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AZERBAIJAN: 11 weeks with no Sunday liturgy

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Amil Javadov, head of communications at Azerbaijan's State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in the capital Baku, told Forum 18 News Service he "can't say" why the only Georgian Orthodox priest cannot return to serve his community. The Azerbaijani State Border Service denied re-entry to the country to the only Georgian Orthodox priest (and bishop-designate), Georgian citizen Fr Demetre Tetrushvili, on 21 June. For the past 11 Sundays, the communities of its two state registered parishes in the northern Gakh Region have been unable to host the liturgy. "People go into the church and pray individually, but without a priest there is no liturgy, no service," a Georgian Orthodox Christian lamented to Forum 18. Officials had earlier denied permission for the community to invite a second priest, while a third parish was denied registration. The Church has been banned from re-opening all but two of its historic churches closed during the Soviet period.

For the past 11 Sundays, the Georgian Orthodox community of Gakh [Qax] Region of northern Azerbaijan has been unable to meet to celebrate the liturgy, Georgian Orthodox Christians complained to Forum 18 News Service. On 21 June the Azerbaijani State Border Service denied re-entry to the country to their only priest, Georgian citizen Fr Demetre Tetrushvili. "I can't say why he can't return," Amil Javadov, head of communications at the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, claimed to Forum 18 from the capital Baku on 7 September.

"People go into the church and pray individually, but without a priest there is no liturgy, no service," a Georgian Orthodox Christian lamented to Forum 18. "Fr Demetre is still banned from entering Azerbaijan."

Javadov of the State Committee insisted that Forum 18 should ask its question in writing as to why Fr Demetre cannot return to his place of service. Forum 18 put the question in writing the same day (as it had done on 29 June and 3 July). Like Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry (to which Forum 18 had put the same question on 29 June and 9 July), the State Committee had not responded to Forum 18 by the end of the working day in Baku on 8 September.

The telephones of Mehman Ismayilov, regional representative for the State Committee, went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 7 and 8 September.

Fr Demetre (secular name Levan Tetrushvili) was based at St George's Church in Gakh and is the bishop-designate for the Georgian Church's Azerbaijan Diocese. He had served in Azerbaijan from 2011 until his sudden denial of re-entry in June 2015. He also served in the second and only other registered Georgian Orthodox parish of St Nino in the nearby village of Alibeyli (see F18News 13 July 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2080).

Meanwhile, two of the five Sunni Muslims arrested in February and later imprisoned for selling religious literature without state permission – Azad Qafarov and Salim Qasimov – have had their appeals rejected. The appeal of the third – Imam Mubariz Qarayev – is due to continue at Baku Appeal Court on 11 September. Qasimov was freed in August at the end of his six-month sentence (see F18News 9 September 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2098).

Three prisoners of conscience arrested for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief – two female Jehovah's Witnesses and one male Shia Muslim – remain in detention at the National Security Ministry (NSM) secret police Investigation Prison in Baku. Two of them – the Jehovah's Witnesses – have had their pre-trial detention extended for a further three months (see F18News 9 September 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2098).

Struggle for churches, priests

Azerbaijan's Georgian Orthodox community – most of whom live in Gakh Region – have struggled to be allowed to re-open places of worship forcibly closed in the Soviet period and provide clergy for them.

St George's Church in Gakh re-opened and gained state registration first. In 2010 the State Committee registered St Nino's Church in Alibeyli. In 2012, Fr Demetre discussed with the authorities a request for permission for a priest to be allowed to serve in Alibeyli. "They initially said yes, then after two hours' discussion said it was impossible," he told Forum 18 from the Georgian capital Tbilisi

on 4 September.

Another parish – Holy Trinity Church in the village of Kotuklu – prepared a registration application, signed by 20 parishioners, Fr Demetre added. The application was handed to the State Committee. "For four years negotiations continued – they said this was wrong, that was wrong, this is missing, there weren't enough official founders. Ten times we corrected the documents. Then silence. They don't put anything in writing."

Amendments to the Religion Law, signed into law in July 2011, raised the required number of adult founders for a religious community from 10 to 50 (see F18News 14 December 2011 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1647).

Fr Demetre noted that the local authorities in Gakh Region had banned him from using Holy Trinity Church in Kotuklu for worship. "According to the law it is not forbidden, but they are their own law," he lamented to Forum 18.

St George's Church in Kurmukh is among other historic Georgian Orthodox churches kept forcibly closed since 2007 by the authorities, despite appeals from local people (see F18News 29 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1246).

The State Committee website lists four Georgian Orthodox churches (St George's in Gakh, St Nino's in Alibeyli, Holy Trinity in Kotuklu and St Michael's in Meshabash), with a short history of each and photos, even though it is only prepared to register two of them, Forum 18 notes.

