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AZERBAIJAN: Twenty seven Juma mosque members detained, many fined, four beaten

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

In the wake of the police swoop on the Juma mosque in Baku's Old City on 30 June, 27 community members were detained and most were fined before being freed, mosque imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev told Forum 18 News Service on 7 July. He said four had been beaten in detention. He was particularly offended by the detention and interrogation on 5 July of eleven women, who were then fined. "It is an insult to arrest Muslim women," he complained. The community is still being denied access to the mosque. "We have been deprived of the right to meet collectively in God's house." Baptist pastor Ilya Zenchenko and Adventist pastor Yahya Zavrishko offered their support to the community. "The seizure of the mosque was unjust and a violation of their rights," Zenchenko told Forum 18.

In the week since police and court executors seized the Juma (Friday) mosque in Baku's Old City from its Shia Muslim congregation, a total of 27 community members have been detained, most of these have been fined and four have been beaten in custody, the mosque's imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev told Forum 18 News Service from the Azerbaijani capital on 7 July. "The mosque is under a police gendarme regime. We have been deprived of the right to meet collectively in God's house," he complained. Coming to the support of the Juma mosque community are Baptist leader Ilya Zenchenko and Adventist leader Yahya Zavrishko. "I'm indignant about the police action," Pastor Zenchenko told Forum 18 on 7 July. "The seizure of the mosque was unjust and a violation of their rights." Pastor Zavrishko agreed. "It is my personal view that the police's action was over-harsh," he told Forum 18 on 7 July. "Religious communities have the right to function without state registration."

Again on 7 July Forum 18 was unable to reach anyone in the Juma mosque offices, which are under the control of Imam Surkhai Mamedov of the Caucasian Muslim Board. He and his colleagues were installed by the police on 30 June when the mosque was raided and the community expelled. On 7 July Forum 18 was also unable to reach Rafik Aliev, the head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations. His assistant said he had already left for the day and said he had no mobile telephone.

Police stormed the mosque on 30 June to implement a March court order depriving the community of the building. However, the community - which is independent of the Muslim Board - overwhelmingly rejected Imam Mamedov. After allowing the community limited access to the prayer hall for prayers in the next few days, police then detained Ibrahimoglu's colleague Imam Adil Huseinov as he began evening prayers on 4 July. Eyewitnesses told Forum 18 that the police did not take off their boots and continued to carry sidearms in their holsters, and as they cleared the Muslims from the prayer hall they used "foul language" and manhandled community members. Police then sealed the building entirely to the original community (see F18News 5 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=355).

Ibrahimoglu reported that police pressured those detained to sign statements that they would no longer attend the mosque. He said a few did sign, but when the remainder refused the police ordered them to pay fines of 50,000 manats (70 Norwegian kroner, 8 Euros or 10 US dollars). "They were forced to pay, otherwise they would not be released, but only the court has the right to fine people, not the police," he told Forum 18. "Nor did the police give them receipts. This is economic pressure on believers, on top of the other pressures." He said they were all warned that if they come to the mosque again they will face heavier fines.

Ibrahimoglu was particularly offended that eleven of those arrested were women, detained and interrogated for one and a half hours at the Sabail police station on 5 July. Accused of holding an "unapproved religious meeting" they were fined under Article 299 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes "violation of the regulations relating to the creation and functioning of religious communities". "It is an insult to arrest Muslim women," he complained.

Ibrahimoglu said no community members are currently being held because he has instructed his community not to attend the mosque as long as the police remain in control of it. He added that his religious freedom organisation Devamm has received some 500 complaints from community members about the police actions and that the community will be seeking redress through the courts.

Despite international human rights agreements that Azerbaijan has signed, which guarantee believers the right to choose their own religious leaders without state interference, Article 9 of Azerbaijan's 1997 religion law requires Islamic religious organisations to be

subject to the Caucasian Muslim Board. The Juma mosque community rejects this stipulation, arguing that it conflicts with international religious freedom norms.

Robin Seaward, acting head of the Baku office of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), said his office is monitoring developments at the mosque closely. "We do have an interest in it and we are concerned," he told Forum 18 from Baku on 7 July. "We are concerned that religious freedom and freedom to exercise one's faith is preserved in Azerbaijan. Religious freedom is an absolutely fundamental human freedom and one of the main OSCE principles without which it is impossible to build a democratic society."

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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