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AZERBAIJAN: "Torture is nothing new, but insulting Allah is crossing a red line"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

After the jailing of a Muslim Unity Movement member for six years, police seized and tortured two of his supporters outside the Baku courtroom. "They put their hands through the sack and pulled out my beard. I was insulted with the crudest of obscene words. They also insulted Allah," one of the two, Suleyman Alakbarov, recounted. In protest, the Movement's leader, prisoner of conscience Taleh Bagirov, began a hunger strike. "Torture is nothing new, but insulting Allah is crossing a red line," said Bagirov's wife Leyla Ismayilzade.

Following the jailing on 20 May of a Muslim Unity Movement member for six years, police seized and tortured at least two of his supporters who were protesting outside the Baku courtroom. Officers "insulted Allah" while torturing them, human rights defenders say. In protest at the insults and torture, the Movement's jailed leader, prisoner of conscience Taleh Bagirov, began a hunger strike on 3 June. He called for those issuing the insults during the torture to be punished. Other prisoners joined the hunger strike in solidarity.

Muslim Unity Movement members Suleyman Alakbarov and Mail Karimli said that after police detained them outside Baku's Serious Crimes Court on 20 May, they took them to the 22nd Police Station in the city's Nasimi District. They beat them there, then put bags over their heads and took them to what the two men believe was the Interior Ministry's Main Directorate for the Struggle with Organised Crime (see below).

Alakbarov said that once there, officers threw him on the floor and began to beat him, then started to jump on him. "They put their hands through the sack and pulled out my beard. I was insulted with the crudest of obscene words. They also insulted Allah" (see below).

Officers then forced Alakbarov and Karimli to promise on video that they would no longer attend trials in court. Officers released them that evening. Karimli said officers took him and "dumped him in the desert" (see below).

Forum 18 was unable to find out why officers tortured Alakbarov and Karimli, why they swore and "insulted Allah" knowing that the two men are Muslims and deliberately aggravating their distress, and why no officers appear to have been arrested in response to the torture claims. The telephone of the Head of the 22nd Police Station Fakhrin Bektashi, as well as of the duty officer, went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 17 June (see below).

The man who answered the phone on 17 June at the Interior Ministry's Main Directorate for the Struggle with Organised Crime – who did not give his name – listened to Forum 18's questions as to why officers had tortured Alakbarov and Karimli and "insulted Allah". He then claimed it was a wrong number and put the phone down (see below).

In a 24 May statement, Police spokesperson Colonel Ehsan Zahidov denied that Alakbarov and Karimli had been tortured. "As for information about their alleged beatings and insults by police officers, this is absolutely false and unfounded," his statement declared (see below).

Zahidov also complained that "so-called lawyers who call themselves human rights defenders" had joined Alakbarov and Karimli in their "absurd contentions", including at a press conference earlier that day. "But they forget that spreading such knowingly fabricated and unfounded allegations attracts legal responsibility" (see below).

Forum 18 was unable to reach Colonel Zahidov on 17 June. Colleagues referred Forum 18 to his deputy, Elnur Aslanov, but his phone went unanswered.

Bagirov's wife Leyla Ismayilzade supported his protests. "Torture is nothing new, but insulting Allah is crossing a red line," she told regional news website Caucasian Knot (see below).

Bagirov insists that he is not seeking punishment for the police officers so much as an admission of guilt. "According to Taleh, the main thing for him is the recognition by the state of the very fact of blasphemy and the beginning of an investigation," Bagirov's lawyer Bahruz Bayramov declared on 10 June (see below).

State-imposed Islam only

The regime is determined to prevent any exercise of freedom of religion or belief by Muslims which is outside its control. It has closed down independent mosques and movements and has subjugated administration of all mosques, the appointment and removal of all clergy, college teaching of Islam and publication of Islamic materials (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2749) to the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations.

The regime moved quickly to crush the Muslim Unity Movement, which Bagirov leads, after its launch in January 2015. The Movement has both religious and political goals (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2205) and aims to unify the Islamic and secular opposition to the regime of President Ilham Aliyev.

Another Shia Muslim Imam, Sardar Babayev, remains under investigation (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2750) after eight months' detention. Arrested by the State Security Service (SSS) secret police in October 2021, he is being investigated on treason charges, which he denies. He has already served a three-year jail term handed down in 2017 for leading meetings for Islamic worship, after having gained his religious education outside Azerbaijan.

