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AZERBAIJAN: Baptist and Adventist support for Imam at trial

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

At the opening of the trial today (22 March) of jailed religious freedom activist Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, Azerbaijan's Baptist leader Pastor Ilya Zenchenko and Adventist leader Pastor Yahya Zavrachko have spoken out in support of the Imam, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Baptist Pastor Zenchenko told Forum 18 that "the trial is a spectacle, a show. There is no basis for the charges against him. He is a victim." Adventist Pastor Zavrachko was as forthright. "I believe he is innocent. He only spoke up for people's religious rights." The Imam's brother, Najaf Allahverdiev, is not optimistic about the trial's outcome, speaking of "the usual procedural violations" and fearing that Imam Ibrahimoglu might be sentenced to several years' jail, possibly suspended if there is great international pressure. Meanwhile, members of Imam Ibrahimoglu's 1,000 year old Juma mosque are still fighting the authorities' attempts to evict them and turn the mosque into a carpet museum.

Azerbaijan's Baptist leader Pastor Ilya Zenchenko and Adventist leader Pastor Yahya Zavrachko have spoken up in support of the imam of Baku's historic Juma mosque, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev on the opening day of his trial. "I was there in court today to show my solidarity with him and offer my support," Pastor Zenchenko told Forum 18 News Service from the Azerbaijani capital on 22 March. "The trial is a spectacle, a show. There is no basis for the charges against him. He is a victim." Pastor Zavrachko was equally adamant. "I couldn't attend the trial today, but I believe he is innocent," he told Forum 18 from Baku on 22 March. "He only spoke up for people's religious rights."

The hearing in the case of Ibrahimoglu, which has been joined together with the cases of seven others, began on 22 March at Baku's Court for Especially Serious Crimes, with Judge Eynulla Veliev presiding. Ibrahimoglu, who was arrested on 1 December after being accused of organising protest demonstrations against the way last October's presidential election was manipulated, has been charged under Criminal Code Articles 220 part 1 (participation in mass disorder) and 315 part 2 (resisting the authorities). (See F18News 8 January http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=223).

Najaf Allahverdiev, the imam's brother, reported that two police officers appeared for the prosecution, claiming that Ibrahimoglu spoke up in the Juma mosque on 16 October for everyone to join the street protests. Allahverdiev insists his brother was not at the mosque that day at all, and that prayers were led by another imam, Adil Huseinov. "We have numerous people who can attest to that," he told Forum 18 from Baku on 22 March. Prosecutors also claimed Ibrahimoglu had called on his supporters to vote against corruption which, Allahverdiev reported, the procuracy experts had themselves found not to be anti-government.

Ibrahimoglu's lawyer, Elton Kuliev, appealed to the court for the investigation into his client to be closed due to lack of evidence, but the court rejected this. It also rejected Kuliev's appeal for Ibrahimoglu to be freed from prison while the trial continues.

"Unfortunately the trial began with the usual procedural violations," Allahverdiev complained. "We are not optimistic about the outcome." He said he feared Ibrahimoglu might be given a sentence of several years' imprisonment, though that sentence might be suspended if there is great international pressure.

Allahverdiev said his brother looked well at the trial. "This is the first time I have seen him in all the 115 days he has been held," he told Forum 18. Since his arrest and court-ordered three-month pre-trial detention, Ibrahimoglu has been held with dozens of other opposition activists in Baku's Bayil prison. "My brother was optimistic, even if we are not," Allahverdiev added.

The trial was attended by officials from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe and the Royal Norwegian and United States embassies.

Meanwhile, members of the Juma mosque are still fighting the authorities' attempts to oust them from the historic mosque they have been using for the last twelve years in Baku's Old City and turn the building back into a carpet museum, as it was in the later Soviet period. Allahverdiev told Forum 18 they have no date yet for the hearing of their appeal against the 1 March decision by Baku's Sabail district court that they must leave the mosque (see F18News 5 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=269).

Judge Yusif Kerimov ruled on 1 March that the community had to leave the building "immediately", but after international protests

he suspended his own verdict on 11 March, allowing the Muslims to remain in the building pending the appeal decision. After that the Old City authorities that have been seeking to oust the community appealed against the suspension of the verdict, but Judge Kerimov rejected this appeal on 18 March, allowing the Muslims to continue to use the mosque. Allahverdiev told Forum 18 that prayers are continuing as usual.

Among the many international representatives who have been following the case against the Juma Mosque and its imam is Solomon Passy, the OSCE's Chairman-in-Office. On 16 March he met Najaf Allahverdiev in Baku to discuss the cases.

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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