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AZERBAIJAN: Threats and deportation "to stop us talking about God"

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

On 22 August Russian citizen Imamzade Mamedova was deported from Azerbaijan to Russia for talking to nearby residents in the north-western town of Zakatala about her faith as a Jehovah's Witness. She is the ninth Jehovah's Witness to be deported from Azerbaijan for religious reasons in the last two years. Detained with her was Gamar Alieva, who had been "forbidden" by a local police officer back in 2000 from speaking about her faith. The same officer threatened the two women that the police "would punish us in such a way that we would stop talking about God," Alieva complained. Vali Aslanov of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in Baku dismissed complaints over the treatment of the two women. "What the Jehovah's Witnesses did was wrong, but then they blame the authorities," he told Forum 18 News Service. Zakatala is also where Baptist pastor Hamid Shabanov is in the police cell awaiting the resumption of his trial on charges of possessing a weapon, which his congregation insists was planted by police. However, the regional official of the State Committee rejects any suggestion that religious rights are violated in north-western Azerbaijan. "Here we have freedom of conscience and tolerance at the highest level throughout the world," Nizami Mamedov claimed to Forum 18.

Three weeks after being arrested for conducting "illegal religious propaganda", Jehovah's Witness Imamzade Mamedova was deported from Azerbaijan to Russia by car on 22 August, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 News Service on 26 August. "She was not given any deportation order, which is of course another violation of her rights," they complained. Mamedova, who is 58 and a Russian citizen, had been arrested with another Jehovah's Witness by police, who pressured them to renounce their faith. She was detained for two weeks in a Migration Service detention facility in Baku before being deported. During this time she was allowed almost no contact with the outside world.

No-one at the Russian Federation embassy in Baku was immediately available on 27 August to say whether it had defended Mamedova's interests, or those of other Russian citizens deported from Azerbaijan on religious grounds in recent years.

Mamedova was first arrested on 29 July together with Gamar Alieva in the north-western town of Zakatala [Zaqatala], where both live. Police accused the two women of conducting "illegal" religious propaganda and released them only after seven hours.

Alieva reported that the pair were arrested by local policeman Major Ilgar Bayramov after he found them discussing their faith with neighbours. Bayramov took them to the town police station, where they were interrogated by deputy police chief Kamandar Hasanov and five other officers. "Kamandar swore at us, insulted our faith and us personally," Alieva noted in her complaint to the General Prosecutor's Office, of which Forum 18 has seen a copy.

She said another of the police officers remembered her, as he had "forbidden" her back in 2000 from preaching her faith to others. "Knowing where I work, he started to threaten that I would be driven out of my job and that the police would punish us in such a way that we would stop talking about God," Alieva complained.

Police pressured the two to renounce their faith, but they refused. Alieva reported that police searched the two women's bags without the required witnesses present or any documentation. She also complained they were filmed for subsequent use on television. Police eventually said they would be fined, though without a hearing and without any documentation. Alieva and Mamedova were then freed.

Alieva reported that the following day the police came to her home when she was out and took her husband to the police station. He was forced to transfer from his bank account 16.50 Manats (109 Norwegian Kroner, 14 Euros or 20 US Dollars) as a "fine" on her behalf.

Alieva eventually received from the police a written decision dated 4 August accusing her and Mamedova of having conducted "illegal religious propaganda", an accusation she rejects. The police decision, of which Forum 18 has seen a copy, was signed by Eyub Mamedov (no relation).

Although it declares that no criminal charges are to be filed against either, it accuses Alieva of violating Article 299.0.2 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes "infringement of regulations relating to organisation of religious meetings or other events" with a fine of between 10 and 15 times the minimum monthly wage. Mamedova is accused of violating Article 300 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes "carrying out religious propaganda by foreigners or persons without citizenship" with a fine and/or deportation.

Alieva insists that the Azerbaijani Constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights (to which Azerbaijan is subject as a member of the Council of Europe) guarantee her right to discuss her faith with others.

Deputy police chief Hasanov refused to discuss the harassment of the two Jehovah's Witnesses with Forum 18. "We're getting on with our job," he declared on 27 August, before putting the phone down.

Senior Inspector of the Migration Police Elchin Mamedov (no relation) claimed that the decision to deport Mamedova had been taken by the court of Baku's Khatai District. "The sect protested against the ruling and it has gone to a higher court," he told Forum 18 from Baku on 27 August. "Ask their lawyer." Jehovah's Witnesses say this information is incorrect. Asked why Mamedova was deported merely for conducting peaceful religious activity, Mamedov responded: "I'm not authorised to make any comment."

