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AZERBAIJAN: Nakhichevan detentions without trial, beatings and attempted kidnapping

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service

Three Muslims who read the works of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi were freed from prison on 11 February in the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan. Two were seized in Nakhichevan and the third in Baku and transferred to the exclave. All three were held without any court approval. They were beaten to force them to "confess" to a "crime" (distributing anti-government leaflets) one of their friends insisted to Forum 18 News Service they had nothing to do with. Police have confiscated passports from all three to prevent them leaving the exclave. A fourth fled to Turkey to evade possible arrest, though Azerbaijani police tried to kidnap him there. The Head of Nakhichevan's Department for Work with Religious Organisations Vuqar Babayev declined to discuss the cases with Forum 18. About six of the 200 or so Muslims arrested in November 2014 are still in detention, Yafez Akramoglu of Radio Free Europe told Forum 18. Several are being investigated on treason charges. Most of the 50 Nakhichevan mosques forcibly closed in November 2014 have reopened, but under new leadership "closer to the authorities".

On 11 February three Sunni Muslims who read the works of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi were freed from prison in the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan [Naxçıvan], their friends told Forum 18 News Service. The three had been held without any court approval for two and a half weeks and are said to have been beaten. Police had seized one of the three in the Azerbaijani capital Baku and forcibly put him on a flight to Nakhichevan. Police have confiscated passports from all three to prevent them leaving the exclave. It remains unclear if they will face prosecution and, if so, for what reason.

A fourth Muslim fled to neighbouring Turkey to evade possible arrest. Azerbaijani attempts to seize him back failed. An Azerbaijani consular official in the Turkish city of Kars denied all knowledge of the case (see below).

Meanwhile, at least six or seven of the 200 or so Muslims arrested in a government crackdown in Nakhichevan in November 2014 are believed still to be in detention, Yafez Akramoglu of Radio Free Europe told Forum 18 on 16 February 2015. One was sent to prison for two months, apparently without trial, while two or three others are in prison under investigation on treason charges (see below).

The telephone of Nakhichevan Interior Minister Ahmad Ahmadov went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 16 February. His deputy Qulu Rustamov put the phone down on 16 February as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself. The Head of Nakhichevan's Department for Work with Religious Organisations Vuqar Babayev declined to discuss the cases the same day, referring all questions to the Interior Ministry.

"The men were targeted because of their religious activity," one of the three men's friends insisted to Forum 18. "They read Risale-i Nur [Messages of Light, Nursi's collection of sermons]. Nakhichevan is a small place and everyone knows this."

The friend said fellow Muslims in Nakhichevan who read Nursi's works "face such problems at minimum once a year". Forum 18 has been unable to find out why they were targeted this time.

During the November 2014 mass arrests, about 60 Muslims who read Nursi's works were held only for a day or so before being freed (see F18News 4 December 2014 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2021>).

Severe restrictions on freedom of religion or belief

Nakhichevan - an autonomous territory of Azerbaijan on the Arax river wedged between Armenia, Turkey and Iran - has a population of more than 400,000 and its own government and parliament. The autonomous territory's restrictions on people's ability to exercise human rights, including freedom of religion or belief and other political and social freedoms are far tighter than in the rest of Azerbaijan. These include a de facto ban on people exercising freedom of religion or belief who are Shia Muslims outside state control, almost all Sunni Muslims meeting as communities, and non-Muslims such as Baha'is, Seventh-day Adventists, Hare Krishna devotees, or Russian Orthodox (see F18News 4 December 2014 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2021>).

Arrested or seized?

Police seized two of the three Muslims in Nakhichevan city, the capital of the exclave, on 24 January, their friends - who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals - told Forum 18. Police showed no warrant for the men's arrest and no court approved their detention.

At about the same time, police came to the Baku home of the third man, who is originally from Nakhichevan but now lives and works in the Azerbaijani capital. After seizing him they forcibly put him on a plane to Nakhichevan. On arrival he was transferred to prison. "Officers gave no reason for his detention and showed no documentation," friends told Forum 18. "His family didn't know where he had been taken. Only when they asked the police did they learn that he had been taken to Nakhichevan."

The three men were taken to the Justice Ministry's Pre-trial Detention Centre in the village of Boyukduz in Kangarli District, 20 kms (12 miles) north-west of Nakhichevan city.

Beaten, forced to confess

Once in detention, the three men were kicked and beaten "in various places" and threats were made against their families, the men's friends complained to Forum 18. Police pressured them to sign statements confessing to "crimes". The men apparently did so as a result of what their friends describe as "torture" and their "confessions" were filmed. Although their friends believe the "confessions" were filmed for subsequent showing on Nakhichevan television, they do not appear to have been broadcast yet.

Police officers were seeking "confessions" from the men that they were responsible for an incident in 2013, when leaflets criticising Nakhichevan's rulers were thrown from a car window in central Nakhichevan city. "But they had nothing to do with it," the three men's friends insisted to Forum 18.

Police have long been under political pressure to find those responsible, and others have earlier been pressured to admit to the "crime", Akramoglu of Radio Free Europe - a Nakhichevan native who was deported from the exclave in 2011 - told Forum 18.

Released, but can't leave Nakhichevan

The three men were released from prison on 11 February but, as their passports have been seized, they are unable to leave the exclave. Their friends do not know if they will face administrative or criminal prosecution. The three men do not have a lawyer. "No lawyers in Nakhichevan would dare to defend them," one of their friends told Forum 18.

