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AZERBAIJAN: Azerbaijan blocks ordination in Armenian monastery

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Azerbaijan's military blocked Armenian pilgrims visiting Dadivank Monastery for Sunday worship on 25 April and the ordination of a priest. The monastery is in territory returned to Azerbaijani control after 2020 fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh. Russian peace keepers accompany pilgrims to Dadivank, but "They too were surprised" by the sudden denial of access, says Nagorno-Karabakh's Ombudsperson, Gegham Stepanyan. The ordination had to be moved to another monastery. Azerbaijan's Defence Ministry has not responded on why it blocked access to Dadivank.

On 25 April Azerbaijani military forces blocked Armenian Apostolic Church pilgrims' access to the Dadivank Monastery. The Monastery is in territory now held by Azerbaijan, where the ordination of Deacon Manvel Sargsyan to the priesthood was due to take place that Sunday. Russian peace keepers accompanied the pilgrims to another monastery in the ethnic Armenian-controlled unrecognised entity of Nagorno-Karabakh, where the ordination went ahead.

The 9th century Dadivank Monastery – located just west of Nagorno-Karabakh's Soviet-era borders – was in territory handed back to Azerbaijan in late November 2020. A Russian peace keeping post is located outside the entrance to the monastery, to protect it and the priests who continue to live and serve there.

On 18 April 2021, Russian peace keepers told Armenian Apostolic Church leaders that Azerbaijan had stated that only 15 pilgrims would be allowed to visit the monastery on the following Sunday, not the planned 25. Then on the evening of 23 April, the Church was informed that only 10 pilgrims, including Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenian Apostolic Church Bishop Vrtanes Abrahamian, Deacon Sargsyan, and his parents, would be allowed through.

On 25 April, the 10 pilgrims – accompanied by Russian peace keeping forces – arrived at the Azerbaijani checkpoint just before the monastery. After a delay of 15-20 minutes – as against the usual 5 minute wait – Azerbaijan refused to allow the pilgrims through, blaming the coronavirus pandemic. Despite the Azerbaijani military's claims about the coronavirus pandemic, the Azerbaijani soldiers at the checkpoint were not wearing masks or maintaining social distance, Bishop Vrtanes told Forum 18 (see below).

Bishop Vrtanes told Forum 18 that he wants the problem of access to Dadivank to be resolved calmly. "We want the monastery to function and for pilgrims once again to be able to return there without problems," he said. "The Church should not be involved in political conflicts" (see below).

Azerbaijan's Defence Ministry has not replied to Forum 18's question about why it blocked the pilgrims' access to Dadivank Monastery, as well as the supplies of food for the monks (see below).

An official of the Russian peace keeping forces contingent said that no complaints had come in about events at Dadivank on 25 April. "All is quiet there," the official told Forum 18 from Stepanakert, the unrecognised Nagorno-Karabakh entity's capital. The official added that each week a "limited number of pilgrims" – usually about 11 - are allowed to visit the monastery with the agreement of the Azerbaijani military and the Russian peace keepers (see below).

Armenians complain that the Azerbaijani military's action was contrary to the November 2020 verbal agreement between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev that access to Christian sites would be guaranteed (see below).

The verbal agreement followed the 9 November 2020 tripartite agreement that ended a bitter 44-day war between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces over control of Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories (see below).

There have also been concerns about destruction by Azerbaijan of historic Armenian places of worship and other monuments. Azerbaijani human rights defenders have noted that this may be aimed at cementing the regime's grip on power. One Azerbaijani historian, who wished to remain anonymous, stated that Azerbaijanis who object to the destruction of Armenian heritage "prefer silent rage over jail time" (see below).

Sunday worship, priestly ordination obstructed

On 15 March, the head of the Armenian Church, Catholicos Karekin, appointed Deacon Manvel Sargsyan to the monastery community at Dadivank. Following the Sunday service at the monastery on 18 April, Deacon Sargsyan travelled with the returning pilgrims to Stepanakert, where he spent the week preparing for his ordination.

Nagorno-Karabakh's Bishop, Vrtanes Abrahamian, was due to ordain Deacon Sargsyan to the priesthood on Sunday 25 April at Dadivank monastery.

In line with usual procedure, the 25 people wishing to travel from Nagorno-Karabakh to Dadivank Monastery on 25 April for the worship service and the ordination provided their names and passport details to Russian peace keepers, who shared them with the Azerbaijani military controlling access to the monastery. The Armenian Apostolic Church at the same time told Russian peace keepers that an ordination would take place, which was why 25 people wanted to travel to the Monastery.

