

# AZERBAIJAN: Current situation of Jehovah's Witnesses

HRWF (14.01.2019) – On 5-6 February 2019, the 6th EU-Azerbaijan Subcommittee (SC) on Justice, Freedom, Security and Human Rights and Democracy will take place in Baku. In 2018 and 2017, no Jehovah's Witness was in prison for the exercise of his/her religious freedom while in 2016 and 2015, two and four of them were respectively behind bars.

In September last, the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses participated in the OSCE/ODIHR Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw and filed a report about their situation in Azerbaijan (<https://www.osce.org/odihr/394640?download=true>). HRWF presents you an updated version of this report:

## ***Update Regarding Jehovah's Witnesses in Azerbaijan***

Over the past year, Jehovah's Witnesses in Azerbaijan have experienced less governmental interference in manifesting their religious beliefs. Jehovah's Witnesses are grateful for the decrease in state-sponsored harassment.

## ***Positive Developments***

- **Rental of facilities for holding large religious assemblies.** Since 2016 the Witnesses have received assistance from the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA) and have been able to rent large venues in Baku for annual religious events.
- **Compensation for arbitrary detention.** In early October

2018, Irina Zakharchenko and Valida Jabrayilova finally received compensation for their unjust conviction and 11-month imprisonment during 2015 and 2016.

- **Import of religious publications.** The SCWRA has not refused permission to import any new publications of Jehovah's Witnesses since November 2015.
- **Registration in Baku.** On 8 November 2018 Jehovah's Witnesses in Baku received State registration. 'Jehovah's Witnesses in Baku Religious Community' now appears on the SCWRA website among the list of 'Non-Islamic Religious Communities.'

### ***Current Difficulties***

#### **Denial of Right to Conscientious Objection to Military Service**

1. **Barda.** Barda District Court convicted Mr Emil Mehdiyev on **6 July 2018**, and ordered a one-year probationary arrangement.
2. **Aghdam.** On **6 September 2018**, Aghdam District Court sentenced Mr Vahid Abilov to a one-year probationary arrangement.
3. **Baku.** In **July 2018**, Mr Emin Tahmazov was informed that his case would be sent to the Prosecutor's Office.
4. **Gakh.** On **4 August 2018**, Mr Levani Otarashvili was summoned to the State Service for Mobilisation and Conscription (SSMC) and asked to sign a document concerning the transfer of his case to the Prosecutor's Office.
5. **Khachmaz.** On **28 June 2018**, the SSMC Chief threatened to send Mr Fuad Hasanaliyev's case to the Prosecutor's Office.

#### **Harassment by Officials and Interference with Religious Services**

1. On **20 January 2018**, approximately ten police officers raided the home of Ms Sharafat Azizova during a social gathering of several families of Jehovah's Witnesses (not a religious meeting). The police searched the home, seized personal literature, recorded personal details and took statements from those in attendance. The men were required to give statements at the Lankaran Police Department and were released an hour later.
2. On **10 February 2018**, two officials came to the home of Ms Mzia Otarashvili in mid-afternoon. Without introducing themselves or providing credentials, the officials accused Ms Otarashvili of conducting "unauthorised" religious meetings in her home, which they alleged were in violation of Azerbaijan's laws.
3. On **9 July 2018**, at 10 a.m. Ms Saadat Mammadova was called to the Prosecutor's Office. The employee asked Ms Mammadova various questions about her religious beliefs, and warned her to be careful and not to distribute illegal religious publications; otherwise, he would take measures against her. She was allowed to leave at about 11.05 a.m.
4. On **14 July 2018**, at about 5 p.m., Police Officer Shakhmar Gahramanov and two other officials interrupted a religious meeting in the private home of Ms Sona Mammadova.
5. On **15 August 2018**, Ms Sevda Aliyeva, a resident of Baku, went to the Housing and Communal Services Committee concerning document issues. The manager of the Committee told her in a friendly way that she had received several phone calls from the State Security Service (SSS) enquiring about Ms Aliyeva's religion.
6. On **30 August 2018**, Ms Raisa Shpakovskaya was visited by Field Inspector Elmar Huseynov and another official in civilian clothing, who neither introduced himself nor showed his credentials. About 30-40 minutes later, after searching the entire flat, including the kitchen and the closet, they left.

