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AZERBAIJAN: Senior official "slanders Adventists"

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

Adventists and Muslims have rejected as "slander" accusations by Azerbaijan's senior religious affairs official that an Adventist pastor, Khalid Babaev, tried to gain converts through bribery, that the Adventist relief organisation ADRA is seeking to attract converts "at all costs" and that religious liberty group IRLA is an "Adventist organisation" funded by the United States "special services". Rafik Aliev made the claims in television interviews, but Forum 18 News Service has been unable to reach him to find out why he made the allegations. Babaev was forced to flee the Nakhichevan exclave after receiving death threats. IRLA's secretary general in Azerbaijan, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, imam of Baku's Juma Mosque, is awaiting trial while a court has ordered the community expelled from the mosque.

The leader of Azerbaijan's small Adventist church has described as "an absolute lie" accusations by the country's senior religious affairs official, Rafik Aliev, that the pastor forced to flee the exclave of Nakhichevan had tried to bribe local people to convert. "This is slander," Pastor Yahya Zavrichko told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Baku on 9 March. "He accuses Pastor Khalid Babaev completely without foundation. We should take him to court." Zavrichko also rejected Aliev's claims that the Adventist relief organisation ADRA was engaged in covert proselytism. A spokesman for the embattled Juma Mosque in Baku's Old City rejected another of Aliev's recent broadcast claims that the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA), a group that defends religious liberty for all with membership from a variety of faiths, is an Adventist organisation funded by United States "special services".

Aliev, the chairman of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, made the accusations against Pastor Babaev and against ADRA in an interview with the pro-government private television station Azad Azerbaijan TV on 5 March. His accusations came in response to strong criticism on 4 March from the US State Department and the US Helsinki Commission of moves to oust the Muslim community from the Juma Mosque and the refusal of the Nakhichevan authorities to register the local Adventist congregation and protect Pastor Babaev from death threats (see F18News 5 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=269).

Forum 18 tried to reach Aliev on 9 March to find out why he had made such unconfirmed allegations about Pastor Babaev, ADRA and IRLA, but he was not at the State Committee, while a man answering his telephone in his office at the organisation Irshad, who did not give his name, said Forum 18 had got the wrong number.

Idris Abbasov, head of the local branch of the State Committee in Nakhichevan confirmed to Forum 18 on 9 March that he had not discussed the difficulties of Nakhichevan's Adventist community with Aliev since early January and that he had not passed on to Aliev any allegations that Babaev had been attempting to buy converts. It remains unclear where Aliev obtained his information.

The TV broadcast quoted Aliev as declaring that ADRA, "which is involved in popularising Adventism, is planning to increase the number of its community at all costs". Saying that this is against the law, Aliev said these attempts "would be decisively thwarted". It is not the first time that Aliev has accused ADRA of trying to convert local people, charges ADRA has repeatedly denied.

Zavrichko insisted that while ADRA is the relief arm of the Adventist Church, it is a completely separate organisation that solely provides aid to people in need regardless of their faith. "ADRA does not get involved in attracting people to Christianity," he declared. "People shouldn't mix up the Church with the charity - they are different organisations."

Seymour Rashidov, a spokesman for the Juma Mosque community, which is about to lodge its appeal against the court decision to taken away from it the building it has been using for the past twelve years, has complained of a "new misinformation campaign". "By saying that IRLA is an Adventist organisation that receives money from American special services he wants to create a negative impression in society," he told Forum 18 on 9 March. "It is very sad to hear these slanderous statements against believers and against the well-respected IRLA, especially from a high government official."

Rashidov described Aliev's claims as "consumed with hatred towards believers", describing him as one of the "main fighters against missionary work".

The Juma Mosque's imprisoned imam, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allaverdiev, is secretary general of the Azerbaijan chapter of IRLA.

Zavrighko too insisted that while IRLA was originally founded by Adventists more than a century ago, its charter specifies that it is open to people of all faiths. "I don't understand why Rafik Aliev, a senior government official, is making such accusations. It's very sad."

Meanwhile, Abbasov insisted that the Adventist community in Nakhichevan cannot function on a regular basis without registration, although he was unable to tell Forum 18 which article of the country's religion law specifies that state registration is compulsory before a religious community can meet for worship.

He claimed that his office had rejected the Adventists' registration application because the proposed statute was "illiterate", that the community did not have the approval of the Nakhichevan city administration and that it did not have an identification number from the statistical office. "When they submit a correct application, we will register them within the prescribed one month period," he declared. "Until then they cannot meet on a regular basis."

Despite earlier promises to Forum 18 that he would investigate the death threats that forced Pastor Babaev and his family to flee from Nakhichevan, Abbasov said he could not get involved because the community is not registered. "I have no right to get involved," he claimed. "I can only work with organisations that have undergone registration."

Zavrighko told Forum 18 that he now believes the unidentified men that threatened Pastor Babaev were from the National Security Ministry. "We are people with no rights in Nakhichevan," Zavrighko complained. "There is no guarantee that if Khalid returns he won't be driven out again, and if we send someone new as leader they too could be kicked out." He said the congregation, which is mainly made up of elderly women, is now too frightened to meet for worship.

For more background information see Forum 18's latest 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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