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AZERBAIJAN: "Our constitution guarantees us freedom of religion, but in reality we don't have it"

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

"We rely on God. If we're persecuted for the name of Christ we're blessed," a Pastor told Forum 18 News Service after commenting that "our constitution guarantees us freedom of religion and belief, but in reality we don't have it." Baptists in north-west Azerbaijan face being prevented from working by the authorities, intimidation, and refusal to register their children's births with Christian names, Forum 18 has found. The birth registration ban stops children going to kindergarten or to school, getting treatment in a hospital, or travelling abroad. Despite the detailed accounts of Baptists met by Forum 18, the head of the town administration has strenuously denied their statements. Forum 18 has also been told that people who visit Baptist services are threatened with the loss of their jobs, a powerful threat in a region where unemployment is high, and that the police have banned the holding of a Sunday school for children.

Baptists in Aliabad, in Azerbaijan's north-western Zakatala [Zaqatala] region, have faced forced unemployment, postal censorship, literature restrictions, threats and intimidation ever since the church was founded in 1993. Aliabad is a small town of some 10,000 people almost entirely made up of members of the Ingilo minority, ethnic Georgians who were converted to Islam several centuries ago. The problems faced by the Baptists are in addition to the authorities' refusal either to register their church or permit a church to be built (see F18News 8 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=471).

The church's pastor, Hamid Shabanov, told Forum 18 how in 1994, after he converted to Christianity from Islam, he was summoned to the secret police in Zakatala, where officers beat him. He said meetings were organised at the town mosque to denounce Christians. Shabanov and other church members told Forum 18 how they had been kicked out of their jobs in state institutions in the first half of the 1990s, when the authorities learnt they had become Baptists. "I worked for the local television in Zakatala for 18 years," Shabanov told Forum 18. "When I was kicked out they refused to give me a reason at first, then they said it was because I had converted."

Tamila Suleimanova, another church member, told Forum 18 at the family home in Aliabad on 26 November that in 1994 she had been fired from her job as director of a kindergarten where she had worked for seven years. "The director of the regional education department came down and said they had no complaints about my work," she recalled. "But as you've become a Baptist we have to remove you, they told me." She said the police were also present when she was sacked.

Suleimanova told Forum 18 that the letter of dismissal cited "crude violations" at work as the reason for her sacking. She said she had gone to the local administration to try to get reinstatement but officials told her verbally that until she abandoned her new faith she could not regain her job. "Every three years I have asked them for work, but they refuse."

Among the half-dozen other Baptists sacked was Roza Suleimanova, one of Tamila's relatives, who worked as an assistant at the kindergarten. She told Forum 18 that she has not worked since then and has given up looking as officials will not give her a job because of her faith.

In 1995, Zaur Balayev - now pastor of the second congregation which is also a member of the Azerbaijani Baptist Union - was imprisoned for 16 days. "They called me a bandit and claimed I was preparing a revolt in Aliabad," he told Forum 18 in the town on 26 November.

Shabanov reported that in April 1997, unknown attackers shot at his house, narrowly missing his wife. Forum 18 saw the bullet hole which has still not been repaired in the window of their living room. Shabanov also showed Forum 18 the anonymous note he found afterwards, pinned to the gate, which threatened the Baptists. The same day that Shabanov's home was shot at, raiders also shot at the home of fellow Baptist Novruz Eyvazov, as he told Forum 18 at his home on 26 November.

"Our first problem is the lack of registration: we need to get this problem solved before anything else," Balayev told Forum 18. Registration is "very important", he added, as even if they are interested townspeople would not come to a service in a private house (see F18News 8 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=471).

"The second problem is the expulsion of church members from their jobs: the authorities won't give them their jobs back or any other jobs in state-run institutions."

"The third problem is solving the problems over registering children's births with Christian names," Pastor Balayev told Forum 18. Only after repeated pressure have some church members been allowed to register their children's births with names they choose, while 18-month-old Luka Eyvazov still has not received a birth certificate as the regional civil registration office has objected to the parents' choice of the name (see F18News 1 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=466). Despite promises by Mehman Soltanov of the Justice Ministry's civil registration department in Baku, as of 8 December the birth certificate still had not been issued. Without birth certificates, people cannot go to kindergarten or to school, get treatment in a hospital or travel abroad.

However, the head of the town administration Gasim Orujov strenuously denied that any Baptists had been dismissed from their jobs, or that there is a de facto ban on employing Baptists in state jobs. "Suleimanova was not sacked - that's not true," he insisted to Forum 18. "They're not telling you the truth. They say that their faith doesn't allow them to slander people, but look what they're saying."

Although services have not been raided by the police and local authorities since 1996, Balayev claims that people who have come to Baptist services are still threatened with the loss of their jobs, a powerful threat in a region where work is hard to come by.

This summer the head of the local police summoned him to warn that the church was not allowed to hold a Sunday school for children. "I told him we have every right to teach our faith to our children if the parents agree," Balayev reported. "He said we had no right to drag our children into religious practice and said no children under 16 attend the mosque."

In about 2000, Pastor Shabanov and a colleague were detained for undertaking an evangelistic trip to a nearby town with tapes, New Testaments and tracts. He said the Zakatala regional police then searched his house and confiscated all the religious literature they could find and 300,000 Manats (378 Norwegian Kroner, 46 Euros, or 61 US Dollars), funds which the community had gathered towards the cost of building a church. "The books were returned two months later, but they never returned the money," Shabanov told Forum 18.

Eyvazov, who now leads a congregation that is part of the Council of Churches Baptists, who refuse on principle to register with the state authorities in CIS countries, told Forum 18 that he and a colleague were each fined some 10 US dollars (49 Azeri Manats, 62 Norwegian Kroner, or 7.5 Euros) in 2002 for membership of the unregistered congregation. The average monthly salary in Azerbaijan is around 30 US Dollars (147,300 Azeri Manats, 186 Norwegian Kroner, or 23 Euros).

Foreign visitors to Aliabad's Baptists are routinely questioned about why they have come, most recently this summer when two women came to visit the churches from Moldova. However, local Baptists reported that letters from foreign Christian organisations are no longer obstructed or routinely opened before delivery. "The first time we get a letter from an unknown individual or organisation they open it," Shabanov reported, "but from then on they let them through."

Aliabad's Baptists - like all religious believers in Azerbaijan - cannot receive religious literature sent by post. Under Azerbaijan's compulsory religious censorship system, customs impound the literature in Baku and release it only once an individual or religious organisation has gained specific authorisation from the State Committee.

As Georgian speakers and living very close to the border with Georgia, the Baptists would also like to be able to import religious literature from Georgia, but this too is almost impossible. Anything more than a few religious books for personal use are confiscated.

"The authorities are making sure we can't work, earn money or do anything as believers as we want and as God wants," Shabanov told Forum 18. "Where the law exists it should be fulfilled, but the law doesn't help us. When God thinks we need registration we'll get it." Eyvazov was equally sceptical that the authorities will change their attitude to the Baptists soon. "Our constitution guarantees us freedom of religion and belief, but in reality we don't have it," he told Forum 18. "We rely on God. If we're persecuted for the name of Christ we're blessed."

Balayev - who claims local officials are deliberately obstructing him from opening a grocery shop to be able to earn a living - says the Baptists are not going to give up. "If I didn't believe in God or Christ, I'd have left here long ago," he told Forum 18, "but we're not afraid."

Baptists elsewhere in Azerbaijan have also been attacked by the authorities (see F18News 12 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=252).

For more background information see Forum 18's Azerbaijan 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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