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AZERBAIJAN: Selective obstruction of foreign religious workers

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

Azerbaijani religious communities inviting foreign religious workers are being selectively obstructed, Forum 18 News Service has found. In June, a Swedish pastor of a charismatic church, Mats-Jan Söderberg, was given two weeks to leave Azerbaijan – after being resident for more than a decade. Other religious communities - such as the Lutherans and Catholics - have told Forum 18 that they believe religious communities should have the right to invite foreign citizens to lead them, if the community wants this. The Catholic Church, Russian and Georgian Orthodox churches, Jewish communities, the Hare Krishna community and the Baha'i community are not experiencing currently visa problems for foreigners who work with them. A problem that Azeris have also complained to Forum 18 about is the intense pressure the authorities apply to non-Muslim religious communities, to get state registration as part of a foreign religious organisation.

Azerbaijani religious communities who wish to invite foreign citizens for religious work are still being selectively obstructed, Forum 18 News Service has found. Most dramatically, the Swedish pastor of the Cathedral of Praise charismatic church in the capital Baku, Mats-Jan Söderberg, had his visa denied in June and was given two weeks to leave Azerbaijan, where he had lived for more than a decade. He told Forum 18 from Sweden on 24 October that he has learnt that he has been added to the entry ban list and cannot return to minister to the congregation he still supervises.

Other Azerbaijani religious communities insisted to Forum 18 they should have the right to invite foreign citizens, if they wish to, and that these foreign citizens should have the right to lead religious communities if the community wants this, something the authorities insist is illegal at present.

Söderberg told Forum 18 the June visa denial "came very suddenly and was a surprise for us of course". He said that after thoroughly researching the issue "we realised I had been declared persona non-grata in Azerbaijan, even though the Foreign Ministry and the Religious Affairs Committee denied it".

He said that after the visa denial, he was allowed to stay on until July, but was then denied exit from the country and failed to make his flight. He was then allowed to leave the following day. In August the government's Committee for Work with Religious Organisations allowed him and his family to make a brief return visit to say goodbye to his congregation and pack his property, but after learning that he had been added to the entry ban list his wife and three of their children went without him. However, they were denied entry at Baku airport, held for 28 hours and then expelled.

Söderberg pointed out the irony of being barred from Azerbaijan, as he and his family had already decided to return to Sweden, as he believed the church was ready to be handed over to local leadership. "We will continue to work with our visa issues and as soon the door opens again I will travel to Baku of course," he told Forum 18, noting that he still has oversight responsibilities over the Baku church.

Another religious community with a foreign pastor is Baku's Evangelical Lutheran parish, which is part of ELKRAS (the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Middle Asia), which has its headquarters in St Petersburg. Church secretary Natasha Gaidarova complains that the current law does not allow ELKRAS - or the diocese to which her congregation belongs, which is based in the Georgian capital Tbilisi – to play a formal role in choosing the pastor. "We are part of ELKRAS and it is not only we, but ELKRAS, that chooses our pastor," she told Forum 18 in Baku on 18 October.

The Lutheran congregation has been led by a German pastor, Wolfgang Hering, since March 2005 and he is due to stay until the end of the year. "He gained his visa without problem – but he was given it as a favour," she said. "The congregation should have the right to invite the pastor it chooses."

Gaidarova said the congregation's pastor "does not conduct religious propaganda" and merely serves the congregation. "Work in the church is not propaganda – our church doors are open." She said that the congregation would ideally like a local pastor but, in view of the destruction of the mainly ethnic German Lutheran Church in Azerbaijan under Stalin and the difficulties since then of re-establishing it, at present there is no prospective candidate, so the congregation has to rely on foreign citizens.

Gaidarova said that Rafik Aliev, the head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, had declared recently that the provision in the religion law banning foreigners from conducting religious work will be amended. "It would be good if this were changed. This provision of the law doesn't match democratic standards." Forum 18 has been unable to confirm if and when such a change will be made.

Both Gaidarova and Pastor Hering confirmed to Forum 18 that their bishop, Andreas Stoekl, has been able to visit freely from Tbilisi when he needs to, and that Hering has not been obstructed in his parish work.

Fr Jan Capla, a Slovak who heads the Catholic community in Azerbaijan, reports that earlier visa problems for foreign Catholic priests have been resolved. "All four Catholic priests here are Salesians from Slovakia," he told Forum 18 at the Baku Catholic church on 19 October. "We have no problems with visas." He said none of them has applied for Azerbaijani citizenship, but said they were "open to it". Like the Lutherans, the Catholic community was destroyed under Stalin and has no native clergy. He said the nuncio, Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti, is able to visit Azerbaijan freely from Tbilisi.

