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## Court in Azerbaijan Acquits Six Jehovah's Witnesses of "Spreading Illegal Religious Beliefs"

Tach Tower Belgium (24.08.2000) / HRWF International Secretariat (28.08.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - On August 23, in a small courtroom on the outskirts of Baku, Azerbaijan, a judge of the Qaradag District Court overturned the fines of six women who had been accused of "spreading illegal religious beliefs." The fines stemmed from the September 1 1999 dismissal of the women from their jobs at a gas refinery after its director demanded that they stand before the entire workforce of 70 people and renounce their faith. The women refused. At the time, the local press called the women "traitors" and "dogs" with "poisoned minds" and called for their deportation from Azerbaijan.

"The strong stand on religious freedom taken by the high court in this case is especially noteworthy," stated Akif Alizadeh, attorney for the six women. "In April, the Baku City Court granted the six women leave to appeal and ordered that the case be reheard in the Qaradag District Court on the basis of Azerbaijan's Constitution and international agreements of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the United Nations. These agreements protect dissemination of religious beliefs and freedom from persecution on religious grounds. The Qaradag Court made the right decision on August 23 and shows that Azerbaijan's international obligations are not merely words on paper but a real protection against religious intolerance."

The turning point in the case came in January 2000 when the Azerbaijan Ministry of Justice granted official registration to the *Religious Community of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Azerbaijani Republic*—this after a delay of three years. During those years, Jehovah's Witnesses were subjected to fines, deportations, and police raids. Such religious intolerance drew public condemnation from President Heidar Aliev, who promised that religious freedom would be protected in this predominantly Muslim republic, which straddles the Caucasus mountain range and is at the crossroads of Asia and Europe. Azerbaijan is seeking entry to the Council of Europe and was given a favorable recommendation by the Council's Parliamentary Assembly on June 28, 2000.

The Qaradag District Court, which rendered Wednesday's decision, is expected to issue written reasons for the decision during the coming weeks.

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## **Azerbaijan witness to rapid religious revival**

By Douglas Frantz

New York Times Service (17.08.2000) / HRWF International Secretariat (28.08.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - Down a nondescript street, up two flights of worn concrete stairs, in a shabby converted apartment with peeling paint and no air conditioning, a dozen boys and young men were praying under the stern gaze of their rabbi.

When they fumbled with the Hebrew, Rabbi Moshe Kishon nodded encouragement, recognizing that the language and the ritual were new to them.

This is the Jewish College of Baku, a tiny beachhead in the religious revival stirring among Jews, Christians and Moslems in Azerbaijan and elsewhere in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Members of all three religions are slowly shaking off seven decades of atheist Soviet doctrine and rediscovering their religious roots.

Religion was an area of private life that communism was dedicated to eliminate, not just control, so people are understandably rusty when it comes to prayer and other rituals of faith. Yet many in the capital described a sense of longing for something to believe in since the collapse of the Soviet Union nearly a decade ago.

"When I was a kid I felt very happy to be growing up in a Soviet republic, like most people here," said Haver Kambaizadeh, who works for an American energy company. "Now there is a gap that needs to be filled."

In Azerbaijan, where religion dates to the Zoroastrian fire worshippers in the sixth or seventh century B.C., many organizations are trying to fill that gap.

Ninety percent of the population is Moslem, though their faith is more cultural and ethnic than religious. Few women wear scarves, and the muezzin's call to worship is rarely heard.

Still, new mosques are opening. Often the only new building in a rural village is the mosque, paid for by a wealthy resident or by Iranians, who have tried to find fertile ground for proselytizing, much to the discomfort of the government authorities.

Christians make up 3 percent of the population, and the vast majority are Russian Orthodox. But since Azerbaijan's independence in 1991, evangelical Christians from the

United States and Europe have tried to spread their word. The reception has not always been warm.

Azerbaijan is officially a secular state, but its constitution allows the major faiths to practice without restriction. Still, laws forbid religious "propaganda" by foreigners and require religious groups to register with the government.

The police have used the laws to disrupt activities by Pentecostal and Jehovah's Witnesses groups. Armenians are unable to worship, since their churches remain closed because of hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Judaism is undergoing mild resurgence. About 18,000 "mountain Jews," who have been in the Caucasus for generations, maintain an enclave in northern Azerbaijan. Some 3,000 to 4,000 Jews, mostly descended from immigrants from Russia, live in Baku.

Few in either group are observant. "They have kept the traditions in a cultural sense, but they have been separated from active religion," said Andy David, a diplomat with the Israeli Embassy. "They have forgotten how to pray."

Kishon is determined to change that through a revival of Orthodox Judaism. Since arriving from Israel four years ago, he has opened a state-approved school for 230 elementary and high school students and a kitchen that provides meals for the needy. This fall in Baku, he will open the first yeshiva in the Caucasus in four centuries. Financing comes from Jewish groups in Brooklyn and in Lakewood, New Jersey, both strongholds of Orthodoxy.

