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# AZERBAIJAN: Shia Muslim prisoner – one of many – reported close to death

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

*Inqilab Ehadli, one of the dozens of Shia Muslims imprisoned as an alleged supporter of the Muslim Unity Movement, is believed to be close to death in prison hospital in the capital Baku, human rights defender Elshan Hasanov told Forum 18 News Service. Ehadli, who is 58, was already in poor health when arrested in January and transferred to the secret police Investigation Prison. "In his home town of Salyan he had authority. Young people came to him with questions about their faith and Islamic law, even members of the clergy," Hasanov noted. At least 68 supporters of the Movement have been arrested since an armed assault by security forces on the village of Nardaran in November 2015, including its leader Taleh Bagirov and mosque prayer leader Nuhbala Rahimov. Meanwhile, two female Jehovah's Witnesses – freed after 50 weeks' imprisonment, mostly by the secret police - have failed to overturn their criminal convictions on appeal. The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found in December 2015 that the two were being punished for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief and called for them freed and compensated. The Working Group is due to visit Azerbaijan in mid-May.*

Inqilab Ehadli, an imprisoned Shia Muslim and an alleged supporter of the Muslim Unity Movement who faces treason charges, is in prison hospital in the Azerbaijani capital Baku and believed to be close to death, human rights defender Elshan Hasanov told Forum 18 News Service. "Inqilab has twice undergone heart operations and is registered as a second-degree invalid," he said. "His condition in prison hospital is serious."

"Inqilab did nothing 'dangerous'," Hasanov – who heads the Monitoring Centre for Political Prisoners - insisted to Forum 18. "But in his home town of Salyan he had authority. Young people came to him with questions about their faith and Islamic law, even members of the clergy."

Forum 18 has been unable to find out why police arrested Ehadli and whether he was arrested to punish him for exercising his right to freedom of religion or belief.

Crackdown on Muslim Unity Movement continues

Ehadli's arrest appears to be part of the government crackdown on adherents or sympathisers of the Muslim Unity Movement, led by Shia Muslim prisoner of conscience Taleh Bagirov (also known as Bagirzade).

The Muslim Unity Movement was established in January 2015, with Imam Bagirov chosen as its leader. At the time he was still serving his second prison term on drugs-related charges his supporters insist were fabricated to punish him for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief. He was freed in July 2015 (see F18News 11 August 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2088).

Bagirov was among many people arrested as the authorities stormed a home in the village of Nardaran north of Baku on 26 November 2015. During the raid, two police officers and at least five villagers were shot dead and police then detained 14 Muslims as prisoners of conscience. More villagers were detained later (see F18News 1 December 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2127).

Etibar Najafov, Chief Adviser on Multiculturalism, Ethnic and Religious Affairs in the Presidential Administration, claimed to Forum 18 days after the Nardaran operation that he did not know why it had been needed.

Asked what laws members of the Muslim Unity Movement had broken that caused the authorities to raid while firing weapons, Najafov responded: "If they hadn't violated the law the operation wouldn't have been launched. They've done wrong things – they violated established rules." He struggled to explain what rules they had broken.

Asked if the Muslim Unity Movement had killed or proposed killing anyone, Najafov replied: "No" (see F18News 1 December 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2127).


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Imprisoned Muslim Unity Movement supporters are being investigated on a range of serious criminal charges, including treason, murder, terrorism, mass disorder, illegal firearms and creating an illegal armed group. The deputy head of the movement, Imam Elchin Qasimov (also known as Qasimli), is facing 13 separate charges, all of which he denies. His pre-trial detention was extended by a further three months on 23 April, his lawyer Elnur Nabiyev told Turan news agency that day.

Among those detained in the days and weeks after the armed assault on Nardaran was Nuhbala Rahimov, prayer leader of Nardaran's Rahima Hanum Mosque, arrested in December 2015. He was due to be brought to trial, but the criminal case has been returned to prosecutors and his pre-trial detention period extended (see below).

"We are today the only organisation in Azerbaijan whose entire leadership has been arrested on trumped-up charges," Imam Bagirov said in a 23 February statement from prison.

Officers enter Nardaran mosques with weapons and in boots

The village of Nardaran has a population of about 8,000 and is located on the northern shore of the Absheron peninsula 25 kms (15 miles) north of Baku. It is known as a stronghold of Shia Islam.

Following the assault, officials closed at least four of Nardaran's mosques, claiming that as they do not have state registration it is illegal for them to host prayers. Officials say some could reopen, but only after they have submitted to the state-backed Caucasian Muslim Board and gained the compulsory state registration (see F18News 26 January 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2142).

