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AZERBAIJAN: Frustration at latest unfounded allegations

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

In the latest of numerous unfounded allegations that Rafik Aliyev, head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, has made on local media, he has accused the Adventist and Greater Grace Protestant churches of, amongst other things, conducting "illegal religious propaganda" and of disturbing "citizens residing near places where prayers are held." "We Protestants have been trying to build up a relationship of trust with him and then he comes out with these unfounded accusations," one Protestant told Forum 18 News Service. Aliyev's committee was reported as taking "tough measures up to their closure." Aliyev used a similar approach in 2002 to close down Baku's Azeri-language Baptist church. Pastor Yahya Zavrishko, who heads the Adventist Church in Azerbaijan, told Forum 18 that "Last time Rafik Aliyev complained about us in the media a month ago we spoke to him and he confirmed he had no facts of any violations we had committed."

Protestants have expressed their frustration over the latest accusations against specific churches in the local media from Azerbaijan's senior religious affairs official. Rafik Aliyev, head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, alleged that the Seventh-day Adventist and Greater Grace Protestant churches are working illegally and threatened they could be shut down. "We Protestants have been trying to build up a relationship of trust with him and then he comes out with these unfounded accusations," one Protestant told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Baku on 15 February. "This time it's the Adventists and Greater Grace – in the past it has been other churches."

Rafik Aliyev was quoted by the local news agency MPA on 11 February as complaining that the Adventist and Greater Grace Churches involve children in services and teaching (Azerbaijani law requires parental permission before children can be involved in religious activity), conduct "illegal religious propaganda" and "disturb citizens residing near places where prayers are held". Aliyev reported that the State Committee was therefore taking "tough measures up to their closure", was "preparing documents" – possibly ahead of court action against them – to end such illegal activity and would be demanding responses from the churches by the end of February.

Rafik Aliyev was unavailable at the State Committee or his company on 14 and 15 February. One official, Vatis Sevullaev of the department that censors all religious literature, told Forum 18 on 15 February that the committee has taken no concrete steps yet against the Adventist and Greater Grace churches, but said the moves were prompted by "recent events". Apart from referring to the police raid on the Adventist church in Gyanja [Gäncä] last November in retaliation for what the authorities claimed were "illegal" activities going on there (see F18News 22 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=458), he declined to specify what these "recent events" were.

Sevullaev's colleague Zemfira Rzayeva declined to explain the Committee's planned moves to Forum 18 on 15 February – complaining that Forum 18 had repeatedly distorted her words after earlier interviews – but promised to respond to written questions. Forum 18 then asked in writing how the two churches are alleged to have broken the law, what evidence the Committee has to back up its allegations, what measures the Committee is planning, and why – given that individuals and groups are innocent until proven guilty – the Committee chairman repeatedly makes allegations in the media that have not been proved in a court.

Pastor Yahya Zavrishko, who heads the Adventist Church in Azerbaijan, and the leadership of the Greater Grace Church in Baku both deny any wrongdoing by their churches. They told Forum 18 on 15 February that the State Committee has not written to them about these complaints.

Rafik Aliyev frequently makes allegations against named religious communities which are never backed up with evidence (see F18News 9 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=272). "Last time Rafik Aliyev complained about us in the media a month ago we spoke to him and he confirmed he had no facts of any violations we had committed," Zavrishko told Forum 18 from Baku. "There have been no complaints from neighbours of any of our churches that we are disturbing them with noise."

Zavrishko said that so far, only children of church members have been involved in Adventist religious activities. "Parents bring their children to church events in line with their constitutional rights," he reported. "The State Committee has recently demanded that we get written permission from both parents."

He said he and his colleagues would be meeting deputy head of the State Committee, Samed Bairamzade, on 16 February to discuss Rafik Aliyev's latest allegations. "We want him to explain the statement as we have had no complaint from the Committee direct," Zavrishko told Forum 18.

Among Rafik Aliyev's many past unfounded allegations are: claims that Baptist Pastor Sari Mirzoyev had insulted Islam, which Aliyev used as a pretext to close Baku's Azeri-language Baptist congregation down (see F18News 12 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=252); accusations that Catholics conducted "illegal religious propaganda" (see F18News 9 September 2003); and claims that there is no religious literature censorship as his own state committee ordered Hare Krishna books to be destroyed (see F18News 28 March 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=20).

The local mass media is frequently used to conduct campaigns against religious minorities (see eg. F18News 22 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=458).

One Baku-based Protestant observer complained that repeated allegations in the media that Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses were conducting illegal activity and would be shut down creates a climate of hostility in society. "Such harsh words create negative attitudes among the wider public," the Protestant told Forum 18 from Baku on 15 February. "We're depicted as criminals and brainwashers of children. The goal of our church is to help the community and to raise up good people." The Protestant believed that Rafik Aliyev "is struggling to understand Evangelical Christians".

Another Protestant linked the allegations to statements Rafik Aliyev made on television late last year that churches would not be touched if they do not disturb local people in the area where they are based, do not pressure local residents to attend services and do not involve children in religious activities. The Protestant complained that Rafik Aliyev later cited complaints from neighbours about alleged noise and the presence of children at religious events to threaten to close churches and strip them of state registration.

"It's really hard to check who actually complained and whose children they might be," the Protestant told Forum 18. "Didn't the children come with their parents who are church members? I know that people don't invite children to church services. Services are for adults. But if children come they come with their parents and participate in Sunday school with the written permission of their parents. But the statements made by Rafik Aliyev give a broader space to him to be able to accuse any church of illegal activities now."

The Protestant questioned whether such demands over disturbance were levelled at other religious communities such as the Muslims or the Orthodox, schools, bars or other private companies. "It is obvious that the Committee is looking for a new way of trying to limit churches. It covers Rafik Aliyev so that he can say he's 'not going against religious freedom' in the country. And if he can't persecute churches for their faith openly, then he can just go on accusing and persecuting them because they disturb the peace in the community by their gathering and worship." (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=92

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<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=azerba>

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