Many registration denials

The Georgian Orthodox parish in Kotuklu is among many religious communities of a variety of faiths which have been refused state registration or re-registration since 2009, when re-registration was imposed yet again after revisions to the Religion Law.

No Jehovah's Witness, Baptist or Seventh-day Adventist communities have been able to gain state registration. Only three Protestant communities have been allowed to register (Lutheran, New Life and Word of Life), while many others have had their applications rejected or ignored. Many Sunni Muslim mosques have suffered or been threatened with enforced closure (see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2081).

The State Committee claims that 632 religious communities now have state registration out of an estimated 2,000 in the country (excluding the exclave of Nakhichevan [Naxçıvan], which has its own system of harsh state control on religious communities). However, given incomplete data on the State Committee website it is impossible to verify these figures. The State Committee has not responded to Forum 18's request for a full list (see F18News 5 August 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2086).

Partial figures on the State Committee website indicate that 13 mosques gained registration in 2013, 38 mosques in 2014 and 35 mosques in 2015 so far. No non-Muslim communities are known to have gained state registration since May 2012. In summer 2015 the State Committee removed from its website the list of 21 non-Muslim communities which had state registration, so it remains unclear if even they still have legal status.

Struggle for diocese

The Georgian Orthodox Church Holy Synod ruled on 3 June 2014 to create a separate Diocese of Gakh and Kurmukh, splitting it from the Georgian-based Diocese of Hereti. The new Diocese incorporates the various parishes in Azerbaijan. The Synod named Fr Demetre as the bishop-designate, the Patriarchate website noted the following day. So far, he has not yet been consecrated bishop.

"The Azerbaijani government knew about this decision and knew we wanted proper juridical status," Fr Demetre told Forum 18. "The old leadership of the State Committee was prepared to give the Georgian Church proper status."

However, the Holy Synod decision came a month after Elshad Iskenderov had been sacked as Chair of the State Committee. He was replaced in July 2014 by ruling party functionary Mubariz Qurbanli. Fr Demetre notes that Qurbanli has been less sympathetic than Iskenderov to allowing Georgian Orthodox Christians to exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief. "We don't have freedom, human rights or religious freedom," he lamented to Forum 18.

In addition, the authorities have refused to allow commemorations at the grave of St Mikael Kuloshvili. The priest was killed in 1918 and is buried in the grounds of St George's Church in Gakh. The Georgian Orthodox Holy Synod pronounced him a saint in 2012 (see F18News 13 July 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2080).

Media "slander"

On 15 July, the Russian-language news site Day.az published an attack on Fr Demetre, insisting that he had been told that foreign

citizens are not allowed to conduct "missionary activity" in Azerbaijan. The article then cited allegations about the priest, claiming these had "become known", though without giving any source for its information. It claimed that because of them, "parishioners themselves had become dissatisfied with him".

The author of the article – "Araz Mamedli" – is not known to have contributed articles to Day.az or any other news website. The website's partner sites in Azeri and English do not appear to have carried the article.

Friends of Fr Demetre described the article to Forum 18 as "slander".

"Day.az would not publish anything unless they had received approval from above," one Baku-based commentator on the media told Forum 18.

Church for "offensive" videos, but not for worship

Georgian Orthodox Christians expressed outrage to Forum 18 on 4 September that a video was filmed in St George's Church in Kurmukh depicting individuals dressed as monks fighting and digging up buried treasure. The video was filmed by and used to promote private Azerbaijani television channel ATV. Church members pointed out that they do not have access to the church for worship, while it can be used for purposes they regard as "offensive".

The Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate protested about ATV's filming and use of the video. A 5 September statement on the Patriarchate website described it as a "complete violation of religious feeling" of thousands of believers and called for the Azerbaijani authorities to take "appropriate measures".

In a statement on its website on 7 September, ATV defended its filming of "promotional, creative imagery" in a place of worship. But, it added, "taking into account the concerns of the Georgian Patriarchate" it had halted further use of the video.

Strangely, the Caucasian Muslim Board announced on 7 September that its head, Sheikh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade had visited St George's Church in Gakh and met Georgian Orthodox parishioners, according to the local media. It said he had "given help to the religious community", but did not say what this "help" consisted of. (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's July 2015 Azerbaijan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2081.

More coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Azerbaijan is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=23>.

See also the Norwegian Helsinki Committee/Forum 18 report on freedom of religion or belief in Azerbaijan at: http://www.nhc.no/content/uploads/2018/07/Rapport2_15_Aserbajdsjan_web.pdf

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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.

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