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ARMENIA: "It would have ended badly, for them and for us"

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

Armenia's religious minorities face barriers to their exercising freedom of religion or belief from senior officials, politicians, media outlets and priests of the dominant Armenian Apostolic Church, several communities have told Forum 18 News Service. Owners of two separate venues, forced to cancel contracts with Jehovah's Witnesses in June, have told Forum 18 that they did so unwillingly after facing "pressure". One stated 18 that: "It would have ended badly, for them [Jehovah's Witnesses] and for us. If the meeting had gone ahead, state structures would have become involved." Also the criminal trial of a Pentecostal Pastor Vladimir Bagdasaryan, whose colleagues insist he should never have been prosecuted, nears its end in the central town of Sevan. Bagdasaryan told Forum 18 that the Prosecutor stated that he should be fined and then amnestied. "But this means I'll still be regarded as guilty and have a criminal record," he complained. Both the Collaboration For Democracy Centre and the Helsinki Committee of Armenia have documented numerous instances of official and media intolerance, leading to denials of freedom of religion or belief.

Armenia's religious minorities face obstructions to their exercising freedom of religion or belief from senior officials, politicians, media outlets and priests of the dominant Armenian Apostolic Church, several communities have told Forum 18 News Service. Owners of two separate venues, forced to cancel contracts with Jehovah's Witnesses in June, have stated to Forum 18 that they did so unwillingly after facing "pressure". They refused to specify in detail who threatened or pressured them. And the criminal trial of a Pentecostal Pastor, Vladimir Bagdasaryan, whose colleagues insist he should never have been prosecuted, nears its conclusion in the central town of Sevan.

Deputy Justice Minister Emil Babayan dismissed suggestions that some officials, politicians, and Armenian Apostolic priests acted to restrict the religious freedom of religious minorities, accompanied by hostile media coverage. "You need to hear both sides of each story," he told Forum 18 from Armenia's capital Yerevan on 11 July.

He said he had not followed the prosecution of Pastor Bagdasaryan in Sevan, but insisted his Ministry does not get involved in court cases. He said that if the Jehovah's Witnesses' contracts have been illegally terminated, they can go to court.

The telephone of government religious affairs official Vardan Asatsryan of the Department for Ethnic Minorities and Religious Affairs went unanswered each time Forum 18 called between 6 and 12 July.

The vilification of religious minorities in the media, social pressure, obstruction to their activities and behind the scenes official pressure continue as the Justice Ministry today (12 July) published on its website its latest proposed new Religion Law and amendments to other laws (see F18News 14 July 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1593>).

Pastor's trial

The trial of Pastor Bagdasaryan began under Judge Samvel Asatryan in the central town of Sevan on 31 March, with about seven or eight hearings since then. "I don't think this is normal - the case should have been closed down on the first day," he told Forum 18 on 11 July.

Pastor Bagdasaryan is accused under Article 164 Part 1 of the Criminal Code: "Obstructing the lawful professional activities of a journalist, or forcing the journalist to disseminate information or not to disseminate information, is punishable with a fine of between 200 and 400 times the minimum salary."

Following false claims in the media that an alleged murderer in Sevan is a Jehovah's Witness, priests of the Armenian Apostolic Church took a Shant TV crew to Sevan's Pentecostal Church in November 2010. The TV crew did not seek permission to enter private property where the Church meets, and refused to leave when asked, so Pastor Bagdasaryan tried to stop them filming. After the TV station broadcast a report claiming that the Pastor attacked journalists, a criminal investigation was opened. Police have refused to state what was "lawful" about the journalists' activities.

No charges have been brought against the journalists for their unauthorised activities on private property, and the Yerevan Press

Club told Forum 18 that prosecutors are not usually so quick to defend journalists and start criminal proceedings (see F18News 24 February 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1546>).

Pastor Bagdasaryan said the trial is now close to completion. The Prosecutor Fedrik Bagdasaryan (no relation) summed up the prosecution case on 8 July, and on 13 July Pastor Badasaryan's lawyer is due to give the closing defence address to the Court. A verdict is expected at a further hearing after that.

"They'll find me guilty - everything is moving in that direction"

Pastor Bagdasaryan said the Prosecutor demanded at the trial that he be convicted and fined 200,000 Drams (3,030 Norwegian Kroner, 388 Euros or 543 US Dollars), the minimum fine under Criminal Code Article 164 Part 1. "He told the Court I should then come under the amnesty declared by the President, so I won't actually have to pay a fine. But this means I'll still be regarded as guilty and have a criminal record," Pastor Bagdasaryan complained to Forum 18. "I feel they'll find me guilty - everything is moving in that direction."

