

9 January 2007

AZERBAIJAN: Biggest expulsion in eight years

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

In the biggest expulsion of foreigners involved in religious activity in Azerbaijan since 1999, two Georgian and two Russian Jehovah's Witnesses have been deported, with a Dutch and a British citizen about to follow, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The administrative deportation orders – which do not require any court proceedings – followed a massive police raid on a Jehovah's Witness meeting, which only four of the six foreign residents were attending. Jeyhun Mamedov of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations claimed to Forum 18 that "it wasn't a raid – you can't call it that." He refused to state what law the Jehovah's Witnesses had allegedly broken. Mamedov claimed on local public TV – which accompanied the raid - that "specialised equipment" was confiscated which "could be used for communicating secretly with secret services of other countries". Jehovah's Witnesses totally reject these allegations. A steady trickle of foreigners have in recent years been deported for their religious activity.

In the biggest expulsion of foreign residents involved in religious activity in Azerbaijan since 1999, four Jehovah's Witnesses have already been deported with two more about to follow, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The administrative deportation orders – which do not require any court proceedings – were signed by Colonel Hasan Aliiev, police chief of the capital Baku's Khatai district. They followed a massive police raid on a Jehovah's Witness convention in Baku's Kingdom Hall on 24 December which four of the six were attending. "The six are being deported administratively as they violated the ban on foreigners conducting religious agitation," Senior Inspector Elchin Mamedov of the Migration Police told Forum 18 from Baku on 9 January. "It is all being done in accordance with the law."

In defiance of the country's international human rights commitments, "religious propaganda" is illegal under Article 300 of Azerbaijan's Code of Administrative Offences, with deportation the punishment for foreign citizens. Many of the country's religious minorities want this ban – and other restrictions on their religious freedom - scrapped (see F18News 14 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=828). But even more restrictions on religious freedom seem to be planned (see F18News 14 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=827).

Two Georgian citizens – one of whom was not even at the convention - were deported in late December, with two Russian citizens deported on 8 January. Dutch citizen Robert Delahaye - who was also not present at the convention but in his private flat in the same building - and British citizen Chingiz Guseinov – who was born in Azerbaijan - are still being held at the detention centre, Jehovah's Witness sources said on 9 January. "They have been informed that their documents are still being examined, and this may take several days." Senior Inspector Mamedov told Forum 18 the deportation orders for them have already been signed and stamped and they would be deported to Amsterdam and London respectively "within days".

Senior Inspector Mamedov insisted to Forum 18 that the Migration Police had not issued the deportation orders, but were merely carrying them out. "We can't change the measures enacted by other agencies." Forum 18 was unable to reach Colonel Aliiev of the Khatai police to find out why he had ordered the deportation of the six, two of whom were not even present at the convention. His telephone went unanswered on 9 January.

Denis Vladimirov, the Russian lawyer for the Jehovah's Witnesses who has taken up the cases of the six, is intending to challenge the deportations through the courts. He himself was verbally threatened with deportation by officials, whilst preparing the defence cases.

Consular officials from the British and Dutch embassies have visited the deportees and Senior Inspector Mamedov said that the Baku office of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has also been involved in the cases.

Some fifty police, prosecutor's office and religious affairs officials – together with hostile television journalists – raided the convention. They searched the entire building without a warrant, detaining the six foreigners as well as many local participants and questioning them for many hours, and confiscating computers, religious books and money, much of which was never recorded in the confiscation record (see F18News 27 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=896).

"Besides shouting at and threatening local people and beating up some of them it seems police have not yet officially charged any

local people," one Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18. Religious books, computers and other equipment, and money confiscated during the extensive raid have not been returned.

Asked by Forum 18 on 9 January why the convention had been raided, one of the raiding party – Jeyhun Mamedov of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations – retorted: "It wasn't a raid – you can't call it that." Asked how he would describe it instead he refused to comment. He also refused to explain why the raid was staged or what law the Jehovah's Witnesses had allegedly been breaking. "Foreigners were taking part," was all Mamedov would say, without elaborating. "We will announce the conclusions of our investigation when it is complete," he said, before putting the phone down.