Defending the deportation of Mamedova was Vali Aslanov, an official of the Legal Department of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations. "The police said she did something in Zakatala. They were right to deport her," he told Forum 18 from Baku on 27 August. He acknowledged that the Committee had received Alieva's complaint, but said they had merely passed it on to the General Prosecutor's Office. "We can't enquire into the content of the complaint," he insisted to Forum 18. "This is a matter for the police or the General Prosecutor's Office."

However, Aslanov maintained that the police were right to take action against the two Jehovah's Witnesses, claiming they had "forced" their religious views on others. "Talking about their faith is allowed, but not pressuring others to accept their faith." He declined to specify why he believed they had forced their views on others.

Asked why so many religious communities - including Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestants - face problems practising their faith peacefully in Azerbaijan, with prosecutions, fines, police raids, deportations and censorship of religious literature, Aslanov dismissed such complaints. "The state never does such things," he claimed. "What the Jehovah's Witnesses did was wrong, but then they blame the authorities."

Mamedova is the ninth foreign Jehovah's Witness to be deported from Azerbaijan in punishment for religious activity in the last two years. Six Jehovah's Witnesses were deported after being detained in a massive police raid on a congregation in Baku on 24 December 2006 (see F18News 9 January 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=898>). Two others, Nadezhda Kuznetsova and Anastasia Ivanova, both citizens of the Russian Federation, were deported from the northern town of Khachmaz [Qacmaz] to Russia by car on 17 July 2007.

Mamedova is of Azerbaijan descent but has been living for many years in Russia and has Russian citizenship. She moved back from Russia to Azerbaijan in early 2008, settling in Zakatala, where some of her relatives live.

After her and Alieva's release on 29 July, Mamedova was detained again by the police on 7 August. After being held in Zakatala for one day, she was transferred to the Migration Service detention facility in Baku. This is where the six foreign Jehovah's Witnesses were detained in 2006 before being deported.

Protestant Christians are also known to have been deported from Azerbaijan to punish them for their peaceful religious activity or otherwise forced to leave in recent years. The Swedish pastor of the Cathedral of Praise charismatic church in Baku, Mats-Jan Söderberg, had his visa application denied in June 2005 and was given two weeks to leave Azerbaijan. He was subsequently blacklisted from returning to Azerbaijan (see F18News 1 November 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=680>).

Zakatala is a particularly repressive region for members of religious communities the authorities do not like. Four police officers and two official witnesses raided the Zakatala home of another Jehovah's Witness, Matanat Gurbanova, on 25 March. Police confiscated Gurbanova's religious literature (see F18News 12 June 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1142>).

Azerbaijan's Jehovah's Witnesses have added the information about recent harassment of their communities to a case they have brought against Azerbaijan at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg (Application No. 52682/07).

Baptist pastor Hamid Shabanov - who leads a Georgian-speaking Baptist congregation in the village of Aliabad just outside Zakatala - is now facing criminal trial on charges that he held an illegal weapon, charges his family and congregation insist are fabricated. Shabanov was arrested during a police raid on his home on 20 June and he has been held since then. His trial began in Zakatala on 22 July, but on 29 July the judge referred the case back to the prosecutor for further investigation (see F18News 30 July 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1165>).

Local Muslims have also come under close official scrutiny (see F18News 12 June 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1142>).

However, Nizami Mamedov (no relation of Mamedova), the regional official of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, rejects any suggestion that religious rights are violated in north-western Azerbaijan. "Nothing is happening here, there are no problems," he told Forum 18 from Zakatala on 27 August. Asked about the harassment of Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists and Muslims locally over many years he responded: "Here we have freedom of conscience and tolerance at the highest level throughout the world."

Asked about the detention of the two Jehovah's Witnesses and deportation of one of them, and the prosecution of Baptist pastor Shabanov, Mamedov responded: "Some people want to throw dirt, but you should look at the reality." He defended the prosecution of Shabanov. "This is not related to religion - a weapon was found, and he has violated the law. No-one can violate the law." Told that the Baptists accuse the police of planting the weapon so that they could imprison Shabanov, Mamedov responded: "The police are a state organ. Why shouldn't I believe them?" (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>.

More coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Azerbaijan is at <<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=23>>.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806>.

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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