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## AZERBAIJAN: Nakhichevan Adventist church fights for survival

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

*Within days of the reopening of the Adventist church in Nakhichevan after a year when the community was banned from meeting, the local justice ministry informed the church it was seeking its liquidation through the courts. It claimed the community was wrong to have given its legal address as the church in Baku (of which it was a branch) when it registered in March 1996. One Adventist pastor told Forum 18 News Service he was reluctant to speculate on why the authorities are again seeking to prevent the church from functioning "as we don't want to offend the authorities". "But the justice ministry waited a full seven years before pointing out our mistake – and they're the people who registered our church." Idris Abbasov, head of the Nakhichevan branch of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, denied that the Adventists were being obstructed from worshipping. "No-one has informed me of any liquidation through the courts," he claimed to Forum 18. "They're engaged in prayers and services. No-one is stopping them from doing that."*

Within days of the official reopening on 12 April of the Adventist church in Azerbaijan's autonomous republic of Nakhichevan after a year when the community was banned from meeting, the local Ministry of Justice wrote to inform the church that it was seeking its liquidation through the courts. The justice ministry claimed that the community was wrong to have given its legal address as the church in the capital Baku (of which it was a branch) when it registered in March 1996. Asked why the Nakhichevan authorities are again seeking to prevent the church from functioning, one Adventist pastor, who preferred not to be named, was reluctant to speculate. "We won't give our view as we don't want to offend the authorities," he told Forum 18 News Service on 8 May. "But the justice ministry waited a full seven years before pointing out our mistake – and they're the people who registered our church."

The justice ministry lodged the case to liquidate the church on 7 April in Nakhichevan city court. No date has yet been set for the hearing.

Idris Abbasov, head of the Nakhichevan branch of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, strongly denied that Nakhichevan's Adventists were being obstructed from worshipping. "No-one has informed me of any liquidation through the courts," he claimed to Forum 18 on 8 May. "They're engaged in prayers and services. No-one is stopping them from doing that. We have freedom of religion."

At the same time as the justice ministry is seeking to liquidate the old registration, the community's application for re-registration with the State Committee has been stalled for more than a year. "We gave in the documents to the State Committee in Baku, but they always reply that they're still thinking about it," the Adventist pastor told Forum 18.

Abbasov told Forum 18 that his branch of the State Committee had never received any registration application from the Adventists – or from any other religious community – and that all such applications were being considered in Baku. He said no religious groups have yet been re-registered in the autonomous republic (see separate F18News article). However, he pledged that the Adventists would get re-registration with the State Committee.

No official of the State Committee in Baku was prepared to talk to Forum 18 on 8 May. Zemfira Rzayeva, the head of the registration department, angrily refused to discuss anything, complaining that Forum 18 publishes "untrue information" and misquotes State Committee officials after conducting interviews with them. Committee deputy chairman Namik Allahverdiev simply put the phone down after hearing that Forum 18 was on the line. Samed Bairamzade, head of department for relations with religious bodies, refused to give any information, claiming that he did not know whether it was true that the person calling him was a journalist or someone pretending to be a journalist.

The Adventist pastor pointed out that new moves from the Nakhichevan authorities seem to follow anything the church does. He said that after eleven church members wrote to the prime minister of Nakhichevan last December requesting to be allowed to meet for worship, the justice ministry wrote to warn them of the mistake in the registration document (the church received the letter only in January).

In February the community restored the Nakhichevan church and in March a new pastor, Ivan Uklein, arrived to lead the community. It was on 16 April, four days after the reopening of the church, that the justice ministry wrote to the church to inform it

that the ministry had lodged the liquidation case in court (the church received the letter only on 22 April).

The Nakhichevan Adventist church has faced a long history of harassment. The previous pastor, Vahid Nagiev, was hounded out of Nakhichevan with his family in June 2002 (though Abbasov denied to Forum 18 that they had been driven out of the autonomous republic). Keklik Kerimova, Nagiev's wife, told Forum 18 from Baku on 8 May that the family is "living like refugees" in the Azerbaijani capital, wanting and praying to be allowed to return home. She said they have no work and only one of their four children has been able to find a school.

The Adventist pastor stressed that the Nakhichevan congregation – which has eighteen adult members – holds all its services in Russian. "Officials react very badly when Azerbaijanis convert," he told Forum 18.

Only two Adventist congregations have been allowed to re-register with the State Committee since the re-registration drive was launched in August 2001, one in Baku and one in Azerbaijan's second city Gyanja. The re-registration drive saw hundreds of congregations of a variety of faiths failing to gain the new registered status.

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