Forum 18 was unable to ask Jeyhun Mamedov what the "specialised equipment" was that he claimed was confiscated from the Jehovah's Witnesses. On the day of the raid, on 24 December, he claimed to local public television's news programme Carci that "specialised equipment" was confiscated which "could be used for communicating secretly with secret services of other countries".

The Jehovah's Witnesses totally reject all accusations that they had such "specialised equipment." "This is completely untrue – lots of things said in the 24 December news broadcast were untrue," one Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18 on 9 January.

The Jehovah's Witnesses also dispute assertions made by other officials that they should have informed the State Committee that they were holding the convention. "The State Committee's 'argument' that a convention took place that needed their permission is nowhere based in law," the Jehovah's Witness added. "They are perfectly well aware that we meet there. The only reason for the raid appears to have been to arrest some foreigners."

The Jehovah's Witnesses also complain that they cannot find larger premises to hold their conventions for their estimated 600 adherents in Azerbaijan. "We are forced to use our own small rented facilities because the State Committee immediately interferes and obstructs any other bigger meeting when they get to know about it," they told Forum 18.

First to be deported was the Georgian lawyer Manuchar Tsimintia, who was visiting the Baku congregation to help with legal questions and was not present at the convention. "He was brought to the train station, since he had a ticket, and the Migration Police who accompanied him apologised for his unlawful detention," the Jehovah's Witness stated. Then on 28 December the second Georgian, Giorgi Gogichashvili, was deported. Officials returned his passport to him only when his train crossed the border to Georgia.

The two Russian citizens, Faik Lihatsky (whose wife is an Azerbaijani citizen and lives at their home in Baku) and Murshud Kadyrov, were taken on 8 January in a car provided by the Migration Police to the Russian border and deported. "The authorities still remain silent as to the grounds for their actions, and even the Russian border guards were not told any reasons for the men's deportation," the Jehovah's Witnesses report. "The Azerbaijani authorities did not stamp their passports to the effect that they have been deported."

Migration Police Senior Inspector Elchin Mamedov insisted to Forum 18 that the passports of the Georgian and Russian deportees were not stamped to indicate their deportation. This was because citizens from the two countries do not need visas to enter Azerbaijan.

He refused to say why Lihatsky cannot live with his wife in Baku and practice his faith there freely. "If in any country of the world a foreign citizen breaks the law, they can be expelled," Mamedov insisted. "It doesn't matter if their spouse is a local citizen or not." He refused to say what the foreign spouses of local citizens are allowed to do in religious communities without being punished.

The Jehovah's Witnesses also point out that the State Committee agreed in writing on 25 March 2003 that they do not object to Dutch citizen Robert Delahaye "assisting the community as a servant".

The Jehovah's Witnesses stress that back in 1999, when nine foreign Protestants were ordered to be deported from Azerbaijan on religious grounds, a decision revoked under international pressure, then-president Heydar Aliiev was quoted in Azadlyg newspaper of 10 November 1999 as declaring: "our Constitution guarantees freedom of conscience and religion, and all rights will be defended.. These events will not be repeated."

However, a steady trickle of foreign citizens legally present in Azerbaijan has continued to be deported in retaliation for their religious activity. The Swedish pastor of the Cathedral of Praise charismatic church in Baku, Mats-Jan Söderberg, had his visa denied in June 2005 and was given two weeks to leave Azerbaijan, where he had lived for more than a decade. He was blacklisted and cannot return to minister to the congregation (see F18News 1 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=680).

By contrast, and as part of the State Committee's selective policy differentiating between religious communities, the Russian Orthodox, Georgian Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran and Jewish communities have been allowed to invite foreign citizens to lead their work in the country.

Even foreigners invited by local religious communities to give guest lectures to small numbers of adherents have to get permission from the State Committee. Both Baha'is and Hare Krishna devotees have complained to Forum 18 about the complex bureaucratic procedures needed to apply for such permission. (END)

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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