At each hearing, a group of about 15 "burly young men" accompanied the two journalists to court. "They claim they need protection from us - they're deliberately trying to portray us as dangerous," Pastor Bagdasaryan added.

Each day there is a hearing, Shant TV, where the two journalists work, "repeats the same lies about us - that we're making people stupid, that we're dangerous, that we're a sect", Pastor Bagdasaryan complained.

Employees of Shant TV told Forum 18 from Yerevan on 12 July that no-one was available to comment on the prosecution of Pastor Bagdasaryan, why a group of about 15 "burly" men accompany the journalists to the trial, or why the station repeatedly broadcasts hostile programmes about religious minorities.

Pastor Bagdasaryan stressed that throughout the long-running court case, his Church has continued to meet undisturbed.

Vanadzor conference cancelled

Jehovah's Witnesses rented an auditorium in the northern town of Vanadzor for a three-day convention, due to be held from 10 to 12 June with about 600 attendees. However, when they arrived on the morning of 10 June they found the venue locked, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

The owner claimed that he had received a telephone call from someone threatening to bomb the building if it was used by Jehovah's Witnesses. The owner also told Jehovah's Witnesses that he was willing to allow the convention to take place only if he received approval from the authorities. Following unsuccessful Jehovah's Witness appeals to the police and regional authorities to ensure that the meeting was allowed to proceed safely, the convention was cancelled.

Consider the consequences..

In a meeting with Jehovah's Witnesses, Aram Kocharyan, Governor of the Lori Region (which includes the city of Vanadzor), confirmed that he had called the owner of the auditorium on 9 June and told the owner to consider the consequences of renting the facility to Jehovah's Witnesses. The governor then stated that his comments to the owner were not meant as a threat, but rather a statement that violence against Jehovah's Witnesses from members of a youth group could break out at the building. The governor agreed to notify the owner on the evening of 10 June that his office had no objection to the convention being held on the following two days. However, the owner chose not to provide the auditorium to the Witnesses for the convention.

Forum 18 understands that just before the convention was due to start, a youth organisation sent a letter containing threats if it was not cancelled, but has been unable to obtain a copy of the letter.

Tigran Badoyan, an aide to Governor Kocharyan, confirmed to Forum 18 from Vanadzor on 16 June that Jehovah's Witnesses had come to discuss their concerns with the Governor. But he denied that Governor Kocharyan had made any phone calls about the convention, insisting that owners and renters are free to come to their own agreements. He denied having heard of any threats to the Jehovah's Witness meeting.

Armen Abrahamyan, owner of the auditorium the Jehovah's Witnesses had signed a contract with, said a youth movement had issued "a sort of threat". He declined to identify the movement. He added that pressure had then come from the police and "other structures", but declined to name them either, saying this was "not a conversation to have over the telephone". He said the Governor was not one of those exerting pressure. Electricity had been cut off to the venue, but he said he did not know who had done this.

"We were in a no-win situation," Abrahamyan told Forum 18 from Vanadzor on 11 July. "It would have ended badly, for them [Jehovah's Witnesses] and for us. If the meeting had gone ahead, state structures would have become involved." He said the forced cancellation of the meeting was a violation of religious freedom, but stressed that he focuses on business. "We don't want conflict or

harm."

June Yerevan conference disturbed..

Jehovah's Witnesses signed an agreement to rent the Niko Wedding Hall in Parakar near Zvartnots airport to the west of Yerevan for two conventions, from 24 to 26 June, and from 1 to 3 July. The hall belongs to the Hatsi Burmunk company, owned by Mayis Khachatryan. About 1,000 Jehovah's Witnesses attended the first convention.

At lunchtime on the final day of the June convention, four Armenian Apostolic priests, a member of a youth movement and three women arrived unannounced at the hall. Two of the priests - Parakar parish priest Fr Gegam Kesablyan and Fr Yegishe Avetisyan, chaplain of the Apostolic Church's Youth Organisation - shouted at and insulted those present, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. They said they would not tolerate the continuation of such a meeting. After about half an hour they left.

Two police officers then arrived at the venue, a Major Harut (last name unknown) and Bagdasar (last name unknown). They did not interfere in the resumption of the convention, which continued until its conclusion that afternoon. "Nothing happened - the meeting proceeded normally," Major Harut told Forum 18 on 11 July. "No-one obstructed the meeting."

..then July Yerevan conference cancelled

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that an unidentified parliamentary deputy then arrived, who reportedly told the managers and then the owner to cancel the rental contract. The two managers - Armen and Ayvaz (last names unknown) - then told Jehovah's Witness leaders they needed to discuss the further rental.

