

20 February 2004

AZERBAIJAN: Court proceedings to seize mosque next week

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Court proceedings to seize the 1,000 year-old Juma mosque in Baku, which the government wants to turn into a carpet museum, are due on Wednesday 25 February, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "You know that judges in Azerbaijan are not independent, so they'll rule to close down the mosque and kick us out," Seymour Rashidov, a mosque spokesman, told Forum 18. "But we'll challenge any such decision through the courts, even to the European Court of Human Rights." The mosque's jailed Imam, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev, has pleaded for international publicity and help: "All the hope is for the help of dear friends for whom religious freedom and human rights are not just words but their life mission.", he wrote to Forum 18. The mosque and its young imam have been prominent defenders of religious freedom for all, including Baptists and Adventists. Amongst foreign embassies expected to attend the court hearings is the Royal Norwegian Embassy. "We will be following the case very closely – we will be there," Ambassador Steinar Gil told Forum 18.

Court proceedings to seize the historic Juma mosque in the Old Town of the capital Baku from the local Muslim community and turn it back into a carpet museum as it was during the later Soviet period are due to begin on 25 February. "You know that judges in Azerbaijan are not independent, so they'll rule to close down the mosque and kick us out," Seymour Rashidov, a spokesman for the mosque, told Forum 18 News Service from Baku on 20 February. "But we'll challenge any such decision through the courts, even to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg if we have to." He said he did not know whether the case would be over within a day or two or would last much longer.

On 15 February the court of Baku's Sabail district informed the Juma mosque community of the impending court hearing in the case brought by the architectural administration of Baku's historic old city. The judge in the case will be Yushif Kerimov. The mosque community has yet to choose the lawyer to represent it in court.

The mosque's imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev - who is currently awaiting trial in Baku's Bayil prison on trumped-up charges (see F18News 8 January http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=223) – claims that the authorities had planned to oust the community by force from the thousand-year-old mosque on 29 and 30 January, but were deterred by the international publicity the case generated (See F18News 2 February http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=241). "Again all the hope is for the help of dear friends for whom religious freedom and human rights are not just words but their life mission," he wrote in a 16 February letter from prison received by Forum 18. "The hope is that they will not leave in trouble their believing brothers and sisters in Azerbaijan."

Rashidov told Forum 18 that the mosque community has asked for the court hearing to be postponed, as the acting imam Adil Huseinov is due to leave for the United States on 22 February as a participant in a three-week programme organised by the US State Department to familiarise foreign religious leaders with the religious life of the United States. "If the hearing goes ahead, he will have to cancel his participation," Rashidov declared.

The authorities have long been unhappy about the activity of the mosque and its young imam, a prominent human rights and religious freedom activist who has defended not only the rights of Muslims, but of Baptists, Adventists and others. The authorities argue that the community seized the mosque illegally back in 1992, that it is not registered with the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations and that it has not subordinated itself to the Caucasian Muslim Board, as the country's religion law now requires (see F18News 2 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=241).

However, the mosque community questions why the authorities are only now – twelve years later - looking at how the Muslims regained the mosque, which had been confiscated in 1937 at the height of the Stalinist terror. They claim that their registration with the Ministry of Justice is still valid and reject the demand that mosques must submit to the Muslim Board, claiming the demand violates their religious freedom.

The mosque community has been heartened by recent comments by the head of the Muslim Board, Sheikh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazada, protesting against threats to close down the embattled mosque. "Although the Juma mosque in Icari Sahar [Baku's Old Town] has not registered with the Caucasian Muslim Board, this does not mean that this religious facility should not be working," he was quoted by the Baku paper 525 Qazet on 13 February as declaring. He said the building should be used for the purpose for which

it was built.

Pashazade pointed out that the State Committee, which is headed by Rafik Aliev, had already registered a number of mosques which were not part of the Muslim Board. He added that even the arrest of the imam did not justify closing down an entire religious community. "The mosque cannot be closed down because of individual people," he declared. "If an individual breaks the law, he should answer for that himself."

Rashidov welcomed Pashazade's support. "This was a democratic step on his part."

Among the foreign diplomats expected to attend the court hearings are representatives of the Royal Norwegian Embassy, which is less than 100 metres from the mosque and which has taken a close interest in the plight of the mosque and its imam. "We will be following the case very closely – we will be there," Ambassador Steinar Gil told Forum 18 from Baku on 20 February. "This is something that has caused concern not only in Azerbaijan but internationally." The Baku offices of the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe have also been following developments.

Ibrahimoglu was detained on 1 December on charges that he helped organise the mass street demonstrations on 16 October, the day after the rigged election that saw Ilham Aliyev become president. He was then ordered into three months' pre-trial detention. Rashidov told Forum 18 that the investigator completed the case on 10 or 11 February and that, according to legal procedure, the trial should begin within two weeks from then, although no date has yet been set. "Ibrahimoglu's lawyer has said the investigation found no substantive proof of his guilt," Rashidov declared.

From his prison cell, Ibrahimoglu has highlighted the opposition to his activity from Rafik Aliev of the State Committee. "Aliev is one of the first to pressure us because he is most of all concerned about our human rights activities especially in the field of religious freedom," Ibrahimoglu declared. "It's a fact that after my arrest the situation in the field of religious freedom both in Baku and in other regions has considerably worsened. It seems that after my arrest activities in this field have become quite risky."

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>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY