.

Also in Gyanja, riot police have been used to stop Protestants worshipping. They are among three religious communities in the city banned in March from meeting for worship (see F18News 8 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1560).

Baku's Turkish mosque remains closed

Opposition parliamentary deputy Gazanfaroglu complains about the continued closure of the Martyrs' Mosque, built at Turkish government expense in the 1990s close to Azerbaijan's parliament. "I used to pray there regularly until it was closed in 2009," he told Forum 18. "Its closure is unfounded." He said claims that the building is being renovated are untrue. "I can't see any repairs underway." He called for its reopening.

The Mosque was along with other mosques targeted by a 2008 "temporary" ban on praying outside all mosques in the country, which still continues (see F18News 18 September 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1188). It was subsequently closed (see F18News 17 September 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1350).

However, government parliamentary deputy Aslanova insists that the closure was ordered on the grounds of safety because of the danger of landslides underneath the building. "Permission should never have been given to build on that site," she claimed to Forum 18.

Dadasheva of the Caucasian Muslim Board insisted to Forum 18 that the issue of the mosque lies in the hands of the state, not her Board.

Baku's Abu-Bekr mosque remains closed.

Members of Baku's Abu-Bekr mosque – hit by a grenade attack in August 2008 that killed several people – have rejected state claims that it remains too dangerous to reopen the mosque. The community has made repeated efforts to return to their Mosque (see eg. F18News 16 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1284). "Officials keep the mosque closed and won't say when it might reopen," the community's lawyer Javanshir Suleymanov told Forum 18 from Baku on 4 April. "We don't know which government agency is holding this up."

A court ruling in 2009 that the Mosque should be allowed to reopen was overturned (see F18News 17 September 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1350). After this, Suleymanov said, the community lodged a complaint to the United Nations Human Rights Committee (see F18News 17 September 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1350). The Committee has sought and received further documentation backing up the complaint, but has not yet issued a ruling, the lawyer added.

Suleymanov added that the mosque's imam Gamet Suleymanov (no relation) lodged a case against the Azerbaijani government to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in Strasbourg (Application No. 16599/09) over its failure to recognise anyone as victims of the attack. The Court told Forum 18 on 5 April that it registered the case on 13 March 2009, but that no admissibility decision has yet been taken.

Parliamentary deputy Gazanfaroglu is among those who insist that "there should be no delay in reopening the Abu-Bekr Mosque".

When will promised mosque completion begin?

Although building work at the Fatima Zahra Mosque in Baku's Surakhani District remains at a standstill, community leader Tofiq Razizade remains optimistic that the state will resume the building work, complete the mosque and allow it to reopen for worship. "If the state promised that it will complete the rebuilding, we believe it will fulfil its promise," he told Forum 18 from Baku on 4 April.

After mass protests against the proposed demolition of the half-finished mosque and a ban on Friday prayers there, President Aliyev ordered in May 2010 that it be handed over to the Caucasian Muslim Board for completion and reopening. Salman Musayev, the Board's deputy head, estimated to Forum 18 the same month that completing building work and reopening the mosque would be a question of "several months" (see F18News 27 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1451).

Razizade told Forum 18 he does not know when building will resume. He said only the guards and a handful of people pray inside the half-finished building on Fridays "so that there will not be problems", an apparent allusion to police intervention to prevent large numbers of people praying there in late 2009 when the Surakhani authorities ordered its closure and destruction.

Dadasheva of the Muslim Board told Forum 18 that the state had promised that the Fatima Zahra Mosque would be handed to it as soon as building work was completed. "The question will be resolved at a state level. I'm sure when it takes it on it will be done quickly."

No one at the Surakhani District Administration was available on 5 April to explain to Forum 18 when rebuilding will begin.

Baptists seek historic church return

Baku's Baptist community has requested permission to hold an Easter service at its historic church on the central Azadlyq street on Sunday 24 April as they await a decision on whether it will be returned. The community has been seeking the return of its church –

closed during the Communist period and which has been used in recent decades as a cinema, a games hall and is now being turned into a theatre – since 1989. The church was ceremonially opened exactly 100 years ago in 1911 (see F18News 29 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1246).

The Baptist community has renewed its appeals for the return of the church, writing in October 2010 to President Aliyev and to Hidayat Orujev of the State Committee, in December 2010, January 2011 and February 2011 to the Culture Ministry. "We want it back because it is God's house, a holy place," the head of the Baptist Union Ilya Zenchenko told Forum 18. "It offends our feelings that the church our grandparents built has not been returned."

The Baptists asked to be allowed to hold a Christmas service there, but this was refused, Zenchenko added. He said he hopes that permission for the Easter service there will be granted.

Nuriev of the Culture Ministry told Forum 18 he had never heard that the building was once a church. "No Baptist church is registered, so no application from them for the building can be considered." He declined to say whether it was just that places of worship seized from religious communities by the Communist regime had not been given back. He said the building does not belong to the Culture Ministry but to the State Property Committee.

Parliamentary deputy Gazanfaroglu said he was not aware that the building had been built by the Baptists. "But if it was built for religious purposes it should be returned," he told Forum 18.

Will Lutherans return to historic Kirche?

Another historic church building in central Baku is the century-old German Lutheran church, known as the Kirche. Currently in the hands of the Culture Ministry, the Lutheran ErlÃ¶sergemeinde congregation was forced to leave in 2010 when it was closed for renovation. The building was ceremonially reopened after extensive renovation on 26 December 2010.

However, so far it remains unclear when the Lutheran congregation will be allowed to return. "Our last service in our historic church was on Easter Sunday 2010," one church member told Forum 18. "We're looking forward to being allowed to resume our worship there soon."

Among Protestant churches, only a few have been re-registered and so given legal status. These include Baku's ErlÃ¶sergemeinde Lutheran community, three Molokan communities in Baku, Sumgait and Hilmilli, as well as New Life Church in Baku (see F18News 10 December 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1520).

Georgian Orthodox denied historic property

Georgian Orthodox Christians in the north-western Gakh Region, which borders Georgia, have in the past complained about the authorities' refusal to allow them to regain historic Georgian Orthodox churches in local villages (see F18News 29 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1246). (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 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 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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