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NAGORNO-KARABAKH: Beating and 12 day imprisonment for Baptist soldier

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Forum 18 News Service has been unable to reach V. Davidov, commanding officer of the unit in Hadrut of the army of the unrecognised Nagorno-Karabakh republic where Baptist conscript Gagik Mirzoyan was beaten and detained for more than ten days in early April before being transferred to an unknown location. Mirzoyan "is being persecuted for preaching the Gospel and because they found several Christian calendars in his possession," his relatives and friends told Forum 18 after meeting him at the unit just before his transfer. Mirzoyan has been threatened with a two year prison sentence.

Baptist conscript Gagik Mirzoyan – who is conducting unarmed service in the army of the unrecognised Nagorno-Karabakh republic - has been beaten and punished with more than ten days in detention since the beginning of April for sharing his faith with other soldiers and possessing several Christian calendars, his relatives and friends told Forum 18 News Service from Nagorno-Karabakh on 14 April. Before being transferred to an unknown location, he was threatened with a prison sentence of two years.

Forum 18 has been unable to reach V. Davidov, commanding officer of Mirzoyan's former unit in Nagorno-Karabakh's south-eastern Hadrut region, to find out why he ordered or allowed one of his troops to be beaten and detained merely for expressing his faith and possessing religious calendars.

Forum 18 also tried to find out from the defence ministry why Mirzoyan has been punished, but an official at the ministry told Forum 18 from the capital Stepanakert on 15 April that the minister, General Seyran Ohanyan, was out of the office and that no-one else was immediately available. Telephones also went unanswered at Nagorno-Karabakh's foreign ministry.

On 11 April relatives and friends went to military unit 42009 in Hadrut to see Mirzoyan after hearing that he had been beaten and given ten days' detention at the guardhouse. "When we got there he had already been held under arrest for twelve days but still had not been freed," they told Forum 18. They reported that when they were able to see Mirzoyan the "results of beatings" were visible on his face. Military personnel at the base told the visitors that Mirzoyan would be freed the following day, 12 April, and they would then be able to talk to him.

Despite these promises, Mirzoyan continued to be detained and during the day was threatened by the head of the unit's political department and by an official of the prosecutor's office that a case against him would be drawn up, handed to the prosecutor's office and he would be sentenced to two years' imprisonment. Forum 18 has been unable to discover what charges are being or might be levelled against Mirzoyan.

"Through the grace of God we were later able to have a ten-minute meeting with brother Gagik and discovered that he is being persecuted for preaching the Gospel and because they found several Christian calendars in his possession," his relatives and friends told Forum 18. "Now he has been taken away to an unknown destination and they are not saying where he is and what has happened to him."

Mirzoyan was called up in December 2004. After refusing to serve with weapons and swear the military oath because of his faith he was beaten and pressured by the commander of the unit to which he was transferred and Fr Petros Yezegyan, the unit's Armenian Apostolic military chaplain. Both the defence minister, General Ohanyan, and Fr Yezegyan emphatically denied to Forum 18 that Mirzoyan had been beaten (see F18News 6 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=483).

The army later agreed that Mirzoyan could serve in a non-combat role and he was transferred to the unit in Hadrut region (see F18News 22 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=517).

Nagorno-Karabakh has no provision for alternative service for those who have religious or other conscientious objections to participating in the armed forces. On 16 February a court in Stepanakert handed down a four-year prison term to Areg Hovhanesyan, a Jehovah's Witness who had refused to serve because of his faith but had expressed a willingness to perform an alternative civilian service (see F18News 22 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=517). (END)

A printer-friendly map of the disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=azerba> within the map titled 'Azerbaijan'.

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