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AZERBAIJAN: Former prisoners of consciences' homes raided, literature confiscated

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

Police in Azerbaijan raided a meeting for Baptist worship in the home of former prisoner of conscience Zaur Balaev on 7 November, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The raid in Aliabad took place as Balaev and his wife Nunuka were in Moscow, where she is undergoing cancer treatment. Police detained and questioned one Baptist, as well as seizing religious literature including New Testaments. In a simultaneous raid on another home in the village, police seized more religious literature and questioned another former prisoner of conscience, Hamid Shabanov. Local police refused to discuss with Forum 18 why they had raided the two homes and seized literature including New Testaments. State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations spokesperson Orhan Ali claimed that if nothing illegal is found in the books, they will be returned. "This is not censorship," he insisted to Forum 18.

Police raided a meeting for Baptist worship in the home of former prisoner of conscience Zaur Balaev on 7 November, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The raid, which took place in Aliabad in north-western Azerbaijan, came as Balaev and his wife Nunuka were in Moscow, where she is undergoing cancer treatment. Police detained and questioned one Baptist, as well as seizing religious literature. In a simultaneous raid on another Baptist-owned home in the village, police seized more religious literature and questioned another former prisoner of conscience, Hamid Shabanov. Local police refused to discuss with Forum 18 why they had raided the two homes and seized religious literature.

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan's Jehovah's Witness community has failed in its attempt to seek damages from the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations for its repeated restrictions on the numbers of each religious book and magazine issue the community is allowed to import (see forthcoming F18News article).

Raids

At 11 am on 7 November, police from the regional centre of Zakatala [Zaqatala] raided two Baptist-owned homes in Aliabad, which is about 15 kms (10 miles) away.

About ten officers arrived at Balaev's home in his absence, where about eight local church members were gathered, fellow-Baptist Ramiz Osmanov told Forum 18 from Aliabad on 7 November. Officers showed the Baptists a search warrant, then took pictures of the premises and seized about 17 items of Christian literature, including New Testaments and hand-written notebooks.

"They told us it is illegal to meet without registration," Osmanov told Forum 18. "They said they would check the books by sending them for religious expert analysis by the State Committee in the capital Baku, and would return them if there is nothing harmful." He said the officers were respectful.

Both Osmanov and a woman present were forced to write a statement about what church members had been doing, but only Osmanov was taken to Zakatala Police Station for questioning. He was freed after an hour and a half, he told Forum 18. Officers did not indicate whether or not any administrative or criminal charges would be brought against those present at the meeting.

At about the same time as Balaev's home was raided, other police officers - many in civilian clothes - raided the nearby home of the Shabanov family. Only Hamid Shabanov and his wife were at home. "They told us we meet for worship illegally as we have no registration," he told Forum 18 from Aliabad on 8 November.

Officers confiscated New Testaments in Azeri and Georgian (many inhabitants of the region, like Shabanov, are native Georgian speakers), as well as Russian-language Bibles and other Christian literature and cassettes. "They drew up a list of the books they had seized, saying they would send the literature to the State Committee in Baku. But when I asked at the police station for a copy of the list they said the copier was broken and that they would give me a copy in the next few days," Shabanov told Forum 18.

"They told me that if the books were legal, they would be returned. If they were not, I would be fined," he added.

Shabanov said that - like Osmanov - he had been taken to Zakatala Police Station, where he was held until 5 pm that day. He said his wife had chosen to accompany him. Both husband and wife were required to write statements.

Prisoners of conscience

Balaev was imprisoned from May 2007 to March 2008 on charges he and his community insisted were fabricated to punish him for exercising his freedom of religion or belief (see F18News 19 March 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1102>). Shabanov was held in pre-trial detention from June to November 2008 while being investigated. In February 2009 he was given a two-year suspended sentence on charges he and his fellow-Baptists insisted were fabricated to punish him for exercising his freedom of religion or belief (see F18News 12 February 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1254>). Both trials were marked by multiple violations of the rule of law and legal procedure.

