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AZERBAIJAN: Disturbing numbers of police raids on religious communities

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

Police raids on religious communities have continued to take place at a disturbing rate, Forum 18 News Service has found, especially on summer camps and open air preaching outside the confines of state-registered religious buildings. Baptists, independent Muslims outside the state-controlled Caucasian Muslim Board, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishna communities, and Baha'is are amongst those who have been attacked by the authorities. Nakhichevan, an exclave wedged between Turkey, Armenia and Iran, is the "worst region in the country" for religious freedom, a Hare Krishna devotee told Forum 18. This is an observation that people of several faiths have frequently made to Forum 18. One of the most serious attacks was a raid on a Baptist children's summer camp, in which ordinary police and NSM secret police officers arrived "in many cars, shouting and swearing, even at the women," a church member who was handcuffed and beaten up in front of children told Forum 18.

Some religious leaders and human rights activists told Forum 18 News Service in the Azerbaijani capital in late October that pressure on religious communities had eased as the authorities prepared themselves to ensure victory for pro-government candidates in the 6 November parliamentary elections. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) found that the elections "did not meet a number of OSCE commitments and Council of Europe standards and commitments for democratic elections."

"This year things have been a little better, as we tried to avoid possible problems," one religious minority leader told Forum 18 in the capital Baku. Yet in the past few months a disturbing number of police raids on religious communities have continued, especially on summer camps and open air preaching outside the confines of registered religious buildings.

One of the most serious attacks was a raid on a summer camp for 35 children held by Baku's Mehebet (Love) Baptist church in July in the town of Gakh [Qax] in north-west Azerbaijan, close to the border with Georgia. Some thirty ordinary police and National Security Ministry (NSM) secret police officers raided the house where the camp was being held on 21 July, the last day of the five-day camp. "I saw the police arrive in many cars, shouting and swearing, even at the women," church member Ramil Abdullaev told Forum 18 in Baku on 19 October. "I was hit in front of the children and lost one tooth." He said all twelve helpers were taken in handcuffs to the police station. "There were many questions – Who are you? Where are you from? – and accusations: You've sold out to the Armenians."

Also taken to the police station for examination was all the Christian literature, which was in Azeri. When the Baptist Union in Baku had faxed through a copy of the church's statute, which declares that the church works with children, "they saw that everything was OK", Abdullaev reported. The following morning all those detained were freed. "One secret police officer was hard, the other apologised. The NSM always work like that."

However, ten of those leading the camp were fined a combined total of 700,000 Azeri Manats (1,012 Norwegian Kroner, 130 Euros, or 152 US Dollars) for hooliganism under the Code of Administrative Offences. "We paid – what else could we do?" Abdullaev told Forum 18. The average monthly salary in Azerbaijan is around 147,300 Manats (213 Norwegian Kroner, 27 Euros, or 32 US Dollars).

Ilya Zenchenko, head of the Baptist Union, told Forum 18 in Baku on 19 October that after the raid on the camp in Gakh, the church informed the local authorities in advance where other summer camps were held and there were no further attempts to harass or obstruct the camps.

The only other problem came over an August day camp at the Baptist church in the southern port town of Neftechala, on the Caspian Sea south of Alat, prompted by complaints from two local residents. "One neighbour complained the camp was noisy," Pastor Telman Aliyev told Forum 18, "then he went on to complain that we shouldn't be telling Azerbaijani children about Christ." Aliyev said a second neighbour joined the complaints and tried to frighten parents not to send their children. He says this neighbour then hit two of the children and dragged them away.

When Aliyev went to the local police chief to ask him to prevent such abuses, he says the police chief responded: "Why should I defend you? You're preaching Christ!" Aliyev told him the church had the legal right to teach children whose parents had given their permission. "He refused to help, refused to write down that he was refusing to help, swore at me and kicked me out of his office," Aliyev told Forum 18.

