

5 July 2004

AZERBAIJAN: Police seize imam and three others during mosque prayers

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

Police forcibly interrupted the prayers of imam Adil Huseinov - a colleague of Juma mosque imam and religious freedom activist Ilgar Ibrahimoglu - and three other Muslims, and detained all four overnight. Muslims consider it to be sacrilegious to interrupt prayers, but the start of prayers was the signal for the police to move in. The police also acted offensively in failing to remove their boots and weapons before entering the mosque, as Islam requires. Imam Ibrahimoglu told Forum 18 News Service that all four were beaten, threatened and insulted before being released this morning. However police then seized five other community members arriving for prayers this morning (5 July) and are still holding them.

Police stormed into the embattled Juma [Friday] mosque in Baku's Old City during prayers yesterday evening (4 July) and seized imam Adil Huseinov and three other community members as they were praying. "As soon as imam Huseinov began to lead the community in prayer the police stormed in, grabbed him on both sides and took him outside to a car and drove him away," Ambassador Steinar Gil of the Royal Norwegian Embassy, who witnessed the detention, told Forum 18 News Service today (5 July) from Baku. "The start of prayers was apparently the signal for the police to move in – they seem to have been instructed not to allow him to lead prayers." This police action is seen by Muslims as particularly offensive as, not only did the police fail to remove their boots and weapons, but it is also thought to be sacrilegious to interrupt anyone's prayers.

Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev, Huseinov's colleague and the mosque's main imam, told Forum 18 that the four were held overnight by Sabail district police where they were beaten, threatened and insulted before being released this morning. But he said police seized five other community members who arrived for Monday morning prayers and took them to the 39th district police station, where they are still being held.

No-one was available to comment on the police raids and the detentions at the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, which controls religious activity in Azerbaijan. Nigar Mamedova told Forum 18 on 5 July that only committee chairman Rafik Aliev was authorised to comment and he was not in the office until 6 July.

Nor did anyone answer the phone on 5 July in the mosque office which has, since the police raid on 30 June (see F18News 30 June http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=352) and the forcible installation of imams loyal to the Caucasian Muslim Board (see F18News 2 July http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=354), been under police guard and inaccessible to Juma mosque members.

Ambassador Gil told Forum 18 that one of the newly-imposed imams rejected by the community had led Sunday evening prayers for his 15 or so followers inside the mosque while up to 200 Juma mosque members waited patiently for them to finish. Then imam Huseinov began to lead the prayers. "The police didn't take off their boots and came in wearing sidearms, though they were not holding weapons or truncheons in their hands." Muslims regard entering mosques wearing shoes or carrying weapons as offensive.

Ambassador Gil said the community – which has rejected a court decision to oust them from the historic mosque they have been using for the last twelve years and has rejected new imams being imposed on them with the backing of the police – was "very dignified and disciplined". "They didn't allow themselves to be provoked and left very quietly after the police seized their imam."

Also witnessing the Sunday evening detentions was Robin Seaward, acting head of the Baku office of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

"Speaking as a religious freedom and human rights advocate I can declare that there is no religious freedom in Azerbaijan," Ibrahimoglu told Forum 18. He particularly objected to the arrest taking place during prayers and by police wearing boots inside the mosque.

He said between fifty and 200 police have encircled the mosque and they refused to open it up to allow the community to celebrate morning prayer. "Those held overnight were threatened that they will be arrested if they visit the mosque again," he reported. "This

is a police regime. The house of God no longer exists."

The authorities have long disliked imam Ibrahimoglu, known for his defence of the religious freedom of Christians and Muslims (see

F18News 5 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=294), and the mosque community, which insists on functioning independently of the Caucasian Muslim Board. The Sabail district court on 1 March ordered the community out of the 1000-year-old Shia mosque and the appeal court upheld the expulsion on 22 April. Court executor Nuridin Mustafaev told Forum 18 in April that expelling the Muslims from their mosque would be "unpleasant" but that he is obliged to carry out court orders (see F18News 26 April 2004

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=306).

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>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY