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AZERBAIJAN: Muslims await police expulsion "with fear and flowers"

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

Muslims of Baku's historic Juma mosque are continuing to reject the 1 March court order that they must leave "immediately" the place of worship they have been using for the past twelve years. A court executor visited yesterday (4 March) and warned that next time he will come with police to expel them by force. "This has put the believers into a state of fear," mosque spokesman Seymour Rashidov told Forum 18 News Service. The Muslims have not been told when the police will arrive, but pledge they will greet the police with flowers. The planned expulsion has been widely condemned, with the US Helsinki Commission calling it "a page out of Azerbaijan's communist past".

In the wake of the 1 March court decision to expel them from their place of worship, members of the historic Juma mosque in the Old City of the capital Baku were warned by a court executor yesterday (4 March) that the next time he comes it will be with the police who will evict them by force. "This has put the believers into a state of fear," mosque spokesman Seymour Rashidov told Forum 18 News Service from Baku on 5 March. "The police could attack at any moment." Asked what the community will do when the police arrive, he declared: "We will greet them with flowers. We won't use violence." The expulsion order has provoked severe criticism from inside Azerbaijan and around the world.

On 4 March members of the Helsinki Commission, a United States federal agency promoting human rights, condemned the court-ordered expulsion as "a land grab dressed up as a legal proceeding" and "a page out of Azerbaijan's communist past". Human rights groups within Azerbaijan and other religious communities have likewise condemned the decision to expel the community from the mosque it has been using for the past twelve years.

The five-page court judgment, which the Juma mosque community received on 4 March, explains that the community is being stripped of its place of worship because it has no agreement from the Old City authorities to use the building, that it did not undergo re-registration as a religious community with the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations and that it is not subject to the Caucasian Muslim Board (see F18News 1 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=266).

The community rejects these arguments, saying that it has repeatedly tried to reach an agreement with the Old City authorities, who have failed to respond to their applications, that its 1993 registration as a religious community with the Ministry of Justice has never been revoked and therefore remains valid, and that the requirement in the country's religion law that mosques should be subject to the Muslim Board violates Azerbaijan's international human rights commitments.

Rashidov said he expects the community to lodge its appeal to Azerbaijan's Appeal Court "as soon as possible". He said the court ruling declared that the decision should be enforced "immediately" and that under the law has to be enforced even if the community appeals. He said the court executor refused to tell the Muslims at the mosque when the police will arrive to expel them.

As Rashidov was speaking from outside the mosque, he said Friday prayers were proceeding as usual.

On 2 March Rafik Aliev, the chairman of the State Committee, wrote to the mosque community insisting that it has to reach an agreement with the Old City authorities, submit itself to the Muslim Board and apply for re-registration if it wishes to function. Najaf Allahverdiev, brother of the mosque's imprisoned imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev, spoke to Aliev's assistant Nemat Keydarov on 4 March to seek the Committee's help in resolving the problems, but failed to get any help.

Aliev told Radio Free Europe (RFE) this week that claims that the authorities plan to turn the mosque back into a carpet museum are "disinformation". He claimed that the government has no plans to close down the building but insisted that the mosque may not be returned to the Juma congregation. "To vacate the mosque does not mean that it will be closed down. We are talking about vacating a building that is being illegally occupied," he told RFE. "The only grievance we have toward this religious community is that it occupies a mosque which is a historical and cultural building and, therefore, is the property of the Culture Ministry."

Rashidov told Forum 18 the community still does not know when Ibrahimoglu will be tried. Arrested last year, he remains in

three-month pre-trial detention in Baku's Bayil prison.

For more background information see Forum 18's latest 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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