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AZERBAIJAN: New media threats against Protestants and JW's

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Two false accusations of spreading religious hatred have been made on local TV by the government religious affairs committee, Forum 18 News Service has found. Both those accused – the Protestant Greater Grace Church and the Jehovah's Witnesses - have denied to Forum 18 that they spread hatred, and also denied that they received the official warnings the state committee claimed it had issued. The state committee has spoken of plans to use the courts to liquidate the Jehovah's Witness community. Local media frequently repeat assertions that minority religious communities violate the law, preach religious hatred and have been warned by the state committee, and this creates suspicion of the communities. Police broke up the Greater Grace Church's Sunday School last August, and in 2002 the State Committee used the courts to close down Baku's Azeri-language Baptist church, as well as most of Azerbaijan's madrassahs, or Islamic schools.

Two religious communities falsely accused on television of propagating religious hatred by the government's religious affairs committee have denied to Forum 18 News Service that they have received official the warnings the channel claimed they had. "This is not true," Pastor Fuad Tariverdi of the Protestant Greater Grace Church told Forum 18 from the capital Baku on 30 January. "We have never been officially warned, either verbally or in writing. We are upset by this latest TV accusation." Both he and leaders of the Jehovah's Witnesses – the other community accused by the television station – insist they work within the law and preach tolerance. Editors at the television station told Forum 18 they received their information from the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations and that it is planning to liquidate the Jehovah's Witness community through the courts.

The private Baku-based station Azad Azarbaycan TV claimed on 28 January that the State Committee, which is headed by Rafik Aliyev, had sent a "final warning letter" to Jehovah's Witness leaders and that the State Committee had earlier banned the Greater Grace Church for preaching racial and religious hatred, citing the state's obligation to prevent advocacy of religious hatred under Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Reached on 3 February, editors at Azad Azarbaycan TV told Forum 18 that their correspondent Vugar Aliyev (no relation) had interviewed Rafik Aliyev at the State Committee, who had said that his Committee was preparing to take the Jehovah's Witnesses to court for their alleged "illegal" activities, which the chairman cited as bringing literature into the country, forcing people to buy it, knocking on people's doors very late at night and preaching against other faiths.

"Rafik Aliyev said he had enough information to go to court," the editors, who declined to be named, told Forum 18. "He added that they would invite international organisations to attend the court hearing so that they will be witnesses and that they will not be able to claim that there is no freedom of religion here," the editors reported. They said they had tried to interview some Jehovah's Witnesses to respond to Rafik Aliyev's claims but that as usual the Jehovah's Witnesses declined. The editors said their interview had taken place on 29 January, though it remains unclear whether this was a supplementary interview in the wake of the 28 January report.

Forum 18 spoke by telephone with Rafik Aliyev on 30 January, but he terminated the interview before Forum 18 was able to ask him about the latest threats to the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Greater Grace Church.

"We are not aware of any new warning in 2004," an international Jehovah's Witness representative who is in regular contact with the State Committee on behalf of the community told Forum 18 on 2 February. "In September 2003 the community received such a letter. But they have answered this and it seems that the State Committee was satisfied with their explanations."

The representative said that on previous occasions when the local media had claimed that the State Committee had issued "last warnings", Aliyev told the Jehovah's Witnesses that "we should not pay too much attention to such media reports". The Jehovah's Witnesses have one registered community in Baku, with two congregations totalling some 400 members.

"It is clear that Jehovah's Witnesses have always advocated peace and love to their neighbours according to Biblical principles," the representative told Forum 18, "and therefore there would not have been any basis for an accusation of violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. This also has never been stated in any correspondence from the State Committee in Baku."

However, frequently-repeated media assertions that minority religious communities violate the law, preach religious hatred and have been warned by the State Committee create a climate of suspicion.

Another private station Lider TV reported on 6 May last year, quoting Rafik Aliyev, that the State Committee was drawing up a list of religious structures which violate the law. "The Greater Grace Church is top of the list. Both the Interior Ministry and the committee have seriously warned the church. If the latest warning does not have any effect, serious measures will be taken." Despite these claims, the church told Forum 18 at the time that it had received no warning, verbal or written.

Pastor Tariverdi insists Greater Grace opposes religious intolerance. "We never sow religious hatred against Muslims or anyone else. We teach how we should love all people."

He told Forum 18 that his Church still has registration with the Ministry of Justice, but is about to lodge its amended re-registration application with the State Committee after more than a year of negotiation. He said the State Committee had insisted that the Church register not as an independent community but as a branch of the Greater Grace international headquarters in the United States. "Azerbaijan's constitution says people are free to form communities, and ours is a local church with local membership and local pastors which has functioned for more than ten years," Tariverdi declared. "But if they want us to register under our international headquarters, well, we've got to do it like that."

He said his Church had not faced serious problems since their Sunday school was broken up by the police last August (see F18News 4 September 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=135). But he noted that local officials in the town of Ismaili had told the congregation there that it would have to await registration of its Baku branch before they would consider a local application. Pastor Tariverdi said that the Ismaili church is still able to meet for worship, despite being warned by officials not to meet. "The authorities don't want them to exist," he claimed.

Pressure on the Jehovah's Witnesses was particularly heavy after they organised meetings in a Baku hotel in September 2002, which were banned at the last minute by the State Committee, although it had received plenty of prior notice from the Jehovah's Witnesses. In the wake of the failed meetings, Rafik Aliyev said his Committee was planning to go to court to have the Jehovah's Witnesses' registration revoked.

He alleged at the time that the Jehovah's Witnesses violated the law because they had no written contract with the hotel's management, there were foreign preachers taking part, the hall was overcrowded, children were involved and officials from his committee were not present. He added that the group had been given a "final warning" in February 2002 and had failed to abide by the law.

In 2002 the State Committee closed down Baku's Azeri-language Baptist church through the courts and most of the country's madrassahs, or Islamic schools, alleging that they had violated the law.

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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