Conditions in Nardaran remain tense, Hasanov told Forum 18 after his 18 April visit there. "An undeclared curfew remains in force with armed patrols." He said armed officers even go into the mosques with weapons and with their boots on, something regarded as offensive to Muslims. Surveillance cameras have been installed at many points, including at the entrance to the massive shrine, while homes of individuals the authorities are particularly suspicious of remain under close observation.

Sentences reduced, but no exoneration or compensation

Meanwhile, five Sunni Muslims imprisoned in October 2015 for taking part in a religious study meeting in a Baku home in April 2014 have had their prison sentences reduced on appeal. Three were freed in the court room, though for two of them the remainder of their sentences was suspended. Their lawyer insisted that all five will seek full exoneration and will appeal to the Supreme Court (see below).

Two female Jehovah's Witnesses who spent nearly a year in pre-trial detention, mostly in the then National Security Ministry (NSM) secret police Investigation Prison, have failed to overturn their criminal conviction on appeal (see below).

The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention ruled in December 2015 that the two Jehovah's Witnesses should be freed and compensated for their wrongful imprisonment (see below). The Working Group is due to make a visit to Azerbaijan from 16 to 25 May, according to the UN Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights website.

January arrest and transfer to secret police

Police in his home town of Salyan south-west of Baku summoned Ehadli on 20 January for questioning related to the November 2015 Nardaran events. Officers searched his home but, human rights defender Hasanov added, found nothing incriminating.

Despite this, police handed Ehadli over to the State Security Service (SSS) secret police where he is being investigated under Criminal Code Article 274 on charges of alleged treason. He was immediately ordered held for four months in pre-trial detention at the SSS Investigation Prison in Baku without any court hearing, Hasanov complained to Forum 18. The law requires pre-trial detention orders to be made by a court. A further detention order of three months pre-trial detention order has since been added, Hasanov said.

Ehadli, who is 58 and has four children, is a former deputy chair of the Islamic Party, which gained state registration in 1991 which the Supreme Court revoked in 1995. However, he resigned from his party position more than two years ago because of failing health.

Criminal case returned

The criminal case against the prayer leader at a Shia Muslim mosque in the village of Nardaran, Nuhbala Rahimov, has been returned to prosecutors for further work, Trend news agency noted on 30 March citing relatives. Meanwhile, just before his four-month term of pre-trial imprisonment expired in mid-April, Baku's Sabunchu District Court renewed it for a further four months.


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Rahimov was originally arrested in early December 2015, about 10 days after the heavily-armed government assault on Nardaran.

Rahimov was initially given an administrative prison term. However, Sabunchu District Court soon handed down a four-month pre-trial detention term after prosecutors opened a criminal case against him (see F18News 27 January 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2143).

The criminal case against Rahimov had originally been completed in February 2016 and sent to Sabunchu District Court for trial.

Lenkoran arrests

Police and Prosecutor's Office officials arrested two further alleged members of the Muslim Unity Movement in the south of the country. Qismet Isayev and Vugar Ismayilov were arrested in a "special operation" in Lenkoran, the Interior Ministry noted on its website on 19 April.

The Ministry claimed four grenades and 123 bullets had been seized from them, as well as 18 booklets "promoting religious intolerance". A criminal case has been opened against Isayev and Ismayilov, it added.

How many prisoners?

The authorities have given little information about the arrests of alleged members or sympathisers of the Muslim Unity Movement. On 5 February, General Prosecutor Zakir Qaralov announced that 68 people had been arrested as part of the case, 57 of them in and around Baku and the other 11 in Gyanja and elsewhere.

The authorities have repeatedly claimed that supporters of the movement have been preparing to overthrow the government and have been storing weapons and ammunition.

However, human rights defenders told Forum 18 they find it highly unlikely that members – at least the leadership of the movement – had stored the weapons or ammunition as alleged by the authorities, or that they had planned or called for an uprising or would want one.

68 known detainees

Human rights defenders in Baku in early April compiled a list of 68 people – all of them men – known to have been arrested during or following the November 2015 crackdown in Nardaran (surname, first name, father's name):

1. Bagirov (also known as Bagirzade), Taleh Kamil

2. Huseynov, Abbas Mammadbagir

3. Jabrayilov, Rasim Mirzebaba

4. Jabbadov, Jabbar Amirxan

5. Ismayilov, Aqil Azar

6. Tagizada, Abbas Hafiz

7. Yariyev, Ramin Maharram

8. Ismayilov, Etibar Rasim

9. Bunyadov, Rasim Sarvar

10. Valiyev, Alibala Javad

11. Xudaverdiyev, Ibrahim Mahammad

12. Quliyev, Abbas Abbdulrahman

13. Nuriyev, Ali Hasrat

14. Balayev, Farhad Nasraddin


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15. Agayev (also known as Agazade), Elman Seydamir

