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AZERBAIJAN: Authorities plan to storm embattled mosque?

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

Muslims from the 1000-year old Juma mosque in Baku fear the authorities, who want to use it as a carpet museum, will seize the mosque by force on Friday, and the mosque has invited foreign diplomats to be present as neutral observers. Rafik Aliev, head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, has said that Muslims must leave the mosque because his committee has not registered them – but his committee has refused to consider the mosque's registration application. Otherwise, Aliev has said that police will remove them by force. Under international human rights conventions that Azerbaijan has signed, the absence of official registration does not give any grounds for this expulsion. The embattled mosque and its religious freedom activist imam, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, who was jailed after a rigged trial, have received strong support from Azerbaijan's Baptist and Adventist churches, as well as from the International Religious Liberty Association.

Members of the Juma mosque in Baku's historic old city fear the authorities are planning steps to seize the mosque as the deadline for them to abandon their place of worship approaches. The authorities want to turn it into a carpet museum, as was it was in Soviet times (see F18News 19 January http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=231). "Ten or so unidentified people in civilian clothes arrived outside the mosque this morning as well as three of four film crews from pro-government television channels," Najaf Allahverdiev and Seimur Rashidov told Forum 18 News Service from inside the mosque on 29 January. "No-one demanded that we should leave, but the journalists told us they are expecting an attack." Allahverdiev – brother of the mosque's imprisoned imam, religious freedom activist Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev – and Rashidov both pledged that the community will not leave their thousand-year-old mosque, despite pressure from the authorities.

Allahverdiev said the mosque leaders fear official may organise a "provocation" to give cover for their seizure of the building. "Many people will be in the mosque tomorrow as it is a major feast – perhaps more than a thousand. We have arranged guards, but we can't check everyone coming in or their bags," he told Forum 18. "They might get people to start shouting terrorist slogans, start a fight or plant weapons in the mosque. Then it will all be on TV and they will be able to say: Look, they're all terrorists."

He said this was why the mosque had invited international officials to examine the building on 22 January. Representatives of the Royal Norwegian and the United States embassies, the Council of Europe office in Baku, and human rights activists Saida Gojamanli, chair of the Legality and Human Rights Bureau NGO, and Arzu Abdullayeva, chair of the Azerbaijan National Committee of the Helsinki Citizens Assembly, were given free access to the building to check that nothing illegal was being stored or carried out in it. Mosque leaders told the foreign representatives that they would insist on their rights to remain in the mosque, but were pledged to reject the use of violence to protect their rights.

"Even if they beat us with truncheons, we will not respond," Allahverdiev told Forum 18. He said the mosque leaders had invited foreign diplomats to be present at the mosque on 30 January to ensure neutral witnesses are present if the feared attack materialises.

The film crews and unidentified people arrived a day after Rafik Aliyev, the head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, had declared on television that the Muslims had to leave the mosque because they did not have registration from his committee. He added that the police would otherwise remove them by force. Aliyev did not explain that his committee had refused to consider the mosque's registration application lodged in 2001.

"Because of his position, Aliyev is obliged to secure religious freedom," Allahverdiev complained. "We wrote to him asking him to defend our rights and this is the only response we got." He and fellow-mosque members point out that the mosque retains its 1993 Ministry of Justice registration, and under international human rights conventions that Azerbaijan has signed, absence of official registration does not make religious activity illegal.

Reached by telephone on 29 January, Rafik Aliyev's assistant declined to put Forum 18 through to him after he learnt who was asking for an interview.

"Please do everything within your power in order to preclude the violence over the believers and to prevent their being ousted from God's temple," some 500 mosque members have written in their latest appeal. "Don't let the small island of civil and religious tolerance which is the religious community of the Juma Mosque be suppressed."

Members of the mosque have complained of long-running pressure from the authorities, even before Ibrahimoglu's detention on 1 October last year and his subsequent remand on three-months investigate detention (see F18News 4 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=203). The authorities have accused Ibrahimoglu of organising and participating in riots that followed last October's rigged presidential election, although so far investigators have not produced any evidence of his involvement.

On 16 January the Juma mosque received a letter from the authorities of the old city preservation area claiming that the Muslims were occupying the mosque illegally, an accusation the mosque leaders deny. The letter gave 15 days for the community to leave the mosque. The Baku city authorities also wrote to say they intend to turn the mosque back into a carpet museum, as it was during the later Soviet period. The mosque leaders wrote back to say they rejected the accusations and order to leave the mosque as illegal. "Since 1992 the Juma mosque religious community has been performing its activities in the mosque and over that period of time it has never once been reproached in any way by the governmental agencies," the community pointed out in a 29 January statement.

The mosque insists that it intends to remain independent of the Caucasian Muslim Board, a body that the government requires all mosques to belong to. "The distinguishing feature of the mosque is its activities aimed at propagandising inter-religious and inter-confessional tolerance, civil tolerance and religious freedom. The community implements many charitable programmes including providing religious rituals to the population free of charge. It arranges charitable dinners for orphan children, renders them moral assistance, helps their psychological rehabilitation and arranges classes in geography, history and English."

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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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