Police: no comment

Arif Babayev has been Police Chief of Zakatala Region Police since December 2011, replacing Faik Shabanov (no relation of Hamid). Babayev's telephone went unanswered each time Forum 18 called between 7 and 9 November. Reached on 7 November, the duty officer at Zakatala Regional Police refused to answer any of Forum 18's questions about the raids. He also refused to put Forum 18 through to any senior officers who might be able to explain why two homes were raided and why religious literature was seized.

Orhan Ali, spokesperson for the State Committee in Baku, insisted the raids in Aliabad were nothing to do with it. "What the police do is not our business," he told Forum 18 from Baku on 8 November. "It's their affair. Our task is to check the books which are sent to us."

Literature censorship

The country's Jehovah's Witness community has failed in its attempt to seek damages from the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations for its repeated restrictions on the numbers of each religious book and magazine issue the community is allowed to import (see forthcoming F18News article).

The State Committee operates Azerbaijan's strict prior compulsory censorship of all religious literature produced, distributed, and imported, in defiance of its international human rights obligations (see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1690>).

"Not censorship"?

Religious literature is frequently seized from private individuals, not just as in Aliabad on 7 November. On 31 May, police and National Security Ministry (NSM) secret police raided Zeka Miragayev's Baku home in his absence and without a warrant. They seized copies of the Koran and books by Muslim authors, including the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi (see eg. F18News 11 July 2012 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1719>). As of 9 November, Miragayev's books had still not been returned, his friends told Forum 18 from Baku.

Asked why such religious literature seizures keep occurring, State Committee spokesperson Ali responded: "Maybe there is something [bad] in these books - we don't know what's in them." He added that if nothing illegal is found in them, they will be returned. "This is not censorship," he insisted to Forum 18.

Ali confirmed that "of course" the State Committee maintains a list of banned religious books. "There are Muslim and other books, not just Jehovah's Witness books," he told Forum 18. When Forum 18 told him it had repeatedly sought a copy of the list from the State Committee in vain, as had residents of Azerbaijan, Ali said that an "official request" for a copy should be sent. Forum 18 has asked in writing for a copy previously, and did so again on 8 November.

No state permission to exist

Baptists in Aliabad are the religious community known to Forum 18 as the longest to be seeking registration in vain. Their repeated attempts since 1994 to gain legal status have been repeatedly obstructed by officials at local and national level (see F18News 13 April 2012 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1689>).

"Officials told us that, after 2011's change in the law, we now need 50 adult citizens to apply for registration," Shabanov stated to Forum 18. "We don't have enough people for this." He said many church members had had to migrate to other places in Azerbaijan or abroad, because of the lack of work locally.

The increase in the number of required founders from 10 adult citizens to 50 came in the amendments to the Religion Law adopted by Parliament in June 2011, and published on 4 July 2011 after being signed into law by President Ilham Aliiev (see F18News 27

July 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1598>).

Last-ditch appeal

Baku's Greater Grace Protestant Church, which was ordered liquidated through the courts at the State Committee's request, is still waiting for a date for its last-ditch appeal at Azerbaijan's Supreme Court, community members told Forum 18 from Baku on 9 November.

The Church lodged its appeal on 15 October after failing in its challenge to liquidation in two lower courts (see F18News 23 October 2012 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1757>).

Re-registration "continuing"

Ali of the State Committee rejected suggestions that his colleagues were slow or inefficient at processing the compulsory re-registration applications. These were filed by very large numbers of religious communities before the Religion Law's end 2009 deadline, but have not yet been processed.

Only six religious communities are known to have achieved state registration in 2012 (see F18News 28 June 2012 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1715>).

Ali insisted that the re-registration process "is continuing". But he refused to discuss why no Baptist or Jehovah's Witness communities, for example, have been able to gain re-registration, or why Muslim communities independent of the state-backed Caucasian Muslim Board are banned.

Ali rejected suggestions that the State Committee selectively denies re-registration to religious communities it does not like. "It is not true - there is no discrimination," he claimed to Forum 18. (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>>.

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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