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AZERBAIJAN: Jailed for sharing faith, "non-constructive teaching" and "creating tensions between family members".

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

One Baha'i, Tavachur Aliyev, has been jailed for ten days, allegedly for not obeying the police, but really for sharing his faith, Baha'i sources have told Forum 18 News Service. Forum 18 has also been told that 18 Muslims were also jailed for two weeks, on charges of giving "non-constructive teaching" and "creating tensions between family members". The imprisonments took place during a fresh crackdown on religious activity in the exclave of Nakhichevan (Naxçıvan), between Armenia, Turkey and Iran. Other religious communities such as the Seventh-day Adventists have also suffered at the hands of the authorities, who deny that religious persecution takes place in the exclave, and also decline to talk to Forum 18.

One Baha'i and 18 Muslims were imprisoned for up to two weeks in September, during a crackdown on religious activity in the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan (Naxçıvan), between Armenia, Turkey and Iran, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Baha'i sources told Forum 18 that they believe the charges against Tavachur Aliyev were fabricated, to punish him for speaking of his faith to others. "Eighteen Muslims were given two week sentences on accusations of being Wahhabis," Haji Sultan, the representative of the Caucasian Muslim Board in Nakhichevan, told Forum 18 on 10 December. "But I don't believe they really were Wahhabis." He said all the Muslims held were local people but denied that any were imams.

"Wahhabi" is strictly speaking an adherent of the school of Islam which predominates in Saudi Arabia, but is widely – and incorrectly – used in many former Soviet republics to denote someone the authorities regard as a fundamentalist. In Uzbekistan, officials also use the term to describe Jehovah's Witnesses.

Nakhichevan – an Azerbaijani exclave wedged between Armenia, Iran and Turkey – has some of the strictest controls on religious activity in the whole of Azerbaijan. No religious communities currently have legal status and only mosques are allowed to function – all other minority religious communities, such as the Adventists, have been "crushed," in the words of one church leader. It has been suggested to Forum 18 that the authorities in Nakhichevan are doing what authorities in the rest of Azerbaijan would like to do. (see F18News 10 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=474).

Idris Abbasov, head of the Nakhichevan branch of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, has always denied that any religious persecution takes place in the exclave (see F18News 8 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=49). He declined to talk to Forum 18 on 10 December.

Baha'i sources told Forum 18 that Tavachur Aliyev was summoned to his local police station in mid-September, but when he arrived later than the appointed time he could not find anyone at the police station. He went to work intending to return later, but was detained the same day on accusations of not obeying the police. He was then sentenced to ten days' imprisonment.

The Baha'is believe the case was set up to punish him for speaking to others about his faith. "We are sure this was the real reason," one Baha'i told Forum 18, "though the authorities often find another pretext." The Baha'i insisted that if the true intent was to punish Aliyev for arriving late at the police station, as a first offence he should at most have been fined.

When Aliyev was freed at the end of his sentence, officials extracted a verbal promise from him not to speak further of his faith to anyone. "Of course it was wrong for officials to extract this promise," Baha'i sources told Forum 18. "Everyone in the country has the right to teach any faith." They point out that for Baha'is "our religion is our life" and that it is impossible not to speak of their faith.

Even while Aliyev was still in prison the Baha'i community complained to the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, but it wrote back to say that it had investigated his case and claimed that Aliyev had not been detained for his religious activities. Also in September, the Baha'i community wrote to the ombudsperson, Elmira Suleymanova, but she replied immediately to say that the case had been thoroughly investigated and that the Nakhichevan authorities had reported to her that Aliyev had not been imprisoned for his religious beliefs.

The names of the 18 Muslims detained are unknown and Haji Sultan declined to discuss further with Forum 18 the exact nature of the charges against them. "No official reason for the detentions was given," Haji Hajili, a researcher on a religious freedom project at the FAR Centre, a Baku-based research institute, told Forum 18 on 25 November. However, other sources told Forum 18 that they were imprisoned for giving "non-constructive teaching" and "creating tensions between family members". (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Azerbaijan 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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