7. On **16 September 2018**, about 70 Jehovah's Witnesses from Ganja decided to hold an outdoor meeting in Khanlar. At about 12.10 p.m., after the meeting had finished, five police officers arrived. The police telephoned representatives of the SCWRA, two of whom subsequently attended. The police officers recorded the names of all the detainees and then sent the names for verification, receiving photographs in return.

### **Interference with Manifestation of Belief**

**During 2018**, there were 18 reported cases where police detained individual Witnesses while they were sharing their religious beliefs with others. Typically, police officers stop the persons concerned, take them to the police station, verbally abuse them, and threaten them with administrative charges and heavy fines. On most of these occasions, the Witnesses were detained for several hours.

1. **Lankaran**. On **19 February 2018**, a police officer called and asked Ms Gulnaz Nasirova to come to the police department the next day. On 20 February 2018, at 12.10 p.m. she went to the police department and the police officer, whose name was Adam, questioned her about her religion and religious beliefs. She wrote a statement and was released at about 2 p.m.
2. **Siyazan**. On **25 February 2018**, at 3.45 p.m. Mr Elmur Mursalov and Ms Firangiz Aghasanova were approached by two police officers and taken to the police department. Two officers in civilian clothing, who did not identify themselves, insulted, humiliated and threatened the Witnesses, demanding that they practise Islam and asserting that they 'have no rights.' An official of the SCWRA, who was present, confirmed that the publications were permitted by law, since they bore control stamps. Despite this, he retained them for examination. The

Field Inspector drew up a Report on Seizing Publications. They were released at 8.10 p.m.

3. **Sahil.** On **28 February 2018**, at about 12.30 p.m. Ms Khalida Rasulova, was taken to Police Department No. 38 and asked to write a statement, but she refused to write or sign anything. One of the officers told her that she had violated the law, and read an article in the law about a fine. At about 1.45 p.m. she was released.
4. **Baku.** On **25 March 2018**, at about 1.45 p.m. Mr Emil Mehdiyev and Mr Rizvan Babayev were taken to Police Department No. 19 against their will. In the department, Mr Mehdiyev's pockets were searched. They were allowed to leave at about 3 p.m.
5. **Baku.** On **23 April 2018**, at about 11.50 a.m. Ms Rahifa Guliyeva and Ms Targul Seyidova were taken to Police Department No. 33 against their will. The Witnesses wrote and signed statements. At about 4.05 p.m. the Witnesses were released.
6. **Yevlakh.** On **4 May 2018**, at about 11 a.m., the police took Ms Hasa Mammadova to a mosque, and questioned her about the literature and religion of Jehovah's Witnesses. Then officers took her to the police department. She was released at about 2 p.m.
7. **Baku.** On **21 May 2018**, between 12 and 12.30 p.m., Ms Yegana Salahova was visited at home by three officials, one of whom was Field Inspector Mahammad. She was asked to write in a statement that she was not one of Jehovah's Witnesses and that she did not share her beliefs with others. Ms Salahova refused. The officials left at 2 p.m.
8. **Salyan.** On **27 May 2018**, at about 2.25 p.m., Mr Elgiz Aliyev and Mr Ali Amirzada were taken to the police department against their will. The officers insulted the Witnesses' religion, and said that they must preach Islam. The men were released at about 3.10 p.m. after their personal details had been recorded.
9. **Siyazan.** On **1 July 2018**, at about 12.40 p.m., Ms Ismat

Zohrabova and Ms Maryam Aliyeva, along with Mr Eldar Aliyev who had been detained while conducting a Bible study in a park, were taken to the police department against their will. The Deputy Chief, named Goshgar, said that they were engaged in illegal activities and had no right to share their beliefs. Eventually, Goshgar returned their publications and said that this time the police would let them go, but if they returned to Siyazan they would be detained. Their personal details were recorded and at about 1.15 p.m. they were released.

10. On **11 July 2018**, at about 10.15 a.m., Ms Bahar Aliyeva and her daughter Ms Aysel Aliyeva were approached by four or five police officers, and told that they must accompany them to the police department. If they refused they would be taken there by force. The women were ordered to empty their bags and all their publications were seized. After the police had taken their statements, they were released at about 3.30 p.m.
11. On **27 July 2018**, at about 8.40 a.m., Ms Natalya Moroz and Ms Sevil Teymurova were taken to Police Department No. 22. They wrote statements and were not released until 7 p.m.
12. On **20 August 2018**, at 12.55 p.m., Ms Natella Azimova was summoned to Badamdar Police Department No. 41. A police officer, Agil, informed Ms Azimova that the husband of a woman with whom she studied the Bible had complained about her. At 4.45 p.m. she was released.
13. On **23 August 2018**, at about 1.30 p.m., police officers of the Astara Police Department detained six Jehovah's Witnesses: Mr Roman Mukhtarov, Mr Elshan Aghalarov, Mr Ruslan Taghiyev, Ms Khatira Gubadova, Ms Bahar Aliyeva, and Ms Sharafat Azizova. The police seized from Mr Aghalarov's car all the religious publications and his personal laptop. He was told to empty his bags, which contained his and his wife's personal items. When he objected, one of the officers pushed him. Their personal details were recorded and statements were taken. At

about 6.30 p.m. all were released.

