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NAGORNO-KARABAKH: Why can't Baptist Church function?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Masis Mailyan, deputy foreign minister of the unrecognised enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, has insisted to Forum 18 News Service that, despite the latest police raid on a Baptist congregation, the enclave follows the commitments contained in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, telling Forum 18 that "there are no restrictions on believers and all confessions are equal." However he contradicted himself by stating, contrary to Article 18, that, under the martial law that has operated since 1992, only registered organisations can exist and that Baptists "cannot hold services." Mailyan denied that only the Armenian Apostolic Church is allowed to function, but admitted that it is the only registered religious community. Other local Protestants have told Forum 18 that pressure on their work has eased in recent years and their congregations can function quietly, so it is unclear why the Baptists have been singled out for the authorities' continuing hostility.

In the wake of the latest police raid on a Baptist church in the capital Stepanakert, the deputy foreign minister of the unrecognised Nagorno-Karabakh republic, Masis Mailyan, has insisted to Forum 18 News Service that as long as martial law remains, only registered organisations - religious or otherwise - are allowed to exist. "The Baptist congregation has not applied for registration with the Justice Ministry - its meetings are not sanctioned," he told Forum 18 from Stepanakert on 27 September. "So they cannot hold services." He denied suggestions that only the Armenian Apostolic Church is allowed to function in Nagorno-Karabakh, but admitted it is the only religious community that has gained registration.

Nagorno-Karabakh has been under martial law since 1992, when bitter conflict was raging between the local Armenian population and the Azerbaijani government, a conflict which ended in de facto victory for the local Armenian forces. The presidential decree imposing martial law - renewed annually by the parliament in Stepanakert - imposes restrictions on civil liberties, including banning the activity of "religious sects and unregistered organisations", banning demonstrations and imposing media censorship.

Six police officers and one man in civilian clothes raided the prayer house in the evening of 20 September, Baptist sources told Forum 18 on 21 September. "Without presenting any documents they immediately began looking round the premises," the Baptists complained. "When asked to present a search warrant they responded that it wasn't a search but a look around." The police were "especially interested" in the literature published by the Baptist Council of Churches, seizing 32 copies of the Russian-language Herald of Truth, including a supplement in Armenian, 100 tracts and other publications.

The Baptists reported that after the first such raid, the police later returned the confiscated literature, but this has not happened after either the second or this latest raid.

Church worker Feliks Mamiev was then taken to the police station and questioned for more than two hours. "They were basically interested in the life of the church," the Baptists reported. "They said that in Nagorno-Karabakh, martial law is in force and therefore no-one apart from the Armenian Apostolic Church has the right to conduct meetings." Police seized Mamiev's passport and banned him from travelling anywhere.

Mamiev's church in Stepanakert belongs to the International Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians/Baptists, which rejects registration on principle in all the post-Soviet republics where it operates.

Forum 18 was unable to reach Nagorno-Karabakh's police chief Armen Isagulov on 27 September to find out why the Baptists cannot meet for worship freely and keep religious literature, but an official in his office who did not give his name refused to discuss the police raid on the Baptist prayer house. "No-one can answer your questions," he told Forum 18, before putting the phone down.

The Stepanakert Baptist congregation has faced problems in recent years. Church member Tigran Nazaretyan was beaten up and threatened in September last year for running a street library, and police confiscated books from the church (see F18News 3 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=174). In February 2002 police raided meetings, confiscated books and deported 24-year-old Arsen Teimurov, who had returned to his native Karabakh after becoming a Baptist while in prison in Ukraine.

Despite the latest pressure on the Baptist congregation, Mailyan insisted that Nagorno-Karabakh - which as an unrecognised republic

cannot sign up to international human rights agreements - abides by international religious freedom commitments. "Religious freedom officially exists here just as it does in other states," he told Forum 18. "There are commitments in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - we follow these. There are no restrictions on believers and all confessions are equal."

Other Protestant churches have told Forum 18 that pressure on their work has eased in recent years and their congregations can function quietly. "The situation is now open and our church is growing," one Protestant told Forum 18 on 27 September. "Within the last month we held a conference without problems." It remains unclear why the Baptist congregation has been singled out for pressure.

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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f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY