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AZERBAIJAN: Police "did well" in Sumgait raids

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Defending the raids in mid-May on three Protestant churches in Sumgait within three days was the press office of Azerbaijan's Interior Ministry. The police "did well", an official there told Forum 18 News Service. After a raid by up to 15 police officers on the Sunday worship service of one of the congregations, held in a local restaurant, two church members were today (18 May) each fined about two weeks' average local wages. On 17 May, some 20 police officers raided a private flat where members of another local church were meeting, seizing about 60 books. "You can't meet for religious purposes in a restaurant – there are mosques and synagogues for that," the Interior Ministry official insisted. He refused to give his name, telling Forum 18: "I don't know who you are. You might be a terrorist or Azerbaijan's enemy No. 1."

Within the space of three days in mid-May, three Protestant communities in the town of Sumgait (Sumqayıt) north of the Azerbaijani capital Baku were raided by police and officials of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Other Protestant communities in the town, as well as Muslim, Russian Orthodox and Jewish communities, appear not to have faced raids. Two members of one of the raided congregations – a husband and wife - were each fined about two weeks' average wages today (18 May), local Protestants complained to Forum 18. An Interior Ministry official defended the police action to Forum 18.

Following a police raid on a Saturday morning Seventh-day Adventist worship service in a house the congregation owned in Sumgait in December 2010 and fines handed down on two church members, the small congregation had to stop meeting for worship (see F18News 16 December 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1522).

State control of all religious activity has sharply increased in recent years in Azerbaijan, with harsh amendments to the Religion Law in 2009, accompanied by new "offences" in the Criminal Code and Code of Administrative Offences to punish religious activity the state has not specifically authorised. In defiance of Azerbaijan's international human rights obligations, all unregistered religious activity is banned, while all religious literature is subject to compulsory prior censorship.

The Sumgait crackdown follows a similar crackdown in March in Azerbaijan's second city Gyanja [Gəncə]. Three religious communities 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).

Many mosques have been closed down under various pretexts in recent years, most of them of the minority Sunni community (see F18News 13 May 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1570).

Raid

Trouble began in Sumgait at about 11.30 am on 15 May, when police raided the Sunday morning service of the Praise Church, the local congregation of the Baku-based Cathedral of Praise, a church affiliated with Word of Life in Sweden. Up to about 15 police officers from the town's 4th Department of the Police, accompanied by officials of the State Committee, arrived at the Göygöl (Blue Lake) restaurant where more than forty church members had gathered for the service, the Interior Ministry website noted.

"Police wrote down the names of all those present, then all were taken by bus to the 4th police station," one local Protestant, who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18. "Police knew where we were meeting." Officers questioned church members at the police station, demanding that they write statements. Also present at the police station was Neman Akhadov, the representative for Sumgait and Absheron of the State Committee.

The website of the Interior Ministry claimed the following day that the meeting had been illegal as the community was meeting away from its registered address. It said that a case had been lodged against Elchin Pashaev and his wife Afar under Article 299.0.4 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes religious activity at an address other than a religious organisation's registered address.

Article 299.0.4 was one of a number of provisions punishing religious activity which were added to the Code of Administrative Offences in 2009. In December 2010, sharp increases in fines were introduced for all violations of Article 299 and Article 300 of the Code (see F18News 7 January 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1527).

Police intended to bring cases against more church members, but did not do so, one local Protestant told Forum 18. The Interior Ministry website that in addition to the charges against Pashaev and his wife, "preventative talks" were conducted with other church members.

Second police visit

Police then moved on to the home of another Sumgait Protestant pastor, local Protestants told Forum 18. However, he refused to let them in. Officers went away and returned a little while later. They questioned the pastor about his activity and particularly about any contact he might have had with foreigners.

Third raid

On the evening of 17 May, about 20 police and officials of the State Committee raided a private home of South Korean citizen Son Chung Soon, where Protestants from another church had gathered. Some 60 Bibles and other Christian books were confiscated, the Interior Ministry website noted the same day, insisting that the Protestants' activity was illegal. Those present were taken to the police station, where they were questioned and had to write statements, local Protestants told Forum 18. The books were not returned.

Two fines

On 18 May, Elchin Pashaev and his wife Afar of the Praise Church were tried at Sumgait Administrative Court under Article 299.0.4 of the Code of Administrative Offences. They were found guilty and each fined 150 Manats (1,062 Norwegian Kroner, 134 Euros or 190 US Dollars), even though the penalty for individuals under this Article is now 500 to 2,000 Manats.

Forum 18 notes that the fine of 300 Manats in total on one family represents the equivalent of nearly four weeks' wages of the State Committee's newly-appointed official in Sumgait. The State Committee advertised the post in January, offering 345 Manats per month, according to its website.

"It was all very fast and not a pleasant outcome," one local Protestant told Forum 18 in the wake of the court hearing. The Protestant said the Pashaevs immediately collected the money from fellow church members and paid the fines, even though they do not consider they have done anything wrong. "Church members want to stress that they are law-abiding." The Protestants said the Pashaevs are not intending to appeal against the punishment as they see little point.

Police "did well"

The telephone of Sumgait State Committee representative Akhadov went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 18 May. No one at the State Committee in Baku was prepared to discuss why three religious communities in Sumgait were raided.

The chief of the Sumgait Police 4th Department – the local department where the Praise Church was meeting - refused to discuss anything with Forum 18 on 17 May.

However, an official of the Interior Ministry press centre in Baku vigorously defended the police action. The police "did well", he insisted to Forum 18 on 18 May. "These people violated the law. You can't meet for religious purposes in a restaurant – there are mosques and synagogues for that." He brushed aside Forum 18's questions as to why religious communities cannot meet freely in line with their rights under Azerbaijan's Constitution and the country's international human rights commitments.

Asked for his name, the press centre official refused to give it. "I don't know who you are," he told Forum 18. "You might be a terrorist or Azerbaijan's enemy No. 1." He then put the phone down.

Jehovah's Witness escapes punishment

Meanwhile, a court in north-western Azerbaijan has dismissed accusations against a local Jehovah's Witness. The judge at Gakh [Qax] District Court closed the administrative case against Vusal Bakirov today (18 May), Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Police launched a case against Bakirov on 18 April on accusations of spreading his faith. 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 distributing religious literature without permission from the state. Since 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). A first hearing was held at Gakh District Court on 3 May (see F18News 13 May 2011)

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1570). (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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