Ten neighbours then wrote what Aliyev described as "false statements" alleging that there had been misbehaviour at the day camp. On 5 September, Aliyev was fined 84,000 Manats (121 Norwegian Kroner, 16 Euros, or 18 US Dollars) under the Code of Administrative Offences for allegedly teaching religion illegally. "I refused to sign the document and refused to pay. They told me they'd pass the case on to Baku." He said an investigator summoned him on 9 October to ask why he had not paid the fine. He responded that he considered it unjustified.

The authorities have repeatedly refused state registration – and hence a legal personality – to the Naftchala Baptists and many other religious communities across the country (see F18News 3 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=681).

The Baptist congregation in the southern town of Ali-Bairamali [Ali Bayramli], which meets in the home of a church member, was raided in the early summer, as Mehebet's assistant pastor Yahya Mamedov reported. "Church members were taken to the police, questioned and then released, though not before they were forced to sign statements that they wouldn't meet as a church," he told Forum 18 at the Baptist church in Baku on 19 October. "This was a psychological tactic to exert pressure." Mamedov also reported that the leader of the Baptist church in another town, whom he preferred not to identify, had been summoned and threatened several times early in the year.

Azad Azerbaijan television reported on 7 May that on 19 April the police closed down a mosque in Sumgait's [Sumqayit] 6th district, claiming that its documents were not in order and that it had been built "illegally" as its construction had been funded by a Saudi charity, Islam Nijat. The TV station quoted the mosque's imam, Haji Mahyaddin Jafarov, as stating that the mosque had been operating since 1994 and that it had never had any problems with documents over that period. The imam said he had appealed to the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations to allow the mosque to reopen, but had received no response.

Forum 18 was unable to find the closed mosque or imam Jafarov in Sumgait on 20 October, but the imam of the city's mosque under the control of the state-backed Caucasian Muslim Board, Haji Ibrahim, told Forum 18 that his was the only mosque in the city. Haji Akif Akaev, spokesperson for the Muslim Board, told Forum 18 in Baku that the closed mosque was nothing to do with the Board as his Board had not approved it.

Jehovah's Witness sources told Forum 18 that on 12 June, police officers and television crews raided an Azeri-language Jehovah's Witness meeting in Baku. Reports on the raid were shown by several television channels. "The reports contained negative and slanderous information on the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses," Witnesses complained to Forum 18 (see F18News 21 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=590).

On 22 June, the police raided a Russian-language Jehovah's Witness meeting in Baku, arrested the 67-year-old partially blind owner of the flat where the meeting was being held and his wife, and confiscated religious literature. Both husband and wife were questioned for four hours before being released.

Both raids came as Rafik Aliyev, chairman of the State Committee, was again threatening the Jehovah's Witnesses that their registration would be revoked and their activity banned.

In separate incidents in July, two Jehovah's Witnesses in Zakataly [Zaqatala], in the north-west of the country, were questioned by the police for sharing their faith on the street and ordered to stop. The two were held for five hours before being freed. Later that month, another Jehovah's Witness was ordered to leave a private home in the town and come to the police after sharing his faith with his relatives. Police threatened him with 15 days in prison.

Also in July, police in Barda in central Azerbaijan questioned two Jehovah's Witnesses and one was threatened with 15 days in prison and assaulted. Another Jehovah's Witness was assaulted in the town a few days later by local residents.

Police in a Baku suburb tried to raid the home of Tamila Sadykhova on 11 August while a Jehovah's Witness meeting was underway. When Sadykhova refused to let them in the police banged on the door and shouted for an hour, blockaded the home and cut off the electricity. When the Jehovah's Witnesses completed their meeting (in darkness), police took twelve of them to the local police station. "However, the officers on duty at the police station, having made a few enquiries, politely apologised and released them," the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Members of the Hare Krishna community – who have a registered temple in Baku but nowhere else in Azerbaijan – were banned by the local administration in the town of Gusar [Qusar] in north-eastern Azerbaijan from distributing their books in summer 2005. "They told us we can't spread Krishna teachings as we aren't registered locally, though we have some devotees in the town," Babek Allahverdiev told Forum 18 at the Baku temple on 18 October. "Azerbaijan is one country, but officials are dividing it up." He said the local administration in nearby Khudat [Xudat], close to the border with Russia, had banned a group of local devotees from

meeting in summer 2004, telling them to go to Baku if they wanted to meet legally.