16. Bunyadov, Eldar Aliaga

17. Shahbazov, Atabala Shahbaz

18. Babayev, Raji Abasali

19. Quliyev, Mehman Abulfaz

20. Huseynov, Ali Humat

21. Shahbazov, Alibay Atabala

22. Quliyev, Haasaan Ahmad

23. Nabizada, Urfan Fayyaz

24. Qahramanov, Nahid Nasib

25. Alish, Vusal Nadir

26. Aliyev, Vasif Vaqif

27. Babayev, Mohtabar Qilman

28. Alxasov, Vidadi Shirinbala

29. Mammadov, Mehman Sudef

30. Aliyev, Amirali Ismayil

31. Qasimov, Aliaga Mahmud

32. Qurbanov, Alekber Tofiq

33. Agaraziyev, Mubariz Nasir

34. Jabbarov, Hilal Damir

35. Zakiyev, Zahid Faiq

36. Jabrayilov, Agasalim Salman

37. Muradov, Farhad Mirzahasan

38. Rahimov, Nuhbala Bahram

39. Mammadov, Intiqam Haamdulla

40. Qahramanli, Fuad Ali

41. Balakishizada, Jahad Balahuseyn

42. Asgarov, Bahruz Rahib

43. Aliyev, Ramil Zabil

44. Qadirov, Nadir Abdulaga

45. Shirvanov, Seyfaddin Nurulla


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46. Tagiyev, Javanshir Malik

47. Hasanov, Elxan Heydar

48. Nabizada, Huseyn Mammadaga

49. Ibrahimov, Isa Tofiq

50. Rustamov, Alizohrab Amirhuseyn

51. Aslanov, Seymur Tarlan

52. Mustafayev, Zakir Tapdiq

53. Abdulaliyev, Shamil Adil

54. Qasimov (also known as Qasimli), Elchin Kamal

55. Yahyayev, Aga-Ali Eldar

56. Aliyev, Anar Yusif

57. Habibov, Sahib Firudin

58. Ahmadov, Latif Suleyman

59. Valiyev, Niftali Ashraf

60. Osmanov, Teymur Adilxan

61. Bunyadov, Elvin Hatif

62. Rzayev, Sahil Xalid

63. Ismayilov, Ruzi Xaliq

64. Aliyev, Jabir Sabir

65. Seyfullayev, Ramil Suliddin

66. Ibrahimov, Mubariz Eyyub

67. Jabbarov, Elnur Nazim

68. Mikayilzade (also known as Mikayilov), Zulfuqar Sadraddin

Torture suit withdrawn

Muslim Unity Movement leader Imam Bagirov brought a suit against the authorities seeking punishment for those who tortured him while in detention. Folllowing his November 2015 arrest, he was tortured in the hands of the Interior Ministry's Main Directorate for the Struggle with Organised Crime, sustaining a broken nose. Torture only ceased in January 2016 when he was transferred to Baku's Investigation Prison No. 1 (see F18News 27 January 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2143).

Consideration of Bagirov's suit finally began in closed session at Baku's Nasimi District Court on 5 February. On 9 February the court delayed announcing the decision on the suit, while his lawyers noted that proceedings were continung.

In a surprise move, on 23 February Bagirov chose to withdraw the suit. He noted that the suit was provoking further pressure from the authorities on those who attended court hearings to support him. In his statement, he stressed that the Muslim Unity Movement was and continues to be committed to peaceful struggle, Caucasian Knot news agency noted on 23 February.

Prison terms reduced on appeal, but no exoneration

On 19 April, according to court records, Judge Qail Mammadov of Baku Appeal Court finally heard the appeals lodged by the five


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Sunni Muslims imprisoned for taking part in a meeting in April 2014 in a Baku home to study their faith with the aid of the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi. The meeting was broken up in an armed police raid.

At Baku's Yasamal District Court on 7 October 2015, Ismayil Mammadov was jailed for 5 years, 5 months; his brother Zakariyya, with Shahin Hasanov, was jailed for 5 years; Eldeniz Hajiyev was jailed for 4 years, 5 months; and Revan Sabzaliyev was jailed for 1 year, 7 months.

The five were punished for participation in an "illegal" religious group under Criminal Code Article 168, as well as for distributing religious literature which has not undergone the state's strict pre-publication religious censorship (see F18News 8 October 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2109).

Three of the five - Hajiyev, Ismayil Mammadov and Sabzaliyev - spent up to five months in detention in the then NSM secret police Investigation Prison in Baku before being transferred to house arrest in September 2014 (see F18News 22 September 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1999).

On 19 April, at their much-delayed appeal, Judge Mammadov reduced the prison terms on Ismayil Mammadov and Hajiyev to 2 years, 6 months each, their lawyer Asabali Mustafayev told Baku-based Turan news agency. The Judge reduced Sabzaliyev's prison term to one year. The Judge also changed the remainder of Hasanov and Zakariyya Mammadov's sentences from prison terms to suspended sentences.

