

## August 23, 2004: Azerbaijan: Religious freedom conditions worsening

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is deeply concerned about the deteriorating situation for religious freedom in Azerbaijan. On August 12, after only five minutes of deliberation, the Azerbaijani Supreme Court upheld a lower court decision to shut down the Juma mosque. Earlier this summer, the police forcibly expelled the Shia community from the Juma mosque, where it had been worshipping for 12 years. The mosque is led by Imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev, a well-known advocate of religious freedom for all religious communities in Azerbaijan who was jailed in late 2003 after participating in demonstrations following the results of the October 2003 presidential elections. He received a five-year suspended sentence in April of this year. The closure of the Juma mosque is part of a pattern over the past few years of tightening government control on Islamic practice and restrictions on the activities of minority religious communities, including Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Hare Krishnas. "The Azeri government is clearly moving in the wrong direction with respect to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief in Azerbaijan," said USCIRF Chair Preeta D. Bansal. "Through its policy of tightening state control over religious believers, the government of Azerbaijan is failing to live up to its obligations under international law with regard to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief and other human rights. We call on the Azerbaijan government to cease these repressive actions against the Juma mosque community and all religious communities in Azerbaijan. We also urge the U.S. government to raise concerns about increasing religious repression in its dealings with the Azeri government," said Bansal. In 2001, Azerbaijan's relatively liberal 1992 law on religion was eroded by the establishment of the powerful State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations (State Committee), which oversees the registration of religious organizations. After the State Committee was set up, all religious organizations were required to re-register with the government. However, it has become increasingly difficult for many groups, especially minority religious communities outside Baku, to gain registration. Since 2001, the number of registered religious communities has dropped from 400 to 168. Without registration, a religious community's ability to function is seriously restricted. Non-governmental organizations that defend religious freedom rights, including the International Religious Liberty Association and Religion and Democracy, have also been denied registration and been publicly denounced by the State Committee. Police and local authorities have raided the worship services of several minority religious communities that have decided not to seek registration or have been refused registration. Other groups have been fined for meeting in private homes. In 2002, 22 of the country's 26 Islamic schools were closed by order of the State Committee. Although the 1992 law on religion requires only that all religious communities inform the State Committee in order to publish, print, import or distribute religious literature, since the establishment of the State Committee, formal approval is now required before publication or distribution can take place. Since 2003, the government has intensified censorship and import controls over religious literature for all religious communities. The Azeri Baptist community struggled for seven years before getting permission from the State Committee to import Azeri-language New Testaments; even then, the State Committee claimed the right to determine how the materials should be distributed. The Committee has also confiscated religious literature from registered communities such as the Adventists and Hare Krishnas. Despite the closure of the Juma mosque this summer, a new state-approved imam was installed by the state-controlled Caucasus Muslim Board as the head of the mosque. In July of this year, Juma community members who attempted to pray at the mosque were hauled off by police and beaten. The police have also broken up prayer meetings of mosque members held in private homes. By mid-August, a total of 83 mosque members had been summoned to the police under various pretexts. Several of his colleagues, as well as his lawyer, were recently detained. Ibrahimoglu continues to call on his congregation to respond to the situation only through peaceful means.

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