Local media cited employees of the wedding hall and renters of neighbouring rooms as having summoned the priests. Panarmenian.net claimed on 27 June that "thanks to the correct argumentation of the priests", the owners cancelled the contract.

However, on 26 June the owner, Mayis Khachatryan, received telephone calls from the Prosecutor's Office, three parliamentary deputies and the tax office, sources who asked not to be identified told Forum 18. He was summoned the following day to the Chief of Police in Vagarshapat, Gevork Khachatryan (no relation). Citing instructions from unidentified senior officials, the Police Chief reportedly demanded that the owner not rent to Jehovah's Witnesses if he did not want his business to be closed down.

The managers of the hall, Armen and Ayvaz, confirmed to Forum 18 on 11 July that "political pressure, mainly from priests" had led to their reluctant decision to cancel the contract. They confirmed that police had become involved, but insisted they had arrived "to prevent hooliganism from anyone". They declined to discuss anything further.

Police Chief Khachatryan denied absolutely warning the wedding hall owner to cancel the contract with the Jehovah's Witnesses. "I didn't do it," he told Forum 18 from Vagarshapat on 12 July. He then put the phone down. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

The two police officers who attended the June conference, a Major Harut (last name unknown) and Bagdasar (last name unknown), would not discuss why the July convention was forcibly cancelled.

Forum 18 reached Fr Avetisyan at the Apostolic Church's headquarters at Echmiadzin on 12 July and asked why he disturbed a meeting organised by a different religious community. However, he put the phone down.

Forum 18's ten attempts to reach the Apostolic Church's spokesperson Fr Vahran Melikyan at his office in Echmiadzin and on his mobile on 11 and 12 July were unsuccessful.

Will President protect religious freedom?

The abrupt cancellation of the two meetings in Vanadzor and Yerevan repeats problems Armenia's Jehovah's Witnesses faced in 2010, when three such proposed conventions to be held in privately-owned buildings - in Vanadzor, the northern city of Gyumri and Yerevan - had to be cancelled.

On 8 October 2010, and again on 27 June 2011, Jehovah's Witnesses wrote to President Serzh Sargsyan, "respectfully requesting his assistance so that the Witnesses can exercise their Constitutional right to freely assemble and hold peaceful religious conventions in accordance with the European Convention on Human Rights". Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 they had received no response to either letter by 12 July.

On 12 July, President Sargsyan's spokesperson, Armen Arzumanyan, promised to provide Forum 18 the following day with information on what response the President had given to the Jehovah's Witnesses' letters.

Is intolerance government policy?

Some Armenian human rights defenders suggest that encouraging intolerance against non-Apostolic Church churches and faiths has become government policy. Stepan Danielyan of the Yerevan-based Collaboration For Democracy Centre observes that "the trend towards restricting the religious freedoms [sic] has become systemic" in 2009 and 2010.

Danielyan, writing in an April 2011 report "Coverage of Religious Issues in the Armenian Media 2010", bases his conclusion that religious intolerance is government policy on "legal initiatives of the [Armenian] Government, public statements of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Education, the situation in educational institutions, the reporting policy of television companies under [the] government's control, as well as the lack of reaction on the part of law enforcement agencies to obvious cases of religious discrimination" (see <http://religions.am/eng/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=97:coverage-of-religious-issues-in-the-armenian-media-2010&catid=1:articles>).

Danielyan observes that the Apostolic Church is seen "not only as a national-traditional, but also as a social-political institution, unlike other religious organisations". He sees this as "the main point in the promotion of religious intolerance in Armenia".

Based on over 800 articles from major Armenian newspapers and news websites, archived on the Collaboration for Democracy Centre website, the report documents many examples of media intolerance. These include the suggestion that so-called "sects" are responsible for suicides - even though police have not recorded one instance of suicide for religious reasons. Similarly, in relation to the November 2010 Sevan murder case, one newspaper implied that the Jehovah's Witnesses both undermined national security and turned the murderer into "a parent-killing machine".

Similarly, the Helsinki Committee of Armenia has also documented numerous instances of official and media intolerance, leading to denials of freedom of religion or belief. For a 2010 report "Freedom of Religion in Armenia - A Study", the Helsinki Committee conducted media reviews, surveys of public opinion, and interviews with religious believers, journalists, politicians, officials and human rights defenders.

Among the report's many conclusions and recommendations, it documents that "negative attitudes of the vast majority of the public towards non-Apostolic religious organizations were forged on the basis of unfounded gossip, as well as the non-professional publications and coverage by the mass media" (see <http://www.armhels.com/DownloadFile/344eng-Freedom_of_Religion_in_Armenia.pdf>). (END)

More coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Armenia and the unrecognised entity of Nagorno-Karabakh is at <<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=21>>

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>.

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

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