

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS IN AZERBAIJAN**ORAL STATEMENT BY THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF
JEHOVAH'S CHRISTIAN WITNESSES**

For the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Warsaw, 24 September to 5 October 2012

Jehovah's Witnesses in Azerbaijan very much appreciate the freedom to worship they have enjoyed for some years. However, they are now facing a state of uncertainty as well as growing difficulties. Why?

Azerbaijan imposes re-registration on all religious associations but at the same time arbitrarily makes this impossible for some of them.

For instance, the Religious Community of Jehovah's Witnesses in Baku applied for re-registration prior to the legal deadline of January 2010. Even though the application was filed well before time, the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations only reacted after the deadline had passed. Their application was rejected because of some alleged technical mistakes in the application. When the local community offered to adjust them, they were simply told that it was too late since the deadline has passed. The only solution they offered to the Religious Community was to voluntarily liquidate itself and apply for new registration, but with no guarantee that it would be approved. Two years, several meetings with the State Committee and many court cases later, Jehovah's Witnesses in Baku are still not registered. In other cities, like in Ganja, almost 1 ½ years after having applied for registration, the local community of Jehovah's Witnesses has not yet received a reply.

What are the consequences? The communities in many cities and villages are considered illegal. Therefore, they are not allowed to secure a place of worship, import religious literature, or even meet together for worship in private homes. In several cities, Witnesses received huge fines. One of them, Asim Mammadov, could not pay his fine and was imprisoned for three days. However, this did not cancel the fine nor the risk of facing other criminal proceedings or imprisonment.

There is no provision for alternative civilian service, contrarily to the commitments made by Azerbaijan when accessing to the Council of Europe. The consequence? Young men who are Jehovah's Witnesses are harassed, prosecuted and imprisoned.

This situation is exacerbated by the censorship of religious literature. This censorship is arbitrary and contrary to international commitments. In what way? Publications that were approved in the past are later prohibited. What is more, literature is not only checked for content, but the State Committee also determines how much may be imported. Approved quantities do not meet the needs of the local communities of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Jehovah's Witnesses respectfully request Azerbaijan to allow them to be legally re-registered, introduce an acceptable form of alternative service, and stop censoring religious literature.

A delegation of Jehovah's Witnesses is ready to meet with representatives of Azerbaijan attending the present conference in order to clarify any misunderstanding and to promote a constructive dialogue.