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AZERBAIJAN: Police with hostile TV crew raid meeting

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Some 25 police and a hostile film crew from Space TV raided a Jehovah's Witness congress in the capital Baku on 12 June, echoing similar earlier raids on both Jehovah's Witnesses and Adventists in Azerbaijan's second city Gyanja [Gäncä]. Both police and the public prosecutor have refused to explain to Forum 18 News Service why a legally registered religious community was raided, a policeman stating that they "were fined and then released. We won't give out any other information by phone." Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 that "when the police arrived they gave the journalists orders of what to film," and that journalists tried to film interviews with local Jehovah's Witnesses and people from Georgia and the Netherlands against their will. Space TV falsely claimed that a criminal prosecution had been launched with the raid on "a non-traditional religion," but insists – against the evidence – that it also showed the Jehovah's Witness side of the story.

Some 25 police and a television crew raided a Jehovah's Witness congress in the Khatai district of the capital Baku on 12 June in an echo of a similar raid two months earlier in Azerbaijan's second city Gyanja [Gäncä]. "There was no need to march in with lots of police and television cameras in tow, and then show this on television," one Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18. "Our Baku congregation has registration and has a contract to meet there with the owner of the house."

Both the police and the prosecutor's office have refused to explain to Forum 18 News Service why a meeting of a registered religious community has been raided. "The Jehovah's Witnesses were fined and then released," the officer who answered the phone at the Khatai district police told Forum 18 on 21 June. "We won't give out any other information by phone." The official who answered the phone at the Khatai district prosecutor's office also refused to answer Forum 18's questions. No officials of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations – which originally registered the congregation – were available on 21 June.

During the April raid on a Jehovah's Witness meeting in Gyanja that the authorities claimed was "illegal" police also brought along a television crew (see F18News 26 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=551). Similar tactics were also used by Gyanja police against the Seventh day Adventist Church, with a film crew from ANS (Azerbaijan News Service) television - a local station noted for its aggressively hostile coverage of religious minorities – conducting hostile interviews with Adventist children. Despite the parents' clear objections, the police did nothing to prevent the children being questioned by the film crew (see F18News 22 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=458).

Kirill Kulikov, the Jehovah's Witness lawyer handling the case, stated that about 25 police officers burst into the meeting in the early afternoon of 12 June, accompanied by two or three journalists from the pro-government commercial television company Space TV. "When the police arrived they gave the journalists orders of what to film," Kulikov told Forum 18 from the Jehovah's Witness headquarters near the Russian city of St Petersburg on 20 June. He said the journalists tried to film interviews with local Jehovah's Witnesses and people from Georgia and the Netherlands against their will.

Kulikov said police shouted at and threatened the 200 or so Jehovah's Witnesses present and instructed them not to conduct religious activity. They checked everyone's identity documents, searched individual bags for Jehovah's Witness literature, and then divided the Jehovah's Witnesses into men and women, forcing all the men – about 30 were present – into a bus and taking them to the 34th police station. Kulikov reported that when one man refused to go police hit him more than once in the face and chest. The man later obtained a doctor's certificate to verify his injuries.

Police also raided a couple's second floor private flat, and, when some women present refused to open the door, the police broke the door down. Kulikov says the police had no right to search a private home without a warrant. Police nevertheless took away a large quantity of Jehovah's Witness literature, video-cassettes and a DVD player after an hour. These have not been returned by police.

Meanwhile, the 30 or so men were interrogated at the police station for between six and nine hours, with the last freed at 11 pm. "Police beat one of the men on the legs, though strangely the beatings left no marks," Kulikov told Forum 18. The only specific accusations were against the foreigners among the men, who were accused of conducting illegal religious activity. They were all ordered to leave Azerbaijan "or there will be problems".

In defiance of Azerbaijan's international human rights commitments, Article 1 of the religion law bans "religious propaganda" by

foreigners, while Article 300 of the code of administrative offences punishes offenders with fines of up to 25 times the minimum monthly wage or deportation.

Rasim Ismailov, news editor at Space TV, told Forum 18 that both the Society Department at the Khatai district administration and an officer of the 34th police station had informed the station of the forthcoming "operation" and invited them to come along. "They told us a religious organisation was preaching that all nations should be brothers," he told Forum 18 from Baku on 21 June. "This means if war with the Armenians restarts there'll be no-one on our side to fight." He said that both the local administration and neighbours claim that the Jehovah's Witnesses pay poor people 100 US dollars to join the group, but admitted he had no evidence for this. Jehovah's Witnesses deny bribing people to join their communities.

Space TV broadcast the report on the raid the following day. "The law-enforcement bodies have rendered harmless a missionary organisation propagating a non-traditional religion in Khatai district," the TV presenter said. "Most of the women and children used to come here secretly without letting their husbands or parents know," Space TV alleged. "The Khatai executive authorities have been aware of the Jehovah's Witnesses work in the district over a year. Although the law bans foreigners from propagating religion, the authorities have not prevented them from doing so," the presenter added, claiming that Norwegian, British and Georgian citizens were present as well as unspecified others "illegally living in the country".

Space TV also claimed that the Khatai prosecutor's office has instituted criminal proceedings against the congregation, but their lawyer Kulikov states that so far no-one has been summoned, fined or charged with any offence. Asked why he believed Space TV had claimed that a criminal case had been launched, Kulikov responded: "Most likely it sounds more sensational. The aim of such broadcasts is to portray us in a bad light."

Space TV's Ismailov insisted that the TV broadcast had given the Jehovah's Witnesses the opportunity to put their side of the story. "We give both sides to any story," he told Forum 18 and denied that they had filmed anyone against their wishes. "We never show pictures of people if they don't want to be filmed." He said the station had also sought a comment from Rafik Aliyev, the head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, as to why the Jehovah's Witness community had been raided when it had registration, but he refused to talk to Space.

The Jehovah's Witnesses have received a 9 June letter from Rafik Aliyev, about the Gyanja community raided in April (see F18News 26 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=551). Aliyev told the Jehovah's Witnesses that, before every event, they must inform the committee in advance, insisting that this is necessary otherwise "it is difficult to keep control if we don't have information". However, Aliyev gave no legal basis for his demand. "The law doesn't require us to do this," Kulikov told Forum18. "And in any case, when we did so in the past it didn't stop them persecuting us."

Aliyev warned the Jehovah's Witnesses that if they fail to act "within the law", he will have the group liquidated by a court. Aliyev has often claimed in the media – wrongly – that the Jehovah's Witnesses have been stripped of registration or been given a "final warning" for violating the law (see F18News 15 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=511).

Religious minorities the government does not like – especially Protestants, Muslims outside the framework of the state-approved Muslim Board and Jehovah's Witnesses – find it hard to registering religious communities. Jehovah's Witness sources told Forum 18 that they have not applied for registration for any congregations outside Baku as "we had a very hard experience registering the Baku congregation, and in other places there are not enough adults prepared to take the harassment they will get from the authorities by signing a registration application."

For a personal commentary, by an Azeri Protestant, on how the international community can help establish religious freedom in Azerbaijan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=482

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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