

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS IN AZERBAIJAN

ORAL STATEMENT BY THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF JEHOVAH'S CHRISTIAN WITNESSES

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In spite of their being legally registered in Azerbaijan, Jehovah's Witnesses continue to experience great difficulties in exercising their religious freedom. Government agencies continue to illegally raid religious meetings and mistreat those in attendance. Others have been deported. Conscientious objectors are criminally charged and sentenced. Religious literature is censored and often denied importation.

Deportation: The Azerbaijan government continues to violate the guarantees of Articles 9, 10, and 11 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms by deporting citizens of member states of the Council of Europe on specious charges of engaging in "religious propaganda." Since 2007 already 12 individuals who were merely worshipping with their fellow members and not engaged in any criminal activity, were unjustly arrested and deported from Azerbaijan. The last example is the deportation of a Georgian citizen Elguja Khutsishvili on July 23, 2009. His wife Tarana who was in the last month of her pregnancy, together with their two children, remained in Azerbaijan and this family was left without a source of income.

Illegal police interference with religious meetings: A disturbing pattern of police interference with religious meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses has been developing. Only in 2009 there have been already five of such police raids. The latest example is a raid on a religious meeting on August 12, 2009, in the house of the abovementioned Khutsishvili family in the city of Gakh. Victims of these incidents have been subjected to brutal assaults, hours of intimidating police questioning, verbal abuse and slanderous accusations, though they are peaceful, law-abiding citizens who happen to espouse the teachings of the Bible and attend meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses. The victims of this physical abuse have included women and children—even pregnant women were subjected to inhumane treatment.

Lack of alternative civilian service: There is still no provision for an alternative civilian service despite Azerbaijan's commitments to the Council of Europe. Conscientious objector Mushfiq Mammedov, who already in 2006 was sentenced to and served a conditional sentence of six months for draft evasion, was again arrested on August 19, 2009, on the same charges. This is despite the fact that the Criminal Code of Azerbaijan does not allow condemning a person twice for the same crime. His case together with the case of another conscientious objector, Samir Huseynov, who was in prison for almost seven months, are currently before the European Court of Human Rights as a part of the application *Mushfiq Mammedov & Samir Huseynov v. Republic of Azerbaijan*, dated March 7, 2008.

Censorship of literature: There are ongoing problems with importing religious literature. The State Committee for Work With Religious Associations approves some items of literature of Jehovah's Witnesses but denies other items on the basis that their "contents promote the exclusiveness of the faith of Jehovah's Witnesses and insult the feelings of other Christian religions." These publications are widely distributed and generally accepted around the whole world like, for example, the publication called "*What Does the Bible Teach?*," printed in more than 300 languages and distributed in more than 200 countries.

We are concerned that the sufferings Jehovah's Witnesses endured during the Soviet era may be revived. We urge the authorities of Azerbaijan to actively pursue dialogue with our representatives to resolve these problems peacefully and, in the meantime, to issue orders to the police to desist from interfering with religious freedom.

A delegation of Jehovah's Witnesses is ready to meet with representatives from Azerbaijan to discuss this serious issue.