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AZERBAIJAN: Muslims banned from praying outside mosques, Raids on Jehovah's Witnesses continue

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

A ban on worshipping outside mosques in Azerbaijan, imposed after an August bomb attack on a mosque which killed three people, is still in force Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Some Muslim men have also had their beards forcibly shaved off by police. "With the rise in the number of Muslims performing the namaz [Islamic prayers] the numbers who cannot fit inside mosques and have to pray outside has been rising in Baku," a Muslim who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18. "The authorities want total control of the situation - and this could be a challenge. They fear it could lead to the destruction of social order." Also, NSM secret police and the ordinary police have raided another Jehovah's Witness meeting. The NSM filmed those present, saying they would show the film on television to "disgrace" them. Those present, including a young child, were detained and questioned for five and a half hours, as well as being pressured to become Muslims. Two women were fined without being allowed legal representation. No official has been willing to talk to Forum 18 about either matter.

A ban throughout Azerbaijan on Muslims praying in the yards and on the streets near mosques, when they are full, is still in force, Forum 18 News Service has found. The ban was imposed by the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in late August - nearly two weeks after a 17 August bomb explosion at the Abu-Bekr Mosque, in the capital Baku, which killed three people. At Friday prayers on 29 August, several days before the start of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, police prevented worshippers from praying outside several Baku mosques, including the Shehidler Mosque (commonly known as the Turkish Mosque) near the parliament building, and the Lezgin Mosque in Baku's Old City. Only afterwards was the fact of the ban communicated through the media.

State Committee officials claimed the "temporary" ban - which covers the entire country - was to protect worshippers from further attacks. A member of the Shehidler Mosque confirmed to Forum 18 that the authorities had again prevented worshippers praying outside at Friday prayers on 12 September.

"With the rise in the number of Muslims performing the namaz [Islamic prayers] the numbers who cannot fit inside mosques and have to pray outside has been rising in Baku," a Muslim who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18 from Baku. "The authorities want total control of the situation - and this could be a challenge. They fear it could lead to the destruction of social order."

The order banning Muslims from praying outside mosques does not appear to have been published. Forum 18 has repeatedly tried to acquire the text from the State Committee, so far with no response. It remains unclear how long the ban will last, and whether it covers members of other faiths also.

Gamet Suleymanov, imam of Abu-Bekr Mosque who was injured during the bomb attack, told the local media that officers of both the 8th and the 9th police stations in Baku's Sabail District forcibly shaved off the beards of 20 men in his congregation on 26 August. Forum 18 has independently heard complaints over such forced shaving in the last month.

However, the person who answered the phone on 18 September of the head of the 8th Police Station - who refused to give his name or say if he was the head - refused to answer Forum 18's repeated questions. The same day, the assistant to the head of the 9th Police Station Hasan Abdullaev, who refused to give his name, denied to Forum 18 that any men had forcibly had their beards shaved.

The Abu-Bekr Mosque has been closed since the bomb blast. Imam Suleymanov has insisted that it should be reopened for worship as soon as possible.

Also, police have staged a further raid on a Jehovah's Witness meeting in a private home in what appears to be a growing campaign against members of the faith in Azerbaijan, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 News Service. On 6 September police raided a congregation meeting in the western town of Mingachevir [Mingacevir], not far from Azerbaijan's second city Gyanja [Gäncä].

No official has been prepared to explain to Forum 18 why the Jehovah's Witness meeting was raided. Police and court officials in

Mingachevir repeatedly refused to discuss the case with Forum 18. Firdovsi Kerimov, the regional representative in Gyanja of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, refused to answer Forum 18's questions on 17 September. A woman who answered the phone of Yagut Alieva, spokesperson for the State Committee in Baku, told Forum 18 on 17 September that Alieva was on leave. She declined to answer any questions and put the phone down.

In the middle of the afternoon of 6 September, when 21 people were present for a Jehovah's Witness meeting at a private house in Mingachevir, there was a knock at the door. The child of the householder opened it and saw three men dressed in civilian clothing, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Without asking permission or introducing themselves, they entered the flat and started filming those present, saying they would show the film on television to "disgrace" them. The three men stood at the door to prevent any of those present from leaving the flat. They briefly showed their identification and said they were officers of the National Security Ministry (NSM) secret police. Their names were Ilgar Gumbatov, Ismail and Alim (last names unknown).

Gumbatov claimed they had received complaints from neighbours and that the Jehovah's Witnesses who had gathered at that meeting had violated the Code of Administrative Offences. After some time, ordinary police officers entered. "They did not introduce themselves either and behaved very rudely, yelling, and insulting those present at the meeting," the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. The police wrote down the names of almost all present. Without providing any evidence of permission they searched the flat and forcibly took and searched the handbag of one of the women present.

After approximately twenty minutes the police, having taken away the literature that was being used at the meeting, took away by car to the Mingachevir Police Department four women - Saadat Javadova, Gulgiz Bagirova, Natella Gulieva and Reyhan Samedova. They also took the owner of the flat, Medjid Hasanov, together with his wife Maryam Hasanova and their very young child.

At the police station the Jehovah's Witnesses were questioned for five and a half hours. "Pressure was put on them to deny their religious convictions and accept the religion of those policemen, that is - the Muslim faith," the Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18.

In early evening police took those they had detained to the nearby Mingachevir District Court and led them into the hall for judicial hearings. They were ordered to stand, as the Court was in session. A judge came into the hall and demanded that everyone leave except Reyhan Samedova and Maryam Hasanova. The two women were told that they had violated the Code of Administrative Offences and that they had each been fined 10 Manats (71 Norwegian Kroner, 9 Euros or 12 US Dollars).

Court officials refused the women's request to be shown a document specifying which offence they had been accused of and what the fine was. Officials told them that if they wanted they could transfer the money into the bank account of the Police Department through the post office, or if they did not want to they did not have to pay.

Forum 18 has been unable, in repeated attempts to seek comment, to find out from either District Court or police officials what the exact status of the fine is, or why the Jehovah's Witnesses were treated in this way.

After this the other detained Jehovah's Witnesses were also summoned one-by-one into the hall for judicial hearings. However they said they considered the court hearing illegal without the participation of their lawyer and refused to give any testimony.

The detained Jehovah's Witnesses were then taken back to the Police Station. Police officers tried to force them to promise in writing that they would return to the court, but they refused to write anything. Later that evening they were freed, although none of their seized literature was returned.

The Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 17 September that the victims intend to lodge a complaint over the harassment with the Prosecutor's Office soon.

Jehovah's Witnesses have faced severe pressure over the past year, with raids in Zakatala, Baku and Gyanja. In August, in the wake of the Zakatala raid, Russian citizen Imamzade Mamedova was deported from Azerbaijan, the ninth Jehovah's Witness to be deported from Azerbaijan in punishment for religious activity in the last two years (see F18News 27 August 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1179>).

Also raided this year has been a Baptist congregation in the village of Aliabad in Zakatala District led by Pastor Hamid Shabanov. He was arrested in June and is awaiting trial on criminal charges which his family and congregation insist have been fabricated (see F18News 30 July 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1165> and forthcoming F18News article).

The continuing raids on religious communities have been condemned by human rights defenders such as the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly (see F18News 9 June 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1140>). (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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