But Fr Capla complained about the requirement in law that the leader of the community be an Azerbaijani citizen. "This is an anomaly under Catholic canon law," he told Forum 18. "The Code of Canon Law doesn't allow laypeople to lead a parish." He says he believes the ban on foreigners leading religious communities might only be a "temporary measure". "I don't think this provision in the law will last long."

Perhaps to head off potential problems from the government, the Russian Orthodox hierarch in Azerbaijan, Bishop Aleksandr (Ishchein), renounced his Russian citizenship and took Azerbaijani citizenship in November 2001. (Azerbaijan does not allow dual citizenship.) The Russian-born Bishop Aleksandr only came to Azerbaijan to take up a fulltime position in 1995, when he became rector of the Orthodox cathedral in Baku and dean of the parishes in Azerbaijan. His previous church service had been in Russia's North Caucasus.

The Georgian Orthodox Church, which has a functioning parish in Gakh in north-western Azerbaijan close to the border with Georgia also has a resident foreign priest, Fr Ioann Abesashvili, who has encountered no problems working in Azerbaijan.

The various Jewish communities have also been allowed to bring in foreign rabbis. "Meir Bruk, an Israeli citizen, has been our Ashkenazi chief rabbi for nearly four years," the Ashkenazi community leader Gennady Zelmanovich told Forum 18 from Baku on 1 November. "We've never had any visa problems." The most recent new arrival is Rabbi Matityahu Luis, sent by the Chabad Lubavitch movement in May 2005 to serve Jews in Baku.

The Azerbaijani authorities are highly sensitive about the role of foreigners in the country's religious life. Although Forum 18 can find no specific legal provision that bans foreign citizens from leading religious organisations, the religion law describes religious communities as "voluntary organisations of adult citizens" and the State Committee insists that foreigners cannot lead them.

In April 2003, however, after a long battle, the State Committee finally registered the Baku International Fellowship, an English-language Protestant community made up of expatriates. The fellowship is now seeking to employ a pastor.

Article 1 of the religion law, as well as Article 18 of the 1996 law on the status of foreigners and those without citizenship, guarantees foreigners freedom of conscience, but denies them the right to carry out "religious propaganda". Article 300 of the administrative code punishes any foreigner or person without citizenship involved in such "religious propaganda" with deportation, which may be supplemented with a fine of between 20 and 25 times the minimum monthly wage.

Numerous Iranian Muslim clerics, Lutheran pastor Gunther Oborski and some Western Protestant religious workers were deported from the country in the 1990s. Foreigners making short-term visits to local religious communities more recently have occasionally been harassed and expelled, especially if the local religious community is unregistered.

Baku's Hare Krishna community reports that it has been able to invite foreigners for short visits. Babek Allahverdiev told Forum 18 that the community has been able to submit invitations to the Foreign Ministry for foreigners from countries that are unable to buy visas on arrival at Baku airport, such as India. He said the ministry processes the applications within two weeks or so. "We have never had a refusal," he told Forum 18 at the Hare Krishna temple in Baku on 18 October.

Ramazan Askarov of the Baha'i community also reported that the State Committee has not obstructed visas for foreigners' short-term visits. "We recently held our convention here with foreign guests and the State Committee arranged visas for our foreign guests through the foreign ministry," he told Forum 18 in Baku on 19 October.

Despite government hostility to foreign involvement in religious activity, non-Muslim communities seeking registration are put under intense pressure to apply as part of a foreign-based religious organisation, which then has to justify why an Azerbaijani-based congregation is needed and explain who started it. Local Protestants complained to Forum 18 that this means, in effect, that local people cannot decide to form a non-Muslim religious community on their own initiative.

One such local Protestant community is a Pentecostal congregation in the town of Sumgait [Sumqayit], affiliated with the Assemblies of God. "The State Committee insisted there should be a letter from the Assemblies of God headquarters in the United States stating that it wanted to found a church," one church member told Forum 18 in Baku on 18 October. "That means the church in the US is considered to be the founder. Why can't we decide to found our congregation?"

As is usual for Protestant congregations, the application has now stalled. First lodged in spring 2005, it was returned by the State Committee at the end of June with numerous technical changes demanded. "We changed everything the State Committee demanded," the church member told Forum 18. The application was resubmitted in mid-September, but the State Committee has not yet responded. (END)

For a personal commentary, by an Azeri Protestant, on how the international community can help establish religious freedom in Azerbaijan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=482

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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