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AZERBAIJAN: Independent Muslim human rights leader detained

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

A leading Muslim religious freedom activist, who in October found it necessary to seek temporary refuge in the Royal Norwegian Embassy, was yesterday (1 December 2003) detained. Imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, of the Juma mosque in Baku, was originally summoned by the authorities as an alleged witness in a criminal case. "There is no indication what that case was about and who was allegedly involved," a spokesman for religious freedom group Devamm told Forum 18. After 8 hours of questioning, the Imam was detained and is now being held in a police isolation cell before a court hearing within 48 hours to decide whether he is to be charged with a criminal offence or released. Ilgar Ibrahimoglu is also Secretary General of the Azerbaijani Chapter of the International Religious Liberty Association.

Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, imam of the Juma mosque in Baku's old city, was detained yesterday evening (1 December) after being interrogated at the general procuracy for some eleven hours. Seymur Rashidov, spokesman for religious freedom group Devamm, told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Baku on 2 December that Ibrahimoglu had originally been summoned as an alleged witness in a criminal case. "There is no indication what that case was about and who was allegedly involved," Rashidov declared. Ibrahimoglu, who is being held in a police isolation cell in the city's Nasimi district, now faces a court hearing within 48 hours to determine whether he is to be charged with a criminal offence or released. "There are no indications which way it will go," Rashidov declared.

Agakhan Akhadov, an investigator at the general procuracy for especially serious crimes who had summoned Ibrahimoglu for questioning and had interrogated him all day, declined to give Forum 18 any details about any charges that might be levelled at Ibrahimoglu or why he was questioned for so many hours. "I don't know you, I can't see you," he told Forum 18 by telephone from his office on 2 December. "Anyone could phone me up and claim to be a journalist." All he would confirm was that Ibrahimoglu was formally detained at 9 pm on 1 December.

Rashidov maintained that Akhadov had been reluctant to sign the warrant to detain Ibrahimoglu, believing there was no reason for his detention. So the warrant was signed by Ramid Rzayev.

As well as being imam of the Juma Mosque, Ibrahimoglu is a board member of the Islam-Ittihad Society, leading coordinator of Devamm (Centre for the Protection of Freedom of Conscience and Religion) and Secretary General of the Azerbaijani Chapter of the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA). "Probably, certain reactionary circles did not like the vigorous activity of Devamm and IRLA in the construction of a legal civil society and the struggle for human rights," Devamm declared in the wake of Ibrahimoglu's detention.

After what Rashidov describes as a campaign of "slander" against him in the media, including allegations that he was abroad and was being sought by Interpol, Ibrahimoglu gave media interviews in November making clear that he was in Baku and was not being sought. On 28 November, Ibrahimoglu received a letter from the department of investigation of criminal cases at the general procuracy, signed by Akhadov, ordering him to appear for questioning at 10 am on 1 December as a witness in case No. 80308. Ibrahimoglu went for questioning with his lawyer Elton Guliyev.

In the wake of the disputed 15 October presidential election, which the opposition claims was rigged, police raided the Juma mosque during Friday prayers on 17 October in what appears to have been an attempt to arrest Ibrahimoglu and his colleague Azer Ramizoglu. Ibrahimoglu escaped arrest by seeking refuge in the nearby Royal Norwegian embassy, which he left only on 20 October (see F18News 22 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=168).

Apart from participating in a human rights conference in neighbouring Georgia organised by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Ibrahimoglu has spent all his time since then in Baku, continuing his "human rights, scholarly and religious activity", Rashidov declared. "We don't know what they have against him - he has done nothing illegal."

For more background information see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=92

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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