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NAGORNO-KARABAKH: Police beat up, threaten Baptist and family.

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

A Baptist in Nagorno-Karabakh has been beaten up, threatened with mind-altering drugs and had threats against his wife, for distributing religious literature on the street. At the same time his local church had all its religious literature confiscated. Police claim this is legal under martial law, which amongst other restrictions on civil liberties bans the activity of "religious sects and unregistered organisations". However a senior Nagorno-Karabakh representative has claimed to Forum 18 that martial law restrictions have ended and that "There are no restrictions on the activity of any religious communities". Other Protestants, Pentecostals, Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses have also all faced restrictions on their activity which still continue. At the same time the Armenian Apostolic Church has become the de facto state religion.

Baptists in Stepanakert, capital of the unrecognised republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, have reported police harassment during which church member Tigran Nazaretyan was beaten up and threatened as well as all the church's literature being confiscated. According to the Baptists, a police officer told Nazaretyan that "agitation" was not allowed during martial law, which has existed since 1992 when bitter conflict was raging between the local Armenian population and the Azerbaijani government. However, Sos Kevoorkyan, first secretary of the Nagorno-Karabakh representation in the Armenian capital Yerevan, claimed to Forum 18 on 21 October that martial law restrictions had ended and that life was "normal" once again. "There are no restrictions on the activity of any religious communities," he declared and said that he had not heard about harassment of the Baptists.

On 28 September, two men in civilian clothes approached Tigran Nazaretyan while he was running a street library in Stepanakert. Without identifying themselves they took several tracts that Nazaretyan offered them and left. A little while later, police officer Senior Lieutenant Garri Mirzoyan arrived and ordered Nazaretyan to take all the tracts and books with him to the police station. Mirzoyan described the literature as "banned" and "sectarian". Invoking the ban on agitating among the people during martial law, he warned Nazaretyan of the consequences of disobedience and returned the tracts and books.

However, when Nazaretyan reached the Baptist church police met him and took him back to the police station. At the station they asked him what he was doing in Stepanakert and who was financing his activity. Nazaretyan did not answer these questions, so an officer in civilian clothes who did not identify himself continued to interrogate Nazaretyan. He threatened him with imprisonment in the punishment isolation cell, the use of psychotropic (mind-altering) drugs, and that his wife would suffer. Several times the police officer he hit Nazaretyan on his face and head, but as Nazaretyan still did not answer he was released.

While Nazaretyan was being interrogated, other police officers arrived at the church and – after waiting for the end of the Sunday service - confiscated all the literature they could find. The Baptists report that the police did not present any search warrant from the procurator and left no official record of the books they had confiscated. They have appealed for the literature to be returned.

On 22 October, a duty officer at the Interior Ministry in Stepanakert declined all comment to Forum 18 on the behaviour of the police. Despite repeated attempts, Forum 18 was unable to reach Senior Lieutenant Mirzoyan at the police station and his phone was not answered. Following Forum 18's written request on 17 October to explain the action against the Baptists, Masis Mailyan, Nagorno-Karabakh's deputy foreign minister, promised to respond in writing, but had not replied as of 24 October.

"Officials assert that there was no pressure on Nazaretyan or threat to use psychotropic drugs," Karen Ohandjanyan, head of the Stepanakert human rights group Helsinki-92, told Forum 18 on 24 October. He reported that officials claim only to have suggested to Nazaretyan that his church should apply for registration to the Justice Ministry and "conduct its activity in Nagorno-Karabakh on a legal basis".

The Stepanakert Baptist congregation belongs to the International Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians/Baptists, which rejects registration on principle in all the post-Soviet republics where it operates. In February 2002 police raided Baptist meetings in Stepanakert, confiscated books and deported 24-year-old Arsen Teimurov, who had returned to his native Karabakh after becoming a Baptist whilst in prison in Ukraine.

The presidential decree imposing martial law – renewed annually by the parliament in Stepanakert – imposes restrictions on civil liberties, including banning the activity of "religious sects and unregistered organisations", banning demonstrations and imposing media censorship. The authorities claim these harsh provisions have not been enforced since 1995, a year after a ceasefire ended the war, but the threat still hangs over people. "As the law on martial law is still in force banning all kinds of activity and gatherings," Ohandjanyan stated, "on the basis of this the authorities can detain anyone violating the law."

Pentecostals, Adventists, Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses all faced restrictions on their activity in the 1990s, while the Armenian Apostolic Church became the de facto state religion. A member of another Protestant church, who preferred not to be identified, told Forum 18 on 23 October that their small community in Stepanakert can meet for worship, but only as long as it keeps a low profile.

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