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AZERBAIJAN: Another Sunni mosque disappears, heavy fines feared

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

After Turkish imam Ahmet left the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan in February, the Sunni Juma Mosque was taken over by the Shia community, leaving local Sunni Muslims nowhere to pray in the way they wish, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Forum 18 has been unable to establish whether the imam was forced to leave by the Nakhichevan authorities, or whether he left on completion of his term. Turkish diplomats refused to say. "No new appointment [of a Turkish imam] has yet been made, and we don't know when that will be," one told Forum 18. Meanwhile, two Jehovah's Witnesses face possible heavy fines for religious activity after religious literature was seized from their homes. Police and secret police joined the local Religious Affairs official to raid one. A Nursi reader had a Koran seized and faced police questioning in Mingechaur.

The only Sunni mosque in Azerbaijan's autonomous republic of Nakhichevan [Naxçıvan] has been taken over by Shia Muslims after the departure from the exclave of the mosque's Turkish government appointed imam in February, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Most of the mosques closed by the government in recent years have been from the minority Sunni Muslim community. Meanwhile, raids continue on readers of the works of the late Muslim theologian Said Nursi, as well as on Jehovah's Witnesses. Two Jehovah's Witnesses face possible heavy fines.

All religious communities in Azerbaijan remain under tight government control or surveillance. Harsh new amendments were adopted to the Religion Law in 2009 as well as new or increased punishments for religious worship without state authorisation, spreading one's faith or for distributing religious literature that has not passed through the compulsory prior government censorship.

Those religious communities which had been able to gain state registration had to undergo re-registration once more, a process that has left – on state figures – some 300 religious communities still waiting – and thus at risk of raids and possible punishment for continuing to meet for worship. Officials at the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in the capital Baku have insisted to Forum 18 they are trying to "help" religious communities (see F18News 7 April 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1559).

In March, three religious communities in Azerbaijan's second city Gyanja [Gäncä] were banned from continuing to meet for worship because they are not registered. At least one - Star of the East Pentecostal Church – had a visit from the police and riot police to prevent them from worshipping (see F18News 8 April 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1560).

Tight Nakhichevan controls

Nakhichevan - an exclave wedged between Armenia, Iran and Turkey which is an autonomous republic of Azerbaijan – has particularly tight controls on all religious activity.

The National Security Ministry (NSM) secret police in Nakhichevan detained six Nursi readers in May 2010, holding four of them for three days without trial. Books by Nursi were confiscated. The exclave's authorities have long had a de facto ban on religious activity by non-Muslim communities. Small groups of Baha'is, Seventh-day Adventists and Hare Krishna devotees were banned from meeting several years ago (see F18News 20 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1447).

The Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic Department for Work with Religious Organisations, which answers to the Nakhichevan government, not to the State Committee in Baku, insisted to Forum 18 in December 2009 that no re-registration requirement exists there (see F18News 21 December 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1389).

Sunni imam's departure

A Turkish diplomatic official, speaking to Forum 18 on condition of anonymity as someone not authorised to speak to the media, confirmed that Imam Ahmet had left Nakhichevan in February. He had been appointed by the Turkish government's Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyamet) and had served as imam of the Juma Mosque in Nakhichevan city.

Forum 18 has been unable to establish whether the imam was forced to leave by the Nakhichevan authorities, or whether he left on completion of his term. The Turkish diplomatic official refused to say. "No new appointment [of a Turkish imam] has yet been made, and we don't know when that will be," the diplomatic official added.

However, Forum 18 has learnt that a Shia imam has already been appointed to the mosque, leaving no Sunni place of worship left in Nakhichevan.

The Juma Mosque had been built by Turkey's Diyanet in the 1990s. However, in summer 2005, allegedly on orders from Vasif Talibov, the powerful speaker of the Nakhichevan Parliament (Ali Mejlis), the home of the imam next to the mosque, as well as a fountain and toilet, were demolished.

No answers

No one at the Department for Work with Religious Organisations in Nakhichevan was prepared to talk to Forum 18 about the departure of the Turkish imam and where – if at all - Sunni Muslims are able to pray now. Each time Forum 18 reached the Department between 11 and 13 May the official immediately put the phone down.

The telephone of the office of Nakhichevan Chief Mufti Mirjafar Seidov went unanswered between 11 and 13 May.

Similarly unanswered was the telephone of Nakhichevan's Ombudsperson Ulkar Bayramova, who reports to the exclave's parliament.

No Turkish comment

Turkey's General Consulate in Nakhichevan asked Forum 18 to send its questions about the departure of the imam in writing. Sent on 11 May, Forum 18 had received no response by the end of the working day in Nakhichevan on 13 May.

The Counsellor for Religious Affairs at the Turkish Embassy in Baku refused to discuss the departure of the imam from Nakhichevan. "No imams from Turkey are left in Azerbaijan," was all he would tell Forum 18 on 11 May. "We had them here until two years ago."

