FORUM 18 NEWS SERVICE, Oslo, Norway
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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

16 September 2004

AZERBAIJAN: Imam barred from travel to OSCE conference

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

Forum 18 News Service has been unable to discover from the Azerbaijani authorities why on 12 September border guards at Baku airport prevented religious freedom activist and imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev from travelling to Brussels to take part in an OSCE conference on racism and discrimination. Ibrahimoglu told Forum 18 he was not allowed to board his Lufthansa flight despite having checked in and passed through customs. "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not have any information on this issue," the ministry's chief spokesperson Metin Mirza told Forum 18. "The ban imposed upon me to visit the OSCE conference is the latest arbitrary action against me," Ibrahimoglu complained.

Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev, a religious freedom activist and imam of the Muslim community forcibly ousted in June from the Juma mosque in Baku's Old City, was denied permission to leave his native Azerbaijan to take part in a conference on tolerance and non-discrimination held on 13 and 14 September in Brussels by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Belgian Foreign Ministry. "I had been invited to take part in this conference and was honoured to represent both Azerbaijan's NGOs and the religious organisations in this forum at such a high level," Ibrahimoglu told Forum 18 News Service from Baku on 16 September. "The ban imposed upon me to visit the OSCE conference is the latest arbitrary action against me."

Ibrahimoglu has longed faced pressure for heading the mosque community, which refuses to submit to the authority of the Caucasian Muslim Board, as specified in Azerbaijan's restrictive religion law. Arrested in December 2003 on what he says were trumped-up charges, Ibrahimoglu was given a five year suspended sentence in April (see F18News 5 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=294). In August the Supreme Court finally rejected his community's appeal against the decision to strip them of use of the mosque (see F18News 12 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=393).

Forum 18 has been unable to discover why Ibrahimoglu was barred from leaving Azerbaijan to take part in the OSCE conference. Forum 18 asked Metin Mirza, chief spokesperson at the Azerbaijani foreign ministry, why the ban was imposed and whether that did not put into question Azerbaijan's commitment to allow its citizens to present their views in international fora on religious freedom and other human rights issues. "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not have any information on this issue," Mirza responded on 16 September. "In addition, I would like to state that the Ministry does not take on any responsibility regarding any non-governmental organisation member's actions."

An official of the Belgian Foreign Ministry in Brussels who had been involved in organising the conference said he was not aware that any delegates had been prevented from attending. He told Forum 18 on 16 September he was surprised to learn that the Azerbaijani authorities had prevented Ibrahimoglu from leaving his country to attend.

Ambassador Maurizio Pavesi, head of the OSCE office in Baku, told Forum 18 on 16 September that he had no information about the move and so could not comment, but would investigate the report.

Speaking generally, OSCE spokesperson Alexander Nitzsche said that his organisation regularly invites NGOs to take part in its conferences as a way of involving civil society in debate on important issues. "We appreciate the contribution of NGOs to the diversity of exchanges as a way of ensuring as much input as possible," he told Forum 18 from Vienna on 16 September.

The official list of participants in the OSCE Conference on Tolerance and the Fight against Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination (http://www.osce.org/documents/cio/2004/09/3475_en.pdf) includes Ibrahimoglu as an NGO representative from the Baku-based religious freedom group Devamm.

In the absence of Ibrahimoglu, the only Azerbaijani representative at the conference was the government delegate Rahim Rahimov.

Ibrahimoglu told Forum 18 that after passing through customs at Baku airport on 12 September he checked in with the Lufthansa airline and was given a boarding pass. "I went to the border control gate but unexpectedly the border guard authorities prevented me from going to board the aircraft, giving the reason that my departure from the country was prohibited."

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Despite his suspended sentence, Ibrahimoglu argues that the authorities do not have the right to obstruct his departure from the country. "Under the law, even taking into account my suspended sentence, the court decision does not contain any point limiting my leaving the country, only requiring the notification to the relevant juridical authorities regarding the change of my place of residence," he told Forum 18. "Despite the fact that I did not need to give notification of my going to the conference, I nevertheless informed the relevant authorities in writing about it through my representative."

He points out that since being sentenced he has already travelled abroad to a conference on religious freedom, held in May in the Ukrainian capital Kiev. He was not prevented from leaving to attend that conference.

Ibrahimoglu complained of what he said were ever tighter restrictions on his religious work and his campaigning for religious freedom. "Day after day I feel more and more the reality of the notion - a prisoner of conscience, and I am restricted and deprived of the most of my civil and political rights," he told Forum 18. "Besides, there is constant psychological pressure, which does not seem to cease. Practically, I am deprived of the opportunity to carry out either religious or the human rights activities in the field of religious freedom."

He added that the three thousand members of the Juma mosque community are deprived of the possibility to pray together either in the mosque or at anyone's private house. "The mosque has been closed under the pretext of repairs but, as was expected, no work is being done and the police control is still there." He reported that the "long repressions" against mosque members have led some, especially the elderly ones and women, into "deep depression". "For more than seventy days they have been unable to satisfy their spiritual needs and feel constant alarm concerning their tomorrow."

For more background information see Forum 18's Azerbaijan 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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