As Sabzaliyev has already served the reduced prison term (his time in pre-trial detention at the NSM secret police Investigation Prison counted towards his punishment), he was freed in the court room. Also freed in the court room were Hasanov and Zakariyya Mammadov.

Friends of the men confirmed to Forum 18 from Baku on 20 April that the men were home with their families. However, they insisted that the criminal conviction was wrong and that reducing the sentences "was simply an excuse to get them out of prison".

The lawyer Mustafayev said that the defence insist on the men's complete exoneration on all the charges and will lodge further appeals for each of the five to the Supreme Court. "These people did not commit the crime they were accused of," he told Caucasian Knot after the appeal decision. "They were punished for exercising freedom of religion."

Jehovah's Witnesses' appeal fails

Two female Jehovah's Witnesses, Irina Zakharchenko and Valida Jabrayilova, convicted in January of offering one religious booklet without the compulsory state permission needed to distribute religious literature, have failed to overturn their convictions on appeal. The women were also seeking payment of all legal costs, and compensation for the violation of their rights while imprisoned for nearly one year.

On 29 March, Judge Faiq Qasimov at Baku Appeal Court left the sentence unchanged, according to court records.

The two women were arrested by the then NSM secret police in February 2015 to punish them for talking about their faith and offering one religious booklet to a resident of the Baku suburb of Pirallahi.

A criminal case was lodged against Zakharchenko and Jabrayilova under Criminal Code Article 167-2.2.1. This punishes: "Production, sale and distribution of religious literature, religious items and other informational materials of religious nature with the aim of import, sale and distribution without appropriate authorisation" when conducted by an "organised group". Punishment is a fine of 7,000 to 9,000 Manats or imprisonment of two to five years.

On 28 January 2016, Judge Akram Qahramanov of Baku's Pirallahi District Court gave each a large fine, but waived the fines as the two women had spent nearly a year in prison.

Zakharchenko and Jabrayilova spent most of their 50-week pre-trial detention at the then NSM secret police Investigation Prison in Baku.

The United Nations (UN) Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found in December 2015 that the two women were being punished for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief and called for the two to be both freed and compensated. Separately, the UN Human Rights Committee the same month called for the release from prison of Zakharchenko in view of her poor health while it considered the substance of an appeal in her case (see F18News 29 January 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2144).

Despite the UN decision, the authorities have offered Zakharchenko and Jabrayilova no compensation.

No Bible in secret police prison


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Following the women's release from prison after their January conviction, the two women gave video interviews posted on the Jehovah's Witness broadcasting website.

Jabrayilova described their arrest and imprisonment as a "terrible experience". Her first prison cell was small with only a little window. "The cell stank and we were desperate for fresh air," she recounted. She was embarrassed that the guard frequently kept watch on her through the spy glass in the door of the cell.

During the investigation of the case, the Investigator told Jabrayilova: "Everyone has turned away from you. You have been abandoned," she recalled. When the two women were being transported to court to hearings to extend pre-trial detention, the guards made sure they would not be able to have contact with any of their relatives or friends.

After the third pre-trial detention extension hearing, Jabrayilova said she felt very down and was crying as she was led back to her cell. One guard who had shouted at her earlier for being a Jehovah's Witness asked her why she had been imprisoned. "I said it was for God's name," she recounted. "If you're here because of God," she quoted him as responding, "be patient. God will help you." She said this cheered her up.

For the ten months when they were in the secret police Investigation Prison, they had no access to a Bible, Jabrayilova added. Only once they had been transferred to the Investigation Prison at Kurdakhani was she able to get a parcel from her family and found a Bible in it. "I was overjoyed when I saw the Bible in the package."

Jabrayilova noted that many fellow Jehovah's Witnesses had written to them from around the world. They were given these letters only on release from prison.

Zakharchenko recounted her worry during her imprisonment about how her family was coping without her. She expressed gratitude that she was finally back at home and that she was able to pray and attend congregational meetings with her fellow Jehovah's Witnesses.

Exercising freedom of religion improves in harsh prison

Meanwhile, the exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief for inmates at Qobustan prison has improved following criticism, human rights defender Hasanov told Forum 18, citing relatives. Prisoners are now allowed to pray visibly and to fast.

The prison, along the coast to the south-west of Baku, is where prisoners are held in isolation in what are reported to be harsh conditions.

The Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) noted that prisoners in Qobustan have been subjected to torture (see F18News 14 May 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2061).

Some other prisons have their own mosques and Russian Orthodox chapels which, former inmates have told Forum 18, prisoners are free to attend. (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2081.

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.

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