"Our philosophy is to help all the Jews in these countries," Kishon said.

Then there is the Hebrew school with the grand name, the Jewish College of Baku.

Students trickled up the stairs and into the school in clusters of twos and threes in the afternoon, wearing yarmulkes and carrying prayer books printed in Hebrew and Azeri on the school's computers. They sipped tea and told jokes until the rabbi arrived for the classes and then prayer.

As the sound of honking cars and shouts in Russian and Azeri drifted through the open windows, the students faced the walls of the room and recited prayers as they rocked back and forth in the traditional practice of davening.

The star student this particular evening was Gilad Pashayev, a dark-haired 15-year-old who also attends the Jewish high school. He recited his prayers earnestly and smoothly. Later, as his comrades giggled and jostled, Gilad described his reasons for attending Hebrew school and the religious high school, State School 46.

"Before, my family never went to synagogue and didn't pray, but we did observe some Jewish holidays," he said. "My great-grandfather was an observant Jew, and that's what I want to be too. I like walking the city and I like learning the traditions of my religion."

Gilad persuaded his parents to attend services at the small synagogue near the school, which serves Jews of European descent. A few blocks away, Baku's other synagogue, equally small, is attended by mountain Jews who have migrated to the city.

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## **After years of official atheism, Azerbaijan gets religion**

By Douglas Frantz ("New York Times," July 30, 2000)

New York Times (30.07.2000) / HRWF International Secretariat (31.07.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - Down a nondescript street, up two flights of worn concrete stairs, in a shabby converted apartment with peeling paint and no air conditioning, a dozen boys and young men were praying under the stern gaze of their rabbi.

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Religion was an area of private life that communism was dedicated to eliminate, not just control, so people are understandably rusty when it comes to prayer and other rituals of faith. Yet many here in the capital described a sense of longing for something to believe in since the collapse of the Soviet Union nearly a decade ago.

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The kitchen is kosher and feeds elderly Jews and other needy people in the neighborhood. The rabbi beamed as the heavy metal doors to the kitchen's storehouse opened to reveal an odd sight in this Muslim country: shelves lined with gefilte fish, kosher dill pickles and other goods shipped from America.

Last Passover, he said, the kitchen distributed free matzo.

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## **Azerbaijani Police Detain Baptists for Running Street Library**

by Felix Corley

Compass Direct (18.02.2000)/HRWF International Secretariat (16.02.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwsf.net - Azerbaijani Baptists who had been operating a Christian street library in the western town of Gyanja have been threatened by police twice during January "to halt preaching the gospel among Muslims," according to Baptist pastor Ivan Orlov in the Azerbaijani capital of Baku.

Two of the Baptist men were detained; one of them had been hit in the face by a man in civilian clothes a week earlier. An unidentified man attacked the Christian while he was manning the stall with a female church member.

In a statement from Baku passed to Compass by the Friedensstimme Mission in Germany, Orlov recounted that the two ethnic Azeri men -- identified only as Sabir and Zaur -- were detained on January 22 and held for nine hours in the local police station.

"They had only just put out the religious literature on the library table when several police officers and an Azeri in civilian clothes (the same man who had beaten Sabir earlier) led them off to the police station, taking the literature with them," pastor Orlov said. "There they insulted and threatened them."

During the earlier incident on January 15, the unidentified man had come up to Sabir and the woman, an ethnic Russian identified only as Lyubov, and demanded that they halt their preaching. The man reportedly told them that Azerbaijan is a Muslim country where no other religion can be preached.

"He then grabbed the sister by the hood and began to shake her," Orlov reported, "and hit brother Sabir several times in the face, demanding that they stop their preaching. Then he turned over the table with the religious literature and scattered the books."

The Baptists belong to a congregation of the Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians/Baptists, an independent group that refused to register during the Soviet period. The denomination has retained this stand in all the post-Soviet republics where it operates.

Protestant Christians have suffered some difficulties operating in Azerbaijan, where the majority Azeri population is of Muslim background. Some Muslims and government officials have expressed strong disapproval that Christians are allowed to function.

President Haidar Aliev issued a public pledge in early November to enforce Azerbaijan's constitutional guarantees of freedom of conscience, in the wake of police raids against Protestant Christian congregations in Baku and court rulings to deport expatriate Christians. During the next few weeks, two Protestant churches were granted government registration and visas were issued for two other expatriate clergymen serving Baku congregations.

Despite intermittent difficulties, the Baptists said they intend to continue their evangelistic work. "We ask you to pray for us," Orlov declared, "that the Lord will inspire us fearlessly to preach the good news about Christ at all times." He also asked for prayer that God would strengthen the "firmness in faith and steadfastness of spirit" of the community in Gyanja.