Allahverdiev lamented that it is impossible for devotees to preach outside Baku, even in closed halls or private homes. "Police will just come in and ban such meetings." Nakhichevan [Naxçıvan], an exclave wedged between Turkey, Armenia and Iran, is the "worst region in the country" for religious freedom, he added. "Nowhere else is as bad. While in northern Azerbaijan officials use the excuse of needing to counter Wahhabism, in Nakhichevan they cite the border with Turkey and Iran." He said the few devotees who live there cannot meet together regularly "even in private flats".

The authorities in Nakhichevan have long had the reputation as the most repressive in Azerbaijan (see eg. F18News 10 December http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=474 and 13 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=475).

Nariman Gasimoglu, an Islamic scholar who stood for parliament as an opposition Popular Front candidate in the 6 November elections, reported that he had difficulties giving talks in Goichai [Goyçay] and Yevlakh [Yevlax] in central Azerbaijan in September, as part of his series of talks on religion and fundamentalism which he has given in recent years.

"The executive authorities in Goichai told me the political situation was very delicate so they couldn't provide me a good place to hold my talk on religious enlightenment," Gasimoglu told Forum 18 at the Popular Front party office in central Baku on 17 October. "They were polite, though." He said his meeting had to go ahead in an open air tea house, with a much smaller audience than he would have liked. He said in Yevlakh he was banned from holding a public talk. "Because of my political position the authorities were afraid of my talking to the people." He said the talk could only go ahead in the flat of a Popular Front party member.

Death threats following his talks have been made by Muslim extremists against Gasimoglu who is an advocate of religious freedom for all (see his personal commentary "Religious freedom, the best counter to religious extremism" http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338), but the police have been reluctant to protect him (see F18News 30 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=534).

Gasimoglu believes that if he tried to hold such talks again in some regions, such as Gusar [Qusar] in northern Azerbaijan, he would face obstructions from the authorities. By contrast, he reported no problems in holding seminars in the capital Baku or in Agdash in central Azerbaijan, south east of Yevlakh, between May and August this year.

Fear of police action has also led religious communities to restrict their activities. Ramazan Askarov of the Baha'i community said the community in Nakhichevan, an exclave wedged between Turkey, Armenia and Iran, has had to "suspend" its activity because of official hostility and the denial of registration (see F18News 3 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=681).

"The community holds no public activity and no teaching - our followers lead their private Baha'i life at home," he told Forum 18 in Baku on 19 October. He explained that it is a principle of the Baha'i faith that it is obligatory to meet together every 19 days to pray, discuss problems, teach and plan how to contribute to society. "Of course, our people have to come together as a community. It is our law, but in Nakhichevan they cannot practice it." Askarov said he believes if the community there resumes its activities the authorities would immediately crack down again.

Askarov said that in Sumgait, where the Baha'is have a registered community, the local policeman visited the flat where it meets in September. "He was very polite, asking how many people come, who they are," he told Forum 18. "He asked for a full list of names of our people, but we refused, referring him to the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, which registered the community."

One Protestant believes that religious minorities have become used to trying to avoid conflicts with the authorities and simply put up with official harassment. "We've got used to such harassment," the Protestant told Forum 18 in Baku. "It's like the way the Japanese just have to live with earthquakes."

Another Protestant leader who preferred not to be identified insisted that over the past two years the situation for minority faiths has improved. "The people in power now are more intelligent," he told Forum 18 in Baku on 17 October. "Back then those in power confused their views with official views." He said the authorities have closed watched his Church. "They can see we're law abiding and make no calls for violence or religious hatred."

However, as the continuing raids on religious events show, the authorities remain eager to pounce on any religious activity outside registered religious venues. (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

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<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