Each week a "limited number of pilgrims" – usually about 11 – have been allowed to visit the monastery with the agreement of the Azerbaijani military and the Russian peace keepers, an official of the Russian peace keeping forces contingent – who did not give his name - told Forum 18 from Stepanakert on 28 April.

However, on 18 April the Russian peace keepers informed Church leaders that Azerbaijan had stated that only 15 pilgrims would be allowed, not 25. Then on the evening of 23 April, the Church was informed that only 10 pilgrims, including Bishop Vrtanes, Deacon Sargsyan, and his parents, would be allowed through.

On 25 April, the 10 pilgrims – accompanied by Russian peace keeping forces – arrived at the Azerbaijani checkpoint just before the monastery.

"The Russian escort commander went to the Azerbaijani position, and about 15-20 minutes later he returned and said that they would not allow us to enter," Fr Sargsyan told the Armenian news agency Alik Media on 27 April. "They blamed the [coronavirus] pandemic. Of course, that is not the reason, and obstructing our planned event has a purely political context."

The Russian peace keeping official told Forum 18 that it normally takes only about five minutes for the Azerbaijani military to check the passports of the pilgrims against the list submitted in advance, and for the convoy to pass through. "Maybe it was a little longer at the start [in 2020], when there were some misunderstandings," he commented.

Despite the Azerbaijani military's claims about the coronavirus pandemic, the Azerbaijani soldiers at the checkpoint were not wearing masks or maintaining social distance, Bishop Vrtanes told Forum 18 on 28 April.

Bishop Vrtanes hastily had to change the location of the ordination to Gandsasar Monastery, which is within the territory of the Soviet-era Nagorno-Karabakh. The ordination took place that evening, and Deacon Manvel Sargsyan became Fr Atanas Sargsyan.

No food supplies allowed, no questions answered

The denial of access to the pilgrims on 25 April also meant that supplies of food could not be delivered to Dadivank Monastery. Bishop Vrtanes said that the monks have some supplies, but that the Church will send some more with the next convoy on 2 May.

An official of the press office of Azerbaijan's Defence Ministry in Baku refused to answer any questions on 28 April. He told Forum 18 to send any questions in writing, which it did at noon Baku time. Forum 18 had received no response from the Defence Ministry by the end of the working day in Baku to its question as to why its forces blocked the pilgrims' access to Dadivank Monastery, as well as the supplies of food for the monks.

Next Sunday?

Fr Sargsyan told Alik Media that he will try to rejoin the five other monks at Dadivank Monastery in the convoy on Sunday 2 May.

Bishop Vrtanes said that on 27 April, the Church submitted to the Russian peace keepers the list of pilgrims wishing to visit Dadivank for the Sunday service on 2 May. "We're waiting to see what will happen," he told Forum 18. "If we are not allowed to visit we will raise the issue more widely."

Bishop Vrtanes says he wants the problem of access to Dadivank Monastery to be resolved calmly. "We want the Monastery to function and for pilgrims once again to be able to return there without problems," he told Forum 18. "The Church should not be involved in political conflicts"

Accompanying pilgrims

Since November 2020, Russian peace keepers have accompanied pilgrims each Sunday to Dadivank. The convoy also brings supplies of food and other necessities for the monks.

"We only accompany the pilgrims so that there won't be conflict," the Russian peace keeping forces official told Forum 18 on 28 April 2021.

Russian peace keeping forces also accompany Armenian pilgrims to the monastery at Amaras in south-eastern Nagorno-Karabakh. The monastery is located within the borders of the Soviet-era Nagorno-Karabakh, but following the November 2020 ceasefire it is close to the line of contact between the two sides.

"We accompany pilgrims to Amaras to provide for their security," the Russian peace keeping official told Forum 18. "But no lists of pilgrims are required."

The Russian peace keeping forces contingent noted on its website on 27 April that two days earlier it had accompanied 75 Armenian pilgrims to Amaras Monastery for the Sunday service.

War, ceasefire agreement, access to religious sites

On 27 September 2020, conflict broke out between Azerbaijan and both the ethnic Nagorno-Karabakh entity and Armenia. Azerbaijan reclaimed large areas that the unrecognised entity of Nagorno-Karabakh had held since a war over the enclave in the 1990s. Up to a total of around 10,000 soldiers and civilians from both sides were reported to have been killed in the 2020 conflict.

