

Freedom of religion or belief for all in Azerbaijan

Report & statement from the European Baptist Federation

The European Baptist Federation (EBF) consists of 51 Baptist Unions, with 12,000 local congregations in most of the countries in Europe, Central Asia, Middle East and Egypt with more than 800,000 Baptists. The EBF is a regional body of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) with about 100 million Baptists worldwide.

The Baptist movement started in 1609 in Amsterdam and from the very beginning Religious Freedom for all was an important issue. This is still a very important issue for Baptists worldwide and for the European Baptist Federation. Through its network of Unions and local Congregations, the EBF gets reports from the situation in different countries in the OSCE area. Some of these reports are very worrying. In this report we want to highlight the situation in Azerbaijan.

Violations of Religious Freedom in Azerbaijan

One of the member Unions in the EBF is the Baptist Union of Azerbaijan. We are regularly in contact with their leaders. Through Forum 18 News Service, as well as through other sources, we also get regularly information about violations.

We are worried about the violations of religious freedom affecting most religious groups, especially minority groups. We are convinced that all people have the right to meet, to worship and to propagate their beliefs freely, and that this is the best platform for a positive and secure development of any country. We understand that this is not always the case in Azerbaijan. A number of violations have been reported from Christians, Muslims as well as other groups. Most of our direct information comes from the Baptists. In January 2009 the EBF send a monitoring delegation to Azerbaijan in order to get a clearer picture of the situation. A report was written and sent to the President of the Republic, with a copy to the Chairman of the State Committee for Religious Organizations. In July the Baptist World Alliance adopted a resolution on Religious Freedom with allegation to the situation in Azerbaijan. In May and July this year a new Religion Law was adopted. In this law we can see limitations of religious freedom.

Recommendations to the President and Government of Azerbaijan

- We urge the authorities of Azerbaijan to actively make sure that the right to religious freedom for all is protected.
- We request the Government of Azerbaijan to submit the religion law to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe for evaluation in order to bring the law into conformity with international standards.

Below is the text of a resolution of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA), which represents Baptists from across the world, followed by information on the main violations that the EBF delegation was informed about by Baptists in Azerbaijan in January 2009:

Resolution 5 – Religious Freedom Violations in Azerbaijan

The General Council of the Baptist World Alliance meeting in Ede, the Netherlands, July 27-August 1, 2009;

Recollects, celebrating 400 years of Baptist life, that from the beginning our founders stood for freedom of conscience and freedom of religion for all people regardless of their beliefs or non-belief;

Notes that the joint EBF/BWA Religious Freedom Monitoring Group during a visit in January 2009 to Azerbaijan observed violations of freedom of religion towards the local Baptists;

Expresses deep concern over the lack of religious freedom in Azerbaijan as evidenced in the new religion law limiting religious freedom;

Requests the Government of Azerbaijan to submit the religion law to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe for evaluation in order to bring the law into conformity with international standards;

Urges all Baptists to continue in prayer for Azerbaijan and for the members of all its various religious groups

Main points of violation against Baptists recorded by the EBF monitoring group in January 2009

1. *Harassment of Baptist Believers*

Several Baptist leaders have described in detail to us instances of harassment and intimidation from the police and public media because they are Baptists. These have included hostile interrogation, threats against themselves and their families, and even imprisonment.

The cases of the two pastors imprisoned in Aliabad have become well known internationally. It is widely considered that Zaur Balayev and Hamid Shabanov were convicted on false charges and had been targeted because they are Baptist pastors of unregistered churches. We have received a report from an OSCE representative present in court that the legal procedures followed in the case of Pastor Shabanov were not acceptable. We are thankful for the gracious Decree of the State President to release Pastor Balayev, and we hope that the reluctance of the judge to sentence Pastor Shabanov, and hold him under house arrest, will lead to his release also. (He was later convicted. He has now served his sentence and is free)

2. **Obstacles to Registration of Baptist Churches**

It is quite clear to us that serious obstacles are placed in the way of Baptist churches seeking official registration as religious communities, and therefore seeking as good citizens to be within the law. It is possible to lay the blame at national or regional/local government bodies but our conviction is that if there is a political will to register the Baptist churches these can easily be overcome.

We offer two examples:

The Aliabad Baptist Church led by Pastor Zaur Balayev has been attempting to register itself for 15 years. The local State Notary, Najiba Mamedova, has repeatedly refused to notarise the ten signatures required for the Founding Document, thus making this application impossible to proceed.

The Neftcala Baptist Church needs one more document to complete its registration: the building passport for the building it has occupied since 1966. This document was submitted with an earlier group of papers and not returned to the church. Now the church has letters stating that no body, nationally or locally will issue a new Building Passport so the Registration cannot be completed.

We note from the Regulations of the SCWRA (State Committee) , especially Articles 7:4 and 8:5 that the Committee on request shall provide assistance in reaching agreements with State bodies in this matter of Registration. We would respectfully request such assistance in these two cases we have cited.

3. **Discrimination against Baptist Christians in their Employment**

We have met several cases of Baptists being asked to leave their employment when it is known that they are Baptist Christians, and this continues right up to the present time. One example of this is the case of the General Secretary of the Baptist Union, Elnur Jabiyev, who was forced to leave his employment as a Baku Police Officer in 2001. We would ask the help of SCWRA in finding ways for them to appeal against this violation of their human rights and religious freedom. We intend to monitor and report on such violations in the future.

4. Soviet-era Building not returned to the Baptists

From our visits to other faith groups, especially the Muslims and the Orthodox Church, we learned that, despite Azerbaijan having no Law of Restitution, many buildings confiscated by the Soviet authorities have been returned to their original owners. In 1931 a major church building (constructed by the Baptists in 1911) in Azadliq Avenue 47, Baku, was confiscated, and this building exists today as a Cinema-Theatre. The Baptists regard this as a desecration of one of their holy places and have a document requesting its return dated 1989. Therefore we request that the same policy be followed with the Baptists as other faith groups, and this building be restored to them.

The responses to these situations given by the Chairman of the State Committee on Affairs with Religious Organizations are neither exhaustive nor satisfactory. Therefore we continue to raise these points.

Recommendations to the President and the Government of Azerbaijan

- We urge the authorities of Azerbaijan to actively make sure that the right to religious freedom for all people will be protected. *Many of the people from religious minorities groups which we met are living in fear of losing their jobs or being harassed by private persons or police if they openly confess their faith.*
- We request the Government of Azerbaijan to submit the religion law to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe for evaluation in order to bring the law into conformity with international standards; *Azeri speaking citizen have told us that a number of articles in the new religion law is limiting freedom of religion much more than in the old law. Therefore we urge the Government to let the OSCE analyze the law and give recommendations.*

This Report and statement is presented to the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) in Warsaw in September 2009

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The full report from the monitoring trip to Azerbaijan can be found on the web site of the European Baptist Federation www.ebf.org/resources from mid-October 2009.