Torture

The United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-against-torture-and-other-cruel-inhuman-or-degrading>), which Azerbaijan acceded to on 16 August 1996, defines torture as: "any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity".

Under Article 6 of the Convention Azerbaijan is obliged to arrest any person suspected on good grounds of having committed torture (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429). Under Article 4 Azerbaijan is obliged to try them under Criminal law which makes "these offences punishable by appropriate penalties which take into account their grave nature".

Police and secret police officers, as well as prison staff, have frequently used physical and psychological torture over many years, including against those exercising their freedom of religion or belief.

Imam Bagirov was subjected to "severe torture" and a broken nose (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2143) while in detention at the Interior Ministry's Main Directorate for the Struggle with Organised Crime in December 2015.

Of 18 Muslims jailed in January 2017 for their alleged involvement with the Muslim Unity Movement, 17 testified in court that they were tortured (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2205) by officers of the Interior Ministry's Main Directorate for the Struggle with Organised Crime in Baku, and by police. Among the testimonies of torture, Imam Bagirov stated: "It is one thing to beat or put an electric current through a person, but we are speaking here of horrific tortures." No officials were arrested or tried for torturing the prisoners of conscience.

In January 2017, 15 police officers raided a home in Barda where Jehovah's Witnesses were meeting for prayer and study. Officers took all 18 people to Barda District Police Station. One officer, Vuqar Mammadov, hit a female Jehovah's Witness, pulled her hair and threatened her with a sexual assault (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429).

The regime has repeatedly dismissed almost all allegations of torture. In its response to the United Nations Committee Against Torture, submitted on 8 January 2020 (CAT/C/AZE/5 (https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CAT%2fC%2fAZE%2fQPR%2f5)), it claimed that two prison officers had been reprimanded in 2017, while five police officers faced criminal investigations in 2018-9 over torture of detainees, one of whom died as a result of "illegal acts".

The regime claimed that its investigation into torture of Bagirov and another prisoner Abbas Huseynov "concluded that the information on illegal acts .. could not be confirmed". "They were subjected to no illegal physical pressure."

Protests against long jail term

Plain clothes officers arrested Muslim Unity Movement member Razi Humbatov in a village near Baku on 7 July 2021 and he has been held since then. Members of the Movement – which he joined five years ago - believe he was arrested because of his criticism

of the authorities in his social media posts. He is also known for his strong criticism of drug taking and trading.

At the end of his closed trial on 20 May at Baku's Serious Crimes Court, the Judge sentenced Humbatov to six years' imprisonment on drugs charges, local media reported. He insisted that the charges were fabricated.

Several dozen fellow Muslim Unity Movement members and supporters protested against Humbatov's trial outside the court. Police tried to keep the protestors away from the building, arresting five of them.

Nasimi District Court handed 30-day prison terms to three of them - Agaali Yahyayev, Imran Mammadli and Elgiz Mammadov – on charges of "petty hooliganism" and "refusing to obey the police". Police detained two others, Suleyman Alakbarov and Mail Karimli.

Detained, tortured, insulted

Muslim Unity Movement members Suleyman Alakbarov and Mail Karimli said that after police detained them outside Baku's Serious Crimes Court on 20 May, they took them to the 22nd Police Station in the city's Nasimi District. Karimli recounted at a Baku press conference on 24 May how officers had put a bag over his head and beaten him, then taken him by a car to a new location and continued to torture him with beatings there.

Alakbarov similarly recounted being taken first to the 22nd police station. "After an hour they put a bag over my head and took me elsewhere," he told regional news website Caucasian Knot. "On the way I guessed that they were taking me to the Main Directorate for the Struggle with Organised Crime."

Alakbarov said that once there, officers threw him on the floor and began to beat him, then started to jump on him. "They put their hands through the sack and pulled out my beard. I was insulted with the crudest of obscene words. They also insulted Allah."

Officers then forced Alakbarov and Karimli to promise on video that they would no longer attend trials in court. Officers released them that evening. Karimli said officers took him and "dumped him in the desert".

On 24 May, after they recounted the torture and insults at a press conference in Baku, police summoned Alakbarov and Karimli to the city's Main Police Station. Officers took statements from them. They then tried to convince them that they had been taken not to the Interior Ministry's Main Directorate for the Struggle with Organised Crime but to Nasimi District Police Station. "Maybe that was the case," Alakbarov told Caucasian Knot. "But what difference is it where they took us and where they tortured us?"