In 9 November 2020, the Azerbaijani, Armenian and Russian leaders agreed a ceasefire in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, which came into force the following day. The agreement required Armenian withdrawal from territories around Nagorno-Karabakh, and the arrival of Russian peace keeping forces to oversee the ceasefire.

Over the days after the agreement was signed, negotiations continued over how it would be implemented.

"In a [telephone] conversation with Ilham Aliyev," the Kremlin website noted on 14 November 2020, "Vladimir Putin drew attention in particular to the presence of Christian churches and monasteries in areas which in accordance with the tripartite Agreement are being returned to the Azerbaijani Republic. In connection with this, he underlined the importance of guaranteeing the security and normal church activity of these shrines. The President of Azerbaijan showed understanding on this issue and said that the Azerbaijani side will act precisely in this vein."

A statement on the Azerbaijani presidential website the same day contained similar wording, noting President Putin's concern over Christian sites. "President Ilham Aliyev said that the Christian temples located in the territories returned to Azerbaijan in accordance with the trilateral statement, will be properly protected by the state. Christians living in Azerbaijan will be able to make use of these temples."

The Armenian Apostolic Church monastery of Dadivank – located in Kelbajar/Karvachar District just west of the Soviet-era boundaries of Nagorno-Karabakh - was one of the monasteries on territory returned to Azerbaijan's control. On 13 November 2020, Russian peace keeping forces arrived at the monastery. The Abbot of the monastery, Fr Hovhannes Hovhanesian, announced that he and the other monks would remain at the monastery after the area was returned to Azerbaijani control.

Dadivank Monastery is in territory that was due to have been handed back to Azerbaijani control on 15 November 2020, but this was later changed to 25 November 2020.

Azerbaijan's then acting Culture Minister, Anar Kerimov, told the Russian news agency TASS on 30 November 2020 that Azerbaijan would protect all Christian sites and keep them accessible. On Dadivank Monastery, which the Azerbaijanis call Khudavang, he said: "Both the Armenian community and the Azerbaijani community will be allowed access. In Azerbaijan there is an ancient Christian community, the Udis, the ancestors of Caucasian Albania. And they, of course, also consider these shrines holy. Therefore access will be open for both the Armenian community and the Udi community."

"Artificial obstacles"

The unrecognised Nagorno-Karabakh entity's Human Rights Ombudsperson, Gegham Stepanyan, condemned the Azerbaijani military's "artificial obstacles" over access to Dadivank Monastery on 25 April. "They gave various reasons, including the coronavirus pandemic and differences in the names on the list," he told Forum 18 from Stepanakert on 28 April. "Even the Russian peace keepers said this was baseless, and there was no reason to obstruct the pilgrims. They too were surprised."

Stepanyan says there should be no hindrance to access to the monastery, pointing to the verbal agreement which followed the 9 November 2020 ceasefire. He noted that in recent months any hindrances have been technical, with pilgrims sometimes having to

wait to be allowed through or being told they will have to leave their passport with the Azerbaijani military for the duration of the visit to Dadivank. In such cases, Russian peace keepers step in to prevent the Azerbaijani military from holding passports.

"But Azerbaijan is hardening its position," Stepanyan told Forum 18. "Something should be done to make Azerbaijan abide by the agreement."

Stepanyan said local Armenians would also like to have access to the town of Shusha to visit the cathedral. "But no negotiations on this are underway with the Azerbaijanis or the Russians."

Destruction of places of worship and other monuments

There are also concerns about the possible destruction of Armenian Apostolic Church churches and other monuments in Azerbaijan's newly-regained territory (<https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-church-vankasar-satellite-imagery/31213704.html>). These concerns have been reinforced by past destruction of Armenian cemeteries in Azerbaijan's exclave of Nakhichevan and elsewhere in the country (<https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-azerbaijan-julfa-cemetery-destruction-unesco-cultural-heritage/30986581.html>).

Azerbaijani human rights defenders such as the exiled Arif Yunus and others within the country have condemned the destruction of Armenian monuments, noting that this may be aimed at cementing the regime's grip on power (<https://www.hyperallergic.com/482353/a-regime-conceals-its-erasure-of-indigenous-armenian-culture>).

One Azerbaijani historian, who wished to remain anonymous, told the Hyperallergic arts website in February 2021 that Azerbaijanis who object to the destruction of Armenian heritage "prefer silent rage over jail time" (<https://www.hyperallergic.com/482353/a-regime-conceals-its-erasure-of-indigenous-armenian-culture>). (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Azerbaijan (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=23>)

For more background, see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429)

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in the unrecognised entity of Nagorno-Karabakh (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=22>)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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