



This article was published by F18News on: 8 April 2011

AZERBAIJAN: Riot police versus worshippers

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

Three religious communities in Azerbaijan's second city Gyanja have been banned from meeting for worship, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Babek Sadykov of Gyanja Police completely denied this, claiming to Forum 18 that "no one is being prevented from worshipping". Local people, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that one of the communities was warned that "if they met for worship on the following Sunday or at any future date they will all be arrested". Two buses full of ordinary police and riot police later arrived to prevent any religious worship. Protestants told Forum 18 that the church had already reluctantly decided not to hold one big Sunday service that day. "People are now very afraid." Meanwhile, a government-initiated World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue was told by President Ilham Aliev that "freedom of religion, freedom of conscience have been fully established in Azerbaijan".

One of three religious communities in Azerbaijan's second city Gyanja [Gäncä] banned from meeting for worship received a Sunday morning visit from ordinary police and riot police to prevent them worshipping, local Christians who asked not to be identified to prevent state reprisals told Forum 18 News Service. The worship bans were imposed in mid-March because the communities do not have state registration, local people who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. However, Babek Sadykov, Senior Assistant to Gyanja's Police Chief, completely denied that any police had been sent to prevent anyone from worshipping. "There wasn't such a case," he told Forum 18 from the city on 6 April. "No one is being prevented from worshipping."

The Gyanja worship meeting bans come as members of the only Sunni mosque in the city are continuing their campaign to have it reopened after the state forcibly closed it (see F18News 5 April 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1558>).

Freedom of religion and conscience "fully established in Azerbaijan"?

The local representative in Gyanja of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, Firdovsi Kerimov, refused absolutely to discuss warnings he issued to the three communities with Forum 18 on 6 April, putting the phone down immediately.

Similarly dismissing complaints was Yusif Askerov, head of the Registration Department at the State Committee in the capital Baku. "Let them tell our local representative Firdovsi Kerimov - he will sort it out," he told Forum 18 on 6 April. Informed that Kerimov had issued the bans on the three communities' activities and - at least in the case of one of them - warned that if they meet again for worship they will all be arrested, Askerov responded: "He doesn't have the right to arrest anyone."

President Ilham Aliev, speaking at the official opening in Baku of a government-initiated World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue on 7 April, claimed that "it is already a fact that there is a high level of ethnic and religious tolerance in Azerbaijan, and it is the source of our strength". "Freedom of religion, freedom of conscience have been fully established in Azerbaijan," he also declared, according to the text of the speech published on the presidential website. "Independently of ethnic or religious affiliation, any individual living in Azerbaijan is our valued citizen."

But how can people enjoy these "fully established" rights?

Forum 18 asked Askerov of the State Committee how the three Gyanja communities - and the many religious communities of all faiths who either cannot get or do not want state registration - can meet for worship without the threat of police raids and arrests. The right to freedom of religion or belief is within Azerbaijan's Constitution and its international human rights obligations, as are the interlinked rights to freedom of assembly and freedom of expression. However, Askerov appeared not to have an answer. "Well, the law does not allow them to meet as a community, but they can meet as individuals," he eventually said.

According to the State Committee's own figures, more than 300 religious communities which have lodged registration or re-registration applications are still languishing without legal status. The harsh 2009 Religion Law specifies - in defiance of Azerbaijan's international human rights commitments - that unregistered religious activity is illegal (see F18News 7 April 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1559>).

Told that many religious communities - including Muslims who read the works of the late theologian Said Nursi, Protestants of

various communities, Jehovah's Witnesses and others have suffered raids, fines and even short-term detentions within the past year for meeting for worship - Askerov responded: "Well, let them tell our local representatives." However, he could not explain how this could help communities threatened for meeting without state registration.

"You'll be arrested"

Trouble began for the three Gyanja communities in mid-March. State Committee local representative Kerimov told the local media on 29 March that he had warned the Star of the East Pentecostal Church and a Baptist congregation, as well as the New Apostolic Church not to meet for worship as they do not have state registration. He said two of the three had lodged registration applications, but were being "temporarily" closed down pending registration. He implied that the third had not applied for registration, and insisted that all religious communities functioning without registration will be closed down.

Kerimov and a local police officer visited the Star of the East congregation in mid-March, local Protestants told Forum 18. "They warned them that if they met for worship on the following Sunday or at any future date they will all be arrested."

