



This article was published by F18News on: 20 May 2004

AZERBAIJAN: New crackdown on Adventists

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

Adventist Pastor Khalid Babaev - forced by death threats out of Nakhichevan in February - was fined on 20 May in Sumgait, an industrial city near the capital Baku, for leading a congregation without registration. "They failed to register their place of worship," the local police officer told Forum 18 News Service, though he was unable to say which law requires this. A week earlier, two Adventist pastors in Gyanja were fined for failing to register their place of residence in the city. "We don't agree with these fines," Adventist leader Pastor Yahya Zavrishko told Forum 18. "All we want is to be able to function freely." Local officials are also seeking information about the Baku congregation in an apparent bid to step up pressure.

Amid a new crackdown on Azerbaijan's Adventists, three pastors have been fined in the cities of Gyanja (Gänca) and Sumgait (Sumqayıt) for "illegal preaching" and for failing to register their place of residence, while the congregation in the capital Baku is facing increased pressure. "We don't agree with these fines," Pastor Yahya Zavrishko, head of the Adventist Church in Azerbaijan, told Forum 18 News Service from Sumgait on 20 May. "All we want is to be able to function freely."

In Sumgait, an industrial town on the Caspian Sea north of Baku, Pastor Khalid Babaev was questioned on 19 May and today (20 May) was fined 82,500 manats (115 Norwegian kroner, 14 Euros or 17 US dollars) under Article 299 part 1 of the code of administrative offences, which punishes leaders of religious communities who fail to register them with the authorities.

Pastor Babaev had been forced to flee from the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan (Naxçıvan) in February after receiving death threats for trying to lead the Adventist congregation there (see F18News 1 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=265). He had moved to Sumgait only a month ago.

Police arrived at his home in the evening of 19 May, confiscated 48 religious books and took him to the police station. There they warned him not to conduct any religious work until he had approval from the local administration, forced him to sign a statement to say he would comply with this instruction and told him to appear in court the following day. When Adventist colleagues - including Pastor Zavrishko - joined Babaev at Sumgait's city court on 20 May, they learnt that the police would be handing down the fine, not the court.

"Pastor Babaev was not even holding a service at the time the police arrived at his home," Zavrishko told Forum 18. He said Babaev had signed the instruction agreeing not to hold any worship services until the community registers only under great pressure and that the Church believes this demand is unlawful. Zavrishko said that church leaders had visited the official at the Sumgait city administration responsible for links with social organisations and political parties and informed him of the church's intention to seek registration. Officials said there would be no problem and that all the church needs to do is to write to the city's mayor, Vagif Aliiev.

Zavrishko believed the move to punish Babaev was initiated by Major Hasan Asadov, the head of the Sumgait police who had questioned the pastor the previous evening. Forum 18 was unable immediately to reach Major Asadov. However, the police returned the confiscated books on 20 May.

Rahim Salimov, the local police officer involved in the case, insisted to Forum 18 that the Adventists can function in Sumgait only after they receive permission from the local administration. "They failed to register their place of worship," he told Forum 18 from Sumgait on 20 May. "It's a private home. The law says they have to register before they can conduct religious services." Asked which law specifies that religious practice without registration is illegal he repeatedly declared: "Azerbaijani law." But he was unable to specify which law.

The raid on Pastor Babaev in Sumgait came a week after a similar raid on the leaders of the Adventist church in Gyanja, Azerbaijan's second city in the west of the country. The raid followed complaints to the police about the church's distribution on the streets of invitations to attend services.

Police told Pastor Nazim Azimov and his assistant, Elshan Jabarov, that they would be fined for "inciting religious hatred", but instead the two were each fined 50,000 manats (70 Norwegian kroner, 8 Euros or 10 US dollars) for "violating the passport regime". Police claimed that as they were not registered to live in the church building (Azimov is registered as living in Baku), they had

broken the law, a claim disputed by Zavrichko. "There is no law that says Azerbaijani citizens cannot go to other towns," he told Forum 18. He said although they did not agree with the decision, the two pastors paid the fines on 18 May.

Pastor Zavrichko also complained of the increased attention on the activity of the Baku congregation. "The local administration has become interested in knowing all about what we are doing and finding out the home addresses of all our ministers," he told Forum 18. "We feel there are moves to impose greater controls on our work."

Protestant congregations - especially those made up of ethnic Azeri converts - face great difficulties registering and obtaining legal status, especially in towns outside Baku. They often face obstruction or harassment from the authorities, as well as frequent attacks in the media. The pro-government ANS commercial television company showed another report in early May attacking members of the Baku Baptist church.

For more background information see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=92

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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