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NAGORNO-KARABAKH: Officials defend restrictions on minority faiths

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

Following Forum 18 News Service's report of official threats to a local Baptist, Nagorno-Karabakh authorities have defended to Forum 18 the actions they took against him and their restrictions on minority religious activity. The authorities state action was taken, not on the basis of martial law as police claimed but, on the basis of street-trading and customs legislation, and deny that threats were made against the Baptist or his family. The authorities also point out that the only faith to have state registration is the Armenian Apostolic Church. Nagorno-Karabakh states that it abides by international human rights agreements. However all such agreements prevent religious activity being restricted because religious communities either do not have or wish to acquire state registration.

In response to Forum 18 News Service's article about threats to local Baptist Tigran Nazaretyan (see F18News 24 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=169), the authorities of the unrecognised republic of Nagorno-Karabakh have defended the actions they have taken against him and their restrictions on minority religious activity.

In a 30 October written response to Forum 18, based on information from the Nagorno-Karabakh Interior Ministry and the parliamentary commission for state and legal issues, the Foreign Ministry insisted that Nazaretyan had been banned from selling books, not on the basis of martial law as police originally stated but, "on the basis of current law under which trading in literature and other items on the street is forbidden". It said a licence is needed from the local authorities, in this case the mayor's office of the capital Stepanakert.

The Interior Ministry insisted that, contrary to Nazaretyan's testimony, "no threats were made against Nazaretyan, still less against his wife". It claims he was only given an explanation of the law, adding that the police "were forced to move to confiscate his literature" as he continued to maintain his street library after being warned. "The literature in Nazaretyan's possession was not registered in the Nagorno-Karabakh customs authorities," it declared. "Work is therefore now underway on the subject of the contraband literature confiscated."

Nazaretyan's church in Stepanakert 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.

The Foreign Ministry declares that all religious communities have the right to function, but under Nagorno-Karabakh's 1997 religion law, registration of religious organisations is compulsory. "I want to draw your attention to the fact that the Armenian Apostolic Church has such registration," the Foreign Ministry told Forum 18, "while no other confessions have applied with such a request to the Nagorno-Karabakh state justice administration.". Pentecostals, Adventists, Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses have all faced restrictions on their activity. A member of another Protestant church, who wanted to remain anonymous, 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.

As an unrecognised entity, Nagorno-Karabakh is not able to accede to international human rights agreements such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. However, it has declared that it abides by such agreements. Yet all such agreements guarantee the full expression of religious rights and do not allow religious activity to be restricted just because religious communities have not acquired registration or do not wish to acquire it.

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