Forum 18 sent written questions to the Diyanet in the Turkish capital Ankara on 11 May, but it failed to respond by the afternoon of 13 May in Turkey.

Where will Nakhichevan's Sunni Muslims pray?

The transformation of the Juma Mosque into a Shia place of worship leaves the small Sunni Muslim community in Nakhichevan with nowhere to hold prayers.

Even while it was still open, those who attended the Juma Mosque were under close state scrutiny. Three young men who attended prayers there were reported to have been imprisoned for 15 days in November 2009 (see F18News 21 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1397).

Why so many closed Sunni mosques?

Most of the mosques closed or demolished by the authorities since 2009 have been Sunni, although state officials have denied that the religious affiliation of the mosques was the reason for their closure or demolition.

Among those which remain closed, which local Muslims still hope will be allowed to resume their activity, are the Albanian Mosque in Gyanja, the Martyrs' Mosque near the parliament in Baku (also built in the 1990s by Turkey's Diyanet) and Baku's Abu Bekr Mosque (see F18News 5 April 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1558).

Shia mosques reopened

Elsewhere in Azerbaijan, two Shia mosques closed by the authorities earlier this year have been able to reopen.

In early March the local authorities closed the Juma Mosque in the town of Qobustan (Maraza), west of Baku, although local officials vigorously denied this to Forum 18. Muslims who had previously prayed there held Friday prayers outside, often in the snow. Local Muslims told Forum 18 that police and Prosecutor's Office officials harassed those who protested against the mosque closure (see F18News 5 April 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1558).

However, local Muslims told Forum 18 that the mosque reopened in early May. "No-one gave permission. The people just opened

the door and resumed worship," one Muslim told Forum 18. "The local administration has not protested."

The mosque in the village of Turkan not far from Baku was closed in late April. The opposition newspaper Yeni Musavat claimed on 26 March that it had been closed to prevent local people gathering there to protest against villas and fences built recently which prevent their access to the Caspian Sea. Local Muslims confirmed to Forum 18 that the mosque has now reopened.

Will massive fines follow raids?

Meanwhile, raids continue on individuals who hold religious meetings in private homes.

On 18 April, police in the north-western town of Gakh [Qax] launched a case against local Jehovah's Witness Vusal Bakirov on accusations of spreading his faith, the website of the Interior Ministry noted the same day. Two Jehovah's Witness publications were confiscated from him.

He was then charged under Article 300.0.2 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes circulating religious literature without permission from the state. In the wake of the massively increased fines for religious "offences" approved in December 2010, this Article carries punishment on individuals of fines of 200 to 400 Manats (1,580 - 3,155 Norwegian Kroner, 180 - 350 Euros, or 250 - 500 US Dollars) (see F18News 7 January 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1527).

A first hearing in Bakirov's case was held at Gakh District Court on 3 May, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. The trial is due to resume on the morning of 18 May, they added.

In the morning of 29 April in the southern town of Lenkoran close to the border with Iran, police, NSM secret police and the local official of the State Committee raided the private home of local Jehovah's Witness Gulnaz Nasirova. The website of the Interior Ministry noted the same day that the joint operation had been launched to prevent Nasirova from promoting her faith without state permission. It said 19 religious books "forbidden by law" had been confiscated. It said an investigation was now underway.

Lenkoran police refused to discuss the raid on Nasirova's home with Forum 18 on 11 May. The telephone of Miryahya Badirov, local official of the State Committee, went unanswered between 11 and 13 May.

Jehovah's Witnesses insist that neither Bakirov nor Nasirova committed any offence, but fear that both could face heavy fines under the massively increased penalties.

On 6 May, police in the central town of Mingechar raided a private home owned by a Nursi reader, fellow Nursi readers who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. Police confiscated at least one copy of the Koran and took one woman to the police station for questioning.

Warned never to visit Gyanja

In the wake of the detention in Gyanja of a group of pilgrims from the south-eastern town of Salyan, Muslims from the town are afraid to travel to noted Muslim sites in Gyanja, local human rights activist Emil Mamedov of the Support to Democracy group told Forum 18 from the town on 27 April.

The 14 pilgrims from Salyan – including several children - were detained while having lunch in a restaurant on 17 April after visiting the city's Imamzadeh Mosque, Sheikh Nizami Mausoleum and Shah Abbas Mosque. They were held at Gyanja Nizami District Police for six hours, questioned and threatened before being freed. Even though Salyan authorities had told Nizami District Police by telephone that the 14 were bona fide pilgrims, Nizami District Police warned them never to return to the city.

Although Mamedov insists they were not detained for religious reasons – he believes the Gyanja police feared opposition political meetings – he says the detentions have had a chilling effect on local Muslims.

Officers at Nizami District Police refused to discuss with Forum 18 why the 14 pilgrims had been detained and threatened. (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://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Azerbaijan>.

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