



This article was published by F18News on: 6 January 2005

NAGORNO-KARABAKH: Did Armenian priest beat Baptist conscientious objector?

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

An Armenian Apostolic Church military chaplain, Fr Petros Yezegyan, has vehemently denied to Forum 18 News Service that he beat up a Baptist, Gagik Mirzoyan, who refused on religious grounds to do military service in the unrecognised Nagorno-Karabakh republic's army. Fr Yezegyan admitted talking to Mirzoyan for some hours, and Baptist sources have told Forum 18 that "for the final hour and a half the priest beat the brother so badly that blood flowed from his nose and mouth". Baptists have also stated that this was the second beating Mirzoyan received, the first being by a unit commander who assaulted him after he refused to abandon his faith and to serve in the army. Relatives have been refused information on where Mirzoyan currently is, and the Defence Ministry would only tell Forum 18 that he "is still alive."

Armenian Apostolic military chaplain Fr Petros Yezegyan has vigorously denied Baptist claims that he beat church member Gagik Mirzoyan for his refusal to swear the military oath and put on uniform after being called up to military service in the army of the unrecognised Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. "I did not beat him - that is a lie," Fr Yezegyan told Forum 18 News Service from the region on 4 January. "Why are the Baptists saying this?" The priest admitted he spoke to Mirzoyan for some hours on 25 December about his faith and why he was refusing military service, but local Baptists told Forum 18 on 3 January that "for the final hour and a half the priest beat the brother so badly that blood flowed from his nose and mouth". When Mirzoyan told Fr Yezegyan he would lodge a complaint, the Baptists say the priest responded: "You won't get anywhere."

Leaping to Fr Yezegyan's defence was the Armenian Apostolic archbishop of Karabakh, Parkev Martirosyan. "I don't believe he could have beaten anyone, that's absurd," he told Forum 18 from the town of Shusha near the capital Stepanakert on 4 January. "Had he done so it would be a very serious issue which would go straight to the head of the Church, the Catholicos."

The Baptists told Forum 18 that this was the second beating Mirzoyan received since being called up on 6 December. They report that one of the unit's commanders assaulted him on 15 December after he rejected attempts to pressure him to abandon his faith and to serve in the army.

No official would give Forum 18 the contact number for Lieutenant-Colonel Armen Seiranyan, the commander of the education unit in the town of Khodzjali near Stepanakert where the Baptists say the beatings took place.

The republic's Defence Ministry refused all comment on Mirzoyan's case. Andreas (last name unknown), the duty officer who answered the telephone at the ministry on 4 January, consulted with colleagues before declining comment and refused to transfer the call to any other department of the ministry. On repeated questioning from Forum 18, the officer said only that Mirzoyan is still alive, but declined to say where he is being held. He also declined to say what would now happen to him.

Mirzoyan's relatives tried to visit him at the education unit on 31 December, but found he was no longer there. They told Forum 18 they received "no clear reply" to their questions as to where he had been transferred. Fr Yezegyan told Forum 18 Mirzoyan had been moved to another unit, but declined to say which one or whether he was in hospital or in prison.

The Baptists added that the local post office refused to accept a telegram to the Defence Ministry from Mirzoyan's mother about the assaults on her son.

Andreas of the defence ministry insisted that all young men in Karabakh must serve in the armed force with no exceptions. "Anyone who refuses to swear the oath and take up weapons is a traitor and should be sentenced," he told Forum 18 from Stepanakert. "It is clear they will be sentenced."

Such a view was backed by Archbishop Martirosyan. "It is the law of the state that everyone must join the army. Everyone must abide by the law," he told Forum 18. "Nagorno-Karabakh is a war-zone," he added, referring to the unresolved dispute between the largely ethnic Armenian population of Karabakh and the Azerbaijani authorities, who fought a bitter war from 1989 to 1994 for control of the territory. "Armenia has adopted a law on alternative service but there isn't such a law here. Given the continuing state

of war, I don't think such a law is appropriate here."

But Nagorno-Karabakh's deputy foreign minister Masis Mailyan, disagreed, insisting that Armenia's alternative service law also applied in the region. "Laws on subjects that form part of Armenia's obligations under the Council of Europe also extend to the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic," he told Forum 18 from Stepanakert on 5 January. But he insisted that the Karabakh armed forces remain under local control, not under control from Armenia. Mailyan said he had no information on Mirzoyan's case but promised to find out more.

Fr Yezegyan told Forum 18 that in the wake of Mirzoyan's refusal to serve he had been brought in "as a military priest" at the request of the Defence Ministry "to find out to what faith he belonged". He said that in their long conversation, he had explained "a lot" to Mirzoyan. "He's not a Baptist - he's just pretending," the priest said of Mirzoyan. "He's not a believer in the way he should be. A real believer does not act against the state." He insisted that Mirzoyan - and other young Karabakhis - should "take up arms, fight the enemy and defend the fatherland".

Fr Yezegyan - a citizen of Armenia - maintained that he had the right to expound his views in the army of Nagorno-Karabakh as he had been sent by the military chaplains' department at the headquarters of the Armenian Church at Echmiadzin in Armenia.

Nagorno-Karabakh has been under martial law since 1992. The presidential decree imposing martial law - renewed annually by the parliament in Stepanakert - imposes restrictions on civil liberties, including banning the activity of "religious sects and unregistered organisations", banning demonstrations and imposing media censorship.

Officials maintain that only "registered organisations" are allowed to hold meetings, while Karabakh's 1997 religion law requires religious groups to gain registration before they can function. Among religious communities, only the Armenian Apostolic Church - effectively Karabakh's state church - has such registration with the local justice ministry.

Mirzoyan's congregation - which belongs to the Council of Churches Baptists, who refuse on principle to register with the state authorities in post-Soviet countries - has faced repeated harassment from the Karabakh authorities. In the latest incident, the local police raided the Stepanakert church last September, confiscating religious literature and questioning church members (see F18News 27 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=420).

Other faiths - including Pentecostal Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses - have faced problems operating in Karabakh, though pressures have generally eased in recent years.

A printer-friendly map of the disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh is

available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=azerba> within the map titled 'Azerbaijan'.

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