Forum 18 was unable to find out why officers tortured Alakbarov and Karimli, why they swore and "insulted Allah" knowing that the two men are Muslims and deliberately aggravating their distress, and why no officers appear to have been arrested in response to the torture claims.

The telephone of the Head of the 22nd Police Station Fakhri Bektashi, as well as of the duty officer, went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 17 June.

The man who answered the phone on 17 June at the Interior Ministry's Main Directorate for the Struggle with Organised Crime – who did not give his name – listened to Forum 18's questions as to why officers had tortured Alakbarov and Karimli and "insulted Allah". He then claimed it was a wrong number and put the phone down.

Police spokesperson says beatings and insults by police officers "absolutely false and unfounded"

Later on 24 May, the day of the press conference, Police spokesperson Colonel Ehsan Zahidov denied in a statement to the Caliber.az news website that officers had tortured Alakbarov and Karimli.

Zahidov complained that on 20 May, "without any need a crowd of people had gathered outside the court, making a noise and seriously obstructing the movement of traffic and pedestrians". He said police had demanded that the people disperse and that Alakbarov and Karimli "had not submitted to the lawful demands of the police officers and had continued to violate public order".

While claiming that "in the most developed and democratic countries" police are quick to use firearms, Zahidov insisted that police had used no force to take Alakbarov and Karimli to the police station. Once there, he claimed, officers had help "preventive conversations with them and after a warning let them go".

Zahidov complained that Alakbarov and Karimli had spread "rumours" that they had then been taken to the Interior Ministry's Main Directorate for the Struggle with Organised Crime and beaten. He insisted that people detained for administrative violations are never taken there. "As for information about their alleged beatings and insults by police officers, this is absolutely false and unfounded," his statement to Caliber.az declared.

Zahidov also complained that "so-called lawyers who call themselves human rights defenders" had joined Alakbarov and Karimli in their "absurd contentions", including at the press conference earlier that day. "But they forget that spreading such knowingly fabricated and unfounded allegations attracts legal responsibility."

Prison hunger strike over "inadmissible insult to the feelings of Muslim believers"

On 3 June, the leader of the Muslim Unity Movement, prisoner of conscience Taleh Bagirov (also known as Bagirzade), began a hunger strike in the high-security Qobustan prison, 40 kms (25 miles) south west of Baku. He is serving a 20-year sentence handed down in January 2017 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2254).

Bagirov is drinking water, his wife Leyla Ismayilzade noted. (Daytime temperatures in Qobustan are over 30 degrees Celsius, falling to about 20 degrees at night.)

Bagirov informed the prison administration in writing of his hunger strike and why he was conducting it. "Not only do the police torture believers, but their tormentors began to insult Allah," Muslim Unity Movement deputy leader Elchin Qasimov told Caucasian Knot. "Taleh Bagirzade considers this to be an inadmissible insult to the feelings of Muslim believers from the point of view of morality and ethics. He demands the punishment of the guilty."

Bagirov's wife Ismayilzade supported his protests. "Torture is nothing new, but insulting Allah is crossing a red line," she told Caucasian Knot. "He intends to maintain his hunger strike to the end. He said he would not stop until the guilty men are punished. He considers that every believer who has accepted Allah must voice their protest. Blasphemers must be punished."

Bagirov later clarified that he is not seeking punishment for the police officers so much as an admission of guilt. "According to Taleh, the main thing for him is the recognition by the state of the very fact of blasphemy and the beginning of an investigation," Bagirov's lawyer Bahruz Bayramov declared on 10 June.

Bagirov's lawyer, Fakhraddin Mehdiyev, was able to visit him on 14 June in Qobustan prison, the Muslim Unity Movement announced on its Facebook page. The lawyer said that although Bagirov has a high temperature, he is determined to continue his hunger strike.

Bagirov has been held in Qobustan strict regime prison since July 2017. The prison address is:

AZ-1080

Baki Shahari

Qaradag rayonu

Qobustan qasabasi

Habskhana

Others join Bagirov's hunger strike

Other members of the Muslim Unity Movement and fellow prisoners joined Bagirov's hunger strike. These included Abbas Huseyn, Jabbar Jabbarov, Polad Aslanov, Firudin Zeynalov and Seyfaddin Shirvanov. Also among them is Razi Humbatov, sentenced on 20 May (see above). (END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Azerbaijan (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=23>)

For background information, see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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