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## **Azerbaijan Loosens Religious Freedom Restrictions**

### **Protestant Churches Registered, Foreign Clerics Granted Visas**

by Barbara G. Baker

Compass (21.01.2000)/ HRWF International Secretariat (20.01.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - In a deliberate loosening of religious freedom restrictions, the government of Azerbaijan approved two Protestant churches' long-standing applications for registration during December. Almost simultaneously,

visas were issued for a German Lutheran pastor and a Polish Catholic priest to continue serving their respective congregations in Baku.

Registration applications for the Cathedral of Praise and the Nehemiah Church, both of which had been pending for more than a year with the Ministry of Justice, were granted in the second and third weeks of December.

The Cathedral of Praise promptly celebrated its new status with a large Christmas service on December 26. The charismatic congregation's first public meeting in Baku in three years drew some 750 worshippers to what one foreign embassy observer termed "a very energetic service."

President Haidar Aliev made a public pledge to U.S. Ambassador Stanley Escudero in early November, promising to enforce constitutional guarantees of freedom of conscience and religion. The recent approval of church registrations and visas back up the president's intention to uphold greater religious freedom in the oil-rich Central Asian state.

Within two weeks of Aliev's publicized pledge, the Supreme Court of Azerbaijan overturned deportation orders against eight expatriates arrested during a police raid of the Baku Baptist Church last September. Except for a Korean couple who went home for two weeks, none of the expatriate Christians facing expulsion left the country.

Although applications from the Jehovah's Witnesses to gain legal status as a religious organization were initially declined, the Ministry of Justice finally approved this registration December 29. Formal certification is still pending on this approval, representatives said. According to Keston News Service, at least six of their members fined and fired from their jobs last September were reinstated on November 10, the day after President Aliev's announcement.

Disputes over permission for foreign clerics to serve local Christian congregations also appeared to be resolved.

In a meeting December 6 with the U.S. ambassador, the head of the Presidential Secretariat, Ramiz Mekhdiyev, reported that formal permission had been issued for the Rev. Gunther Oborski of Germany to pastor the German Evangelical Lutheran Church of Baku.

Fr. Jerzy Pilus of Poland was also guaranteed his residence visa to lead the Roman Catholic congregation, Mekhdiyev said. The Catholic Church had been granted official registration this past June.

Previously, police and secret service agents had halted worship services of the Lutheran congregation on September 26, claiming that the 1996 law prohibiting foreigners from engaging in "religious propaganda" overrode Rev. Oborski's official visa to pastor the church.

The congregation was subsequently refused official use of their premises, a spacious church building used as a concert hall during the Soviet period. According to Mekhdiyev, the Ministry of Culture was instructed to restore its contract with the German government for the church to be used for the Lutheran congregation's Sunday worship services, beginning December 12.

Due to disruptive efforts of a disgruntled church member who lost chairmanship of the church board last November, the Lutheran church's Sunday services could not be resumed during December.

However, Rev. Oborski confirmed that the congregation met for the first time without interference on January 2. "During these months of struggle and uncertainty, even more people have been attracted to the congregation," he told Compass. "And we also have closer relations with all the other churches, to advise and support each other."

Meanwhile, during the first week of January, the Azeri congregation of the Baku Baptist Church applied for separate registration, apart from its mother congregation of Russian Baptists. "That will become the next test case," an observer told Compass. Two Azeri pastors from this congregation were jailed for 15 days after last September's raid, when authorities claimed it was an "illegal" church.

Even so, during December, several articles in the Baku press questioned the government's liberalized new stance.

On December 17, the Russian-language "Zerkalo" newspaper heavily criticized the proliferation of religious groups led and funded by foreign missionaries in Azerbaijan, claiming that the existing churches could not "compete" financially with all these new "sects."

The article attacked alleged attempts to convert Muslims to Christianity, declaring such efforts were "gaining ground in the country, not because of religious convictions, but because of the weak propaganda of Islamic values."

Another article appearing December 29 in the Azeri-language "Azadlyg" newspaper blamed U.S. pressure for the government decision to start registering missionary organizations.

The writer claimed that Fazil Mammadov, head of the Justice Ministry department for registering legal entities, had described the Nehemiah Church as "a harmful missionary

organization," right after announcing that the government had just registered it.

"In Mammadov's opinion," the article concluded, "the country's law on freedom of faith creates conditions for a harmful missionary organization to be registered." The article complained that any religious group only needed 10 members in order to be eligible to register, compared to the 100 minimum required in Uzbekistan.

Echoing the "Zerkalo" article, the writer called for a revision of the country's laws on freedom of conscience and religion, urging that religious groups be required to wait as many as 15 years to "prove their peacefulness" before being registered.

For the past three years, monitors of human rights issues have criticized amendments to the 1992 Religion Law, which prohibits foreigners from engaging in "religious propaganda" and restricts religions considered by the government to be "foreign to Azerbaijani traditions." According to four U.S. congressmen who wrote President Aliev in early November, such laws are "in violation of international standards on freedom of expression and religious liberty, as well as Azerbaijan's own OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) commitments."

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