One who got away

Another Nakhichevan-based Muslim associated with the other three, Chingiz Talibov, fled to neighbouring Turkey in late January to avoid what he feared would be his detention, his friends told Forum 18.

Once in Turkey, he was contacted by the Azerbaijani Consulate in the town of Igdir, 85 kms (50 miles) from the land border with Nakhichevan. His friends say Consulate officials "tricked him" into coming to visit. Three plain-clothed Azerbaijani police from Nakhichevan then tried to "kidnap" him in an apparent attempt to return him forcibly to Azerbaijan. However, Turkish police witnessed the kidnap attempt on the street and intervened to protect him. The Turkish authorities then deported the three plain clothes police officers back to Azerbaijan.

Nakhichevan police have in the past tried to kidnap in Turkey people from Nakhichevan they wanted back, Akramoglu of Radio Free Europe told Forum 18.

After the failed kidnapping, the Nakhichevan authorities stepped up pressure on Talibov's family in an apparent attempt to force his return home, his friends told Forum 18.

Ramin Yusubov, Vice-Consul at Azerbaijan's Consulate in Kars (which oversees the consular office in Igdir) claimed to Forum 18 on 16 February that "we know nothing about this". He insisted that Talibov "didn't come to the Consulate either in Kars or in Igdir". And he added: "There was no deportation by the Turkish authorities of any Azerbaijani police officers. If there had, we would have known about it."

Detention with no trial, investigation

During the mid-November 2014 crackdown, the authorities arrested about 200 Muslims. While most were released within one or two days (including about 60 Muslims who read Nursi's works), up to 50 of the Muslims were apparently still in detention in early December 2014. Up to 50 mosques - especially those Nakhichevan's authorities think are oriented towards Iran - appear to have been forcibly closed after the arrests (see F18News 4 December 2014 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2021>).

However, all but six or seven of those detained are now believed to have been released, Akramoglu of Radio Free Europe told Forum 18.

Two or three are reportedly being investigated on charges of treason and contact with the Islamic State movement, which has gained ground in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere, Akramoglu added. He said it is difficult to assess the validity of such accusations.

One other of those remaining in detention is serving two months' detention, although the sentence does not appear to have been handed down by a court and no specific allegations against him are known, Akramoglu told Forum 18.

New Mosque leadership "closer to the authorities"

Almost all the approximately 50 mosques forcibly closed in November 2014 have now reopened. "Most are under new leadership closer to the authorities," Akramoglu told Forum 18. "The authorities feared many of them were too close to the Iranians." Again, he said it was difficult to assess the validity of the state's accusations. The new imams were imposed on the mosques by the new Multiculturalism and Religious Affairs Committee, Akramoglu added.

The Multiculturalism Committee, established under an August 2014 Decree, aims to promote religion "in the right direction", control public rituals, especially funerals, and counter "religious sects", presumably within the Muslim community (see F18News 4 December 2014 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2021>). Forum 18 was unable to reach Committee Head Mirhashim Seyidov on 16 February 2015.

Forum 18 was unable to ask Babayev of Nakhichevan's Department for Work with Religious Organisations why the state-backed Multiculturalism Committee interfered in the leadership of mosques. He had already put the phone down before Forum 18 had the opportunity to ask.

"Everyone is of the Muslim religion"

Before he had ended the call, Babayev dismissed concerns Forum 18 has heard from Nakhichevan over restrictions on freedom of religion or belief. "All of the people in Nakhichevan are free to go to mosques or churches," he claimed. When Forum 18 pointed out that no non-Muslim places of worship - whether Christian churches, Baha'i temples or places of worship of any other faith - operate in Nakhichevan, he claimed: "There are no churches because everyone in Nakhichevan is of the Muslim religion."

The exclave's authorities have long had a de facto ban on religious activity by non-Muslim communities. Small groups of Baha'is, Seventh-day Adventists and Hare Krishna devotees were banned from meeting in the 2000s. Faik Farajov, then of the Department for Work with Religious Organisations, told Forum 18 in January 2010 that no non-Muslim communities exist. "The Adventists and Baha'is have all left," he claimed (see F18News 21 January 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1397>).

Babayev said Shia Muslims make up 95 per cent of the population and Sunni Muslims the rest. Asked why Sunni Muslims have difficulty maintaining mosques, he said: "They must go to Shia mosques. Who wants a Sunni mosque?" Told that Forum 18 has spoken to individuals who want to worship in a Sunni mosque, he admitted that only one of the exclave's 217 mosques is Sunni-dominated, the Kazim Qarabakir Pasha Mosque in Nakhichevan city.

Also known as the Juma mosque, this was built in the 1990s by the Turkish government's Diyanet (Presidency of Religious Affairs), which also named its imam. However, the Nakhichevan authorities did not allow any Turkish imam to lead the mosque after February 2011. The Mosque was under Shia leadership for a while (see F18News 13 May 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1570>).

When Forum 18 asked why the Nakhichevan authorities appear to believe that they have the sole right to determine what places of worship of what faith are allowed to function, Babayev put the phone down. Subsequent calls went unanswered. (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1690>.

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

See also Norwegian Helsinki Committee/Forum 18 report on freedom of religion or belief in Azerbaijan at: <http://nhc.no/filestore/Publikasjoner/Rapporter/2015/Rapport2_15_Aserbajdsjan_web.pdf>

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351>.

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>.

A printer-friendly map of Azerbaijan is available at
<<http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Azerbaijan>>.

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