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AZERBAIJAN: Judges not police to expel Muslims from mosque?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

The Muslim community of the 1,000-year old Juma mosque has told Forum 18 News Service that it fears it will be expelled by compliant judges, not the violent police assault originally feared. Local human rights activists from the International Religious Liberty Association, Devamm and the Committee for the Protection of Ilgar Ibragimoglu's Rights have told Forum 18 that they welcome international pressure on the Azerbaijani authorities which, they believe, prevented a violent assault on the mosque. But they fear that expulsion by the tame courts "only looks less aggressive". Muslims from the Juma mosque have told Forum 18 that "the Baptist Church is also persecuted" and note that the Baptist church on Baku's Azadlyq street has not been returned to the church. "It is interesting that it is also intended to be turned into a museum," the Muslims comment. Along with the Adventists, the Baptists have been the strongest religious supporters of Ibrahimoglu and the Juma mosque.

As the authorities continue their campaign to expel the Muslim community from the 1,000-year old Juma mosque, which was handed back to the Islamic community in 1992, the community now fears it will be expelled not by a violent police assault but by compliant judges (see F18News 29 January http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=240). The authorities want to turn the mosque (close to the Maiden's Tower in Baku's Old City) into a carpet museum, the same usage it had in the later Soviet period.

"We were told verbally that we will be taken to court," Najaf Allahverdiev, brother of the mosque's imprisoned imam, told Forum 18 from inside the mosque during this weekend's observance of Id al-Adha (Kurban Bairam or Festival of Sacrifice). He said that up to 2,000 people had Id al-Adha at the Juma mosque, with prayers led by acting imam Adil Huseinov. "It is a good step that violence has been averted," Allahverdiev told Forum 18.

The hearing at the court of Baku's Sabail district is expected within days, although Allahverdiev said today (2 February) that they have received no documents so far. "There is a slight fear that they might hold the hearing without our knowledge, even though that would be illegal."

Meanwhile, Rafik Aliyev, head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, has told Forum 18 that imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev will go on trial on 15 or 16 March, together with opposition activists and supporters rounded up in the wake of street protests against last October's rigged presidential election. Ibrahimoglu rejects all charges of organising, inciting or participating in these protests (see F18News 4 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=203).

Speaking to Forum 18 on 30 January, Aliyev insisted that the Juma mosque community was occupying the building "illegally". "They have no document to prove they occupied the building legally back in 1992," he alleged. He said as a historic monument the building belongs to the Ministry of Culture. "They seized it." Asked why, if this were the case, the issue is only 12 years later being raised, Aliyev then claimed that the mosque is illegal because it refuses to subordinate itself to the Caucasian Muslim Board as the country's religion law requires. Asked how his committee can enforce such a requirement that runs counter to Azerbaijan's religious freedom commitments, Aliyev declared: "I have to apply the law as it is."

Aliyev then switched his complaint again, accusing Ibrahimoglu and the mosque as a whole of pursuing "political aims". "The mosque doesn't engage in religious but political work," he told Forum 18. "They conduct anti-government activity – I've got some of their leaflets." Asked why he was declaring Ibrahimoglu guilty before he had been convicted of anything by any court, Aliyev conceded: "The court will decide if he is guilty. At the moment he is innocent. The investigation is still underway." He said he did not expect to attend Ibrahimoglu's March trial.

After a joint meeting on 31 January, the Azerbaijan chapter of IRLA (International Religious Liberty Association), Devamm (Centre for Protection of Freedom of Conscience and Belief <http://www.devamm.org>) and the Committee for the Protection of Ilgar Ibragimoglu's Rights (www.ibragimoglu.org) welcomed the international pressure on the Azerbaijani authorities which, they believe, has prevented a violent assault to seize the mosque.

"But now a different way of reprisals has been chosen which only looks less aggressive," they declare. But they fear that the city

authorities' decision to take the issue to court, reported by the local media, is unlikely to protect them as they maintain that the courts are dominated by the ruling powers, a view shared by New York-based Human Rights Watch in a January report (<http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/01/23/azerba6992.htm>) on the authorities' crackdown in the wake of the presidential election. "Of course, there won't be any impartial court hearing."

The mosque's defenders in IRLA note that 749 members have already protested against the threat to close the mosque. "But the authorities represented by Rafik Aliyev absolutely ignore the believers' will and continue the policy of violating religious freedom. Moreover, in interviews both to TV and radio channels Rafik Aliyev stated that the community will be forced out of the mosque."

They said the city authorities told them that they are under pressure from the prosecutor's office which is investigating Ibrahimoglu's case. "In other words it is quite clear that the reprisals against the believers are the continuation of punishment of Ibrahimoglu for his human rights and educational activities."

The Juma mosque defenders point out that it is not only their mosque that has suffered. "Another member of IRLA Azerbaijan chapter, the Baptist Church, is also persecuted." They reported that television news has declared that the historic church the Baptists built on Azadlyq street in central Baku before the Soviet takeover will not be returned to representatives of this Church. "It is interesting that it is also intended to be turned into a museum." The Baptists have been seeking the return of their church ever since the end of the communist period, so far in vain. Along with the Adventists, the Baptists have been the strongest religious supporters of Ibrahimoglu and the Juma mosque.

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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