

1 March 2004

AZERBAIJAN: Adventist pastor flees serious death threats

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Adventist pastor Khalid Babaev and his family have fled Nakhichevan (Naxçıvan) in fear, being forced to flee by the refusal by police to protect them from serious death threats, Form 18 News Service has learnt. The state official in charge of religious affairs locally has claimed to Forum 18 that he didn't "know that there are people here who hate others for religious reasons" and that he is "too busy to look into the case," even though he has been told by Pastor Babaev of the death threats. It is believed that the threats are related to the commemoration by Shia Muslims of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, grandson of Islam's prophet Muhammad, which is often a tense time.

Adventist pastor Khalid Babaev and his family have been forced to flee from the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan (Naxçıvan) after police refused to protect them in the face of repeated threats from unknown local people. "The family fled late on Friday night in fear," Yahya Zavrıchko, head of the Adventist Church in Azerbaijan, told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Baku on 1 March. Yet Idris Abbasov, head of the Nakhichevan branch of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, refused to comment on the case to Forum 18 on 1 March saying he had no information, although Babaev had informed him of the threats. "These are difficult days at the moment with Ashura," he added, referring to the commemoration by Shia Muslims of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, grandson of Islam's prophet Muhammad, when passions often rise. "I have been too busy to look into the case." Babaev is the second Adventist pastor driven out of Nakhichevan in recent years.

In mid-February the Babaev family first received threats from a telephone caller who did not give his name. The same caller rang again on 24 February, repeating the threats "with obscene words". "I will come and take your soul!" Babaev quoted him as shouting. "I will gather a crowd and drag you from here!" Later that evening there was another threatening call. The following day, five men – one of whom introduced himself as a driver named Jamil (last name unknown) - appeared at the gate of Babaev's house and threatened to gather a mob of people to kill him or drive him out. Police refused to help Babaev or even accept a statement from him about the threats. They also refused to discuss the threats with Forum 18 (see F18News 25 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=262).

Babaev, his wife and their young son had then stayed the night elsewhere, fearing to remain in the house, which doubles up as the church. Zavrıchko told Forum 18 that neighbours told Babaev that on 27 February five men had again come to the house. It was that night that they decided to flee Nakhichevan.

Zavrıchko reported that Babaev and his family have taken refuge in the country's second city Gyanja (Gänca). "I don't know if they'll be able to return to Nakhichevan. We don't know if it is safe." He said the small community there of some 17 Adventists is now unable to meet for worship and could hold no service last Saturday, the Adventists' holy day. "They're frightened," he told Forum 18.

Babaev wrote to Azerbaijani president İlham Aliyev on 25 February, informing him of the way police refused to protect him and calling on the president to protect his constitutional rights as a citizen of Azerbaijan. Zavrıchko told Forum 18 there has been no response from President Aliyev so far. "We are hoping for a presidential response – and for a better decision locally. We are praying for this."

Abbasov once again affirmed to Forum 18 that everyone in Azerbaijan enjoys the right to freedom of conscience and freedom to practice their religion. He described it as "impossible" for anyone to drive out other residents of Nakhichevan and said there is religious tolerance in the exclave. However, he withheld all comment on Babaev's case until after his office has been able to look into it. "I asked my assistant to investigate this and will let you know," he pledged. He gave unclear answers as to whether he had contacted the police to discuss the threats.

A previous pastor of Nakhichevan's Adventist church, Vahid Nagiev, was deported with his family from the exclave in June 2002, although Azerbaijani law has no provisions for internal deportation. The Nakhichevan church (like many Protestant congregations across Azerbaijan) has been denied state registration (eg. see F18News 12 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=252).

Yet Abbasov rejected any suggestions that the authorities or residents did not want Adventists in Nakhichevan. "I don't know that

there are people here who hate others for religious reasons," he told Forum 18.

Zavrichko said that the threats against Babaev and the forthcoming trial of the imam of Baku's Juma mosque, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, are due to be discussed on 2 March at a meeting in Moscow of the regional branch of the International Religious Liberty Association. A separate case to confiscate the Juma mosque from its Muslim community began in court in Baku on 1 March after a preliminary hearing on 25 February (see F18News 20 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=258).

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