To back up their threat, two buses full of ordinary police and riot police arrived at the church building the following Sunday, 20 March, to prevent any religious worship, Protestants told Forum 18. The church had already reluctantly decided not to hold one big Sunday service that day. "People are now very afraid. The local police officer keeps checking that they are not meeting."

Officials change their mind

In early 2009, well before the 2009 Religion Law came into force, the Gyanja Star of the East congregation applied for state registration, paying the relevant fee but receiving no official response. After the 2009 Religion Law came into force, the State Committee in the capital Baku told Star of the East's leadership in Baku that their Baku branch had to re-register before other branches could apply. But officials also told Star of the East that all their branches in the country could continue to meet and worship while the re-registration and registration processes continue.

However, after the Gyanja worship ban, when church members asked officials of the national State Committee in Baku about the ban on worship, officials merely replied that unregistered religious worship is illegal.

As Star of the East's Baku branch - along with many religious communities of many faiths - has not received registration, the Gyanja branch has not yet applied. The severe delays and hostility encountered in the registration and re-registration process is intensely frustrating to many religious communities (see F18News 7 April 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1559>).

The other two March Gyanja bans

Similarly, the leader of Gyanja's New Apostolic Church congregation was summoned in mid-March and told that it cannot meet for worship because it does not have registration, church members told Forum 18. They stressed though that no threats of arrest were issued. Officials refused to put this ban in writing. Church members say their meeting place was later visited to check that they were not meeting.

The congregation - which meets in rented property in Gyanja - is supported by the German branch of the New Apostolic Church, which has its headquarters in Switzerland.

Church members told local officials that the state registration for their Baku congregation - which like many other religious communities in Azerbaijan is awaiting re-registration - remains valid also for their Gyanja congregation. They say they are planning to bring the certificate to Gyanja to show to local officials in an attempt to have the worship ban lifted.

It is not clear which Baptist church was warned. Ilya Zenchenko of the Baptist Union told Forum 18 on 6 April that their community in Gyanja had not been threatened or raided, as have members of the Council of Churches Baptists. Other Protestants have also told Forum 18 that they do not know which Baptist church was warned by State Committee representative Kerimov.

Widespread violations of freedom of religion or belief

In Gyanja itself, religious communities have frequently been the target of religious freedom violations in recent years, such as Muslims who want the only Sunni mosque in the city reopened after the state forcibly closed it (see F18News 5 April 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1558>). Other targets for religious freedom violations in Gyanja include Muslims who read the works of Said Nursi, Baptists, Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses. State Committee representative Kerimov took part personally in a raid on a Jehovah's Witness meeting in a private home in December 2010. Of six Jehovah's Witnesses detained, three were fined, one was given an official warning and two (both Georgian citizens) were ordered deported (see F18News 7 January 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1527>).

Gyanja Appeal Court rejected the appeals of at least two of the Jehovah's Witnesses on 14 January, the Court website notes.

Violations of freedom of religion or belief take place frequently throughout Azerbaijan. For example, the leader of the Star of the East congregation in Sumgait, a port north of Baku, was summoned by the local police officer in March and warned that the community must not meet for worship, Baku-based Protestants who asked not to be identified for fear of reprisals told Forum 18. The leader has already been fined for religious activity.

Among other violations of freedom of religion or belief affecting worship meetings since the beginning of 2011, a mosque in Qobustan (Maraza) has been closed down - one of many forcibly closed in the country (see F18News 5 April 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1558>); teachers and a local official prevented school-age boys attending Friday prayers at the only mosque in Yevlakh [Yevlax] (see F18News 16 February 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1541>); and a Protestant in northern Azerbaijan was fined three weeks' average local wages in his absence for leading unregistered worship (see F18News 24 January 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1531>);

In addition a Jehovah's Witness in Gakh in north-western Azerbaijan was told she had been fined in her absence for religious activity (see F18News 21 February 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1543>), and Azerbaijan marked the tenth anniversary of its accession to the Council of Europe by rejecting a prisoner of conscience's appeal against his conviction and nine month jail term for conscientious objection to military service (see F18News 22 February 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1544>).

The former leader of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Azerbaijan, Russian citizen Ivan Uzun, was deported to punish him for his religious activity after a Saturday service was raided in Baku. Another Adventist, Moldovan citizen Gheorghiy Sobor, was finally able to return to his wife and children in Baku in February, eight weeks after being denied re-entry to Azerbaijan to punish him for his religious activity (see F18News 16 February 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1541>). (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1192>.

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 personal commentary on the European Court of Human Rights and conscientious objection to military service is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1377>).

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://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=azerba>>.

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