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AZERBAIJAN: Pressure mounts on imprisoned imam's supporters

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Members of a committee to defend imprisoned religious freedom activist and imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu have come under threat of arrest, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Two committee members have been summoned to local police stations tomorrow (10 December), where they fear that, just like Ibrahimoglu, they will be arrested. Another committee member held by police was told that "if his name was published abroad it would be bad for him and his family." Ilya Zenchenko, head of the Baptist Church, has told Forum 18 of Baptist's indignation at Imam Ibrahimoglu's arrest and the value they place on his work. Forum 18 has also learnt that another prisoner, prominent opposition leader Rauf Arifoglu, has been denied access to the Koran, prison guards forcibly confiscating a copy. Reliable sources have told Forum 18 that Azer Ramizoglu, leader of the 'Devamm' religious freedom society, is in hiding from the authorities, who are trying to arrest him.

The active members of a newly-founded committee to defend imprisoned imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu have themselves come under threat of arrest, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Najaf Allaverdiev (Ibrahimoglu's brother) and Seymur Rashidov have been summoned in writing to appear at their local police stations tomorrow (10 December), where they fear they might be arrested, as happened to Ibrahimoglu. "I'm afraid if I go they won't let me out again, they will transfer me to the general procuracy and I will be tortured," Allahverdiev told Forum 18 from the capital Baku on 9 December. "The situation is catastrophic." He said another committee member - who did not want his name to be revealed - had been held by police the whole of the previous night. "He was told that if his name was published abroad it would be bad for him and his family."

Committee members maintain that the authorities have found nothing to use against Ibrahimoglu, and so are hoping to fabricate evidence of terrorism against him by extracting confessions from his associates. "They allege he kept weapons at the Juma mosque, but this is all lies," Allahverdiev insisted. "In fact they are worried that he is fighting for religious freedom, for Baptists to be able to import books and for Muslim women to wear the hijab [headscarf]."

The Baptist Church has leapt to Ibrahimoglu's defence. "We are indignant about his arrest," Ilya Zenchenko, head of the Baptist Union, told Forum 18 from Baku on 10 December. "We believe the actions against him were not legal. There is no proof." He said the Baptists intend to do all they can to prevent such actions in future. Zenchenko praised Ibrahimoglu for the moral support he had given them and help in resolving problems with the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, the government agency that controls religious activity in Azerbaijan. "His work for religious freedom and human rights has been a great support." He said he had wanted to visit Ibrahimoglu in prison the previous day, but that the imam's supporters had told him that access to Ibrahimoglu has been barred to everyone except his lawyer.

Committee members accuse the authorities of wanting to crush the group, founded on 4 December, the day after Ibrahimoglu was ordered by a Baku court into three months' pre-trial detention (see F18News 4 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=203). "They say we are conducting anti-state activity."

Ibrahimoglu, an imam at the Juma mosque in Baku's old city and a board member of the Islam-Ittihad Society, is also a religious freedom defender. He is 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).

Allahverdiev told Forum 18 that the committee is preparing a protest against the imprisonment of Ibrahimoglu for 10 December, international human rights day. He said they will tape over their mouths and chain up their hands to symbolise the denial of freedom.

The written summons to Rashidov and Allahverdiev came after police officers visited several committee members at their homes on 4 and 5 December and pressured them to come to the police station. On the advice of their lawyer, Rashidov and fellow-committee member Shahin Hasanov refused to go without a written summons, despite repeated police visits. They stayed away from their homes to avoid being detained. Among others summoned has been Reshat Valiev. Allahverdiev complained that the police have pressured the relatives of committee members.

The Baku office of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) says it has been monitoring the growing pressure on Ibrahimoglu's supporters. "We know that some of Ibrahimoglu's colleagues have been summoned to the police," human

dimension officer Branislav Solovic told Forum 18 from Baku on 9 December. "The OSCE office is following the situation."

Ibrahimoglu is one of more than one hundred opposition supporters detained in Baku's Bailov investigation prison in the wake of the rigged 15 October presidential election. Ibrahimoglu was a vocal supporter of the Musavat (Equality) party's candidate, Isa Gambar. Many of the prisoners began a hunger strike on 1 December to protest against their continued detention. Solovic said OSCE officials have visited the prison to talk to the prisoners.

One of the most prominent prisoners is Rauf Arifoglu, Musavat's deputy leader and a devout Muslim. Since his arrest on 27 October, he has been denied access to the Koran. "Two days after his arrest, and at his request, I took him a copy of the Koran," Arifoglu's lawyer, Samad Panahov, told Forum 18 from Baku on 9 December. "Prison guards immediately took it away from him by force." When Panahov tried to take him another copy later, this too was confiscated by guards before he could give it to Arifoglu. Panahov said there is nothing in law preventing Arifoglu having the Koran and officials know the law. "But they still violate it." He said denying him access to the Koran was in effect preventing him from praying.

It remains unclear whether Ibrahimoglu has access to the Koran. "I think he is OK in prison," his lawyer Elton Kuliev told Forum 18 from Baku on 9 December. He said he had not seen his client since he was taken to Bailov prison on 6 December, but that he intended to visit on 10 December.

Meanwhile, sources in Baku have told Forum 18 that Azer Ramizoglu, leader of Devamm and chairman of the Islam-Ittihad Society, remains at liberty, but has gone into hiding to avoid arrest. The authorities tried to seize him together with Ibrahimoglu when they raided the Juma mosque on 17 October during Friday prayers (see F18News 22 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=168).

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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