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AZERBAIJAN: Nakhichevan is re-registration black hole

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

More than a year after the compulsory re-registration drive was due to have been completed, the senior religious affairs official in Azerbaijan's autonomous republic of Nakhichevan has admitted to Forum 18 News Service that none of Nakhichevan's dozens of religious communities has been re-registered. "It is still a question whether re-registration should take place in Baku or in Nakhichevan," Idris Abbasov, head of the Nakhichevan branch of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, declared. "I don't know." He told Forum 18 that only Rafik Aliev, the chairman of the State Committee, knows the answer. However, no official of the State Committee in the capital Baku was prepared to talk to Forum 18. Although Abbasov denied that lack of re-registration prevented the dozens of religious communities in the autonomous republic from functioning freely, it leaves them in a legal black hole.

Twenty months after the launch of the compulsory re-registration drive and more than a year after the re-registration process was due to have been completed, the senior religious affairs official in Azerbaijan's autonomous republic of Nakhichevan has admitted to Forum 18 News Service that none of Nakhichevan's dozens of religious communities has been re-registered. "Not one has yet been re-registered with the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations," Idris Abbasov, head of the Nakhichevan branch of the State Committee, declared on 8 May. "It is still a question whether re-registration should take place in Baku or in Nakhichevan. I don't know." He told Forum 18 that only Rafik Aliyev, the chairman of the State Committee, knows the answer.

However, Abbasov denied that lack of re-registration prevented the dozens of religious communities in the autonomous republic from functioning. "They can work freely," he insisted. He resolutely denied reports that the Turkish and the Iranian mosques in Nakhichevan had been closed down last year. "We don't call them Turkish or Iranian. But no mosques have been closed down." He also denied reports that muezzins are banned from issuing the call to prayer from mosques. "This is not banned here," Abbasov insisted. "Maybe they don't do it for technical reasons. But they can, just as in any European country."

Nakhichevan is an autonomous republic on the Arax river sandwiched between Armenia, Iran and Turkey and has a population of some 350,000. It has its own government and parliament.

The controversial re-registration drive - launched in August 2001 just two months after the State Committee was established - was originally due to have been completed by the end of March 2002. But more than a year after this deadline, the process has seen only 168 religious communities gain re-registration (these are listed on the committee's website www.addk.net). This compares with 406 religious communities registered with the Ministry of Justice under the old system and an estimated 2,000 religious communities in Azerbaijan as a whole.

With the re-registration applications from Nakhichevan lodged with the State Committee in Baku (which has not shared the information with the Nakhichevan branch) and with the dispute over which branch of the State Committee should conduct the re-registration in Nakhichevan unresolved, local religious communities have fallen into a black hole.

Forum 18 tried to discover from the State Committee in Baku on 8 May why no religious communities in Nakhichevan have yet been re-registered, but no official was prepared to talk. Zemfira Rzayeva, the head of the registration department, angrily refused to discuss anything, complaining that Forum 18 publishes "untrue information" and misquotes State Committee officials after conducting interviews with them. Committee deputy chairman Namik Allahverdiev simply put the phone down after hearing that Forum 18 was on the line. Samed Bairamzade, head of department for relations with religious bodies, refused to give any information, claiming that he did not know whether it was true that the person calling him was a journalist or someone pretending to be a journalist.

Abbasov told Forum 18 he did not know how many religious communities exist in Nakhichevan. "There are individual people but not 'communities', as this is a legal term and they do not have registration." He estimated that there were about thirty mosques, one Adventist community and only a few individual members of other religious communities, such as Russian Orthodox, Jews or Baptists. "I can't say how many of these there are." He said he would only know how many religious communities exist when they apply for registration.

One Adventist pastor familiar with the justice ministry's attempts to liquidate the Nakhichevan Adventist church's registration through the courts (see separate F18News article) reported that the church had applied for re-registration more than a year ago to the State Committee in Baku. However, he said the Baku committee appears not to have control over what happens in Nakhichevan. "We want to re-register our church in Nakhichevan," he told Forum 18 on 8 May, "but the State Committee in Baku says it does not have links with the autonomous republic."

Although Rafik Aliyev told Forum 18 in London on 5 March that religious communities that have not re-registered with his committee retain their old justice ministry registration, many religious communities in Azerbaijan have faced harassment from the local authorities and police if they cannot produce a re-registration certificate from the State Committee. As officials have insisted on the importance of re-registration, it remains unclear why no communities in Nakhichevan have yet been re-registered.

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