14. On **28 August 2018**, at about 1.30 p.m., when Ms Sevda Aliyeva and Ms Sama Natigzada were sharing their religious beliefs in public, they were stopped by seven or eight police officers and taken to the police department. They were released at 4.30 p.m.
15. On **29 September 2018**, at about 11.45 a.m. Ms Aytaj Rahmanova and Ms Telli Samadova were approached by three police officers while sharing their beliefs. After writing statements, they were released at about 1 p.m.
16. On **16 October 2018**, at about 1.10 p.m., three of Jehovah's Witnesses, Mr Yavar Abbasov, his wife Ms Khuraman Abbasova, and Mr Mahabbat, were approached by Rufat Ismayilov, a police officer in civilian clothing. They were taken to Police Department No. 35. At 4.30 p.m. they were released.
17. On **4 November 2018**, a group of Jehovah's Witnesses shared their religious beliefs. When they were leaving the city a man, who said he was a representative of the executive authority for religious affairs, stopped them and stated that each time they come to the district they have to inform the executive authority. He threatened to take them to the police department, but after ten minutes he let them go.
18. On **11 November 2018**, at about 11.10 a.m., a police officer who introduced himself as Nazim stopped Mr Eldar Aliyev and demanded that he get his companions and leave the city. Nazim told him that "he does not want to see them preaching in Siyazan." At 11.50 a.m. Nazim left. The Witnesses subsequently proceeded to share their beliefs without hindrance.

## **Denial of Ganja Registration**

1. Since **1 July 2010**, Jehovah's Witnesses in Ganja have filed six applications for registration. Every

application was returned on the basis of alleged errors. On **14 September 2016**, representatives of the EAJW met with Mr Gurbanli, who indicated that no progress would be made with this application until re-registration of the Baku Community was resolved.

2. **Elsewhere in Azerbaijan**, there is not the required number of Jehovah's Witnesses to apply for registration. According to the Law, a minimum of 50 founders is required. In some cities, such as Sumgayit, Barda and Mingachevir, there are several dozen Jehovah's Witnesses but the available number does not reach 50, and for this reason an application to register the local religious community cannot be filed. Although law-enforcement agents have not disrupted religious meetings in recent months, Jehovah's Witnesses outside Baku live in constant fear that their meetings for worship may be disrupted by police officers and that they will be fined for 'illegal' religious activity.
3. **National Registration.** As mentioned above, Jehovah's Witnesses live and worship in many cities and smaller towns. In some cities they number in the tens, and in others there are fewer than 10. Because these groups are unable to apply for local registration, during 2009 documents seeking national registration were filed with the SCWRA. However, the application was rejected, with the sole reason given: *"According to the first part of Article 12 of the Azerbaijan Republic Law on Freedom of Religious Beliefs, a religious community can conduct activity at the place of worship that is indicated as the legal address mentioned in the information that is presented in order to obtain state registration."*

**Jehovah's Witnesses in Azerbaijan will be pleased to provide additional details on request:**



LegalContact.AZ@jw.org

International Office of Public Information: OPIGov@jw.org

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## **WORLD: US condemns 10 countries for severe religious freedom violations**

By Jennifer Hansler

CNN (11.12.2018) – <https://cnn.it/2Erh0kr> – Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Tuesday announced the US has deemed 10

countries guilty of severe religious freedom violations.

The nations – China, Eritrea, Iran, Myanmar (also known as Burma), North Korea, Pakistan, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan – were categorized “Countries of Particular Concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. They were found to have engaged or tolerated “systematic, ongoing, (and) egregious violations of religious freedom.”

“In far too many places across the globe, individuals continue to face harassment, arrests, or even death for simply living their lives in accordance with their beliefs. The United States will not stand by as spectators in the face of such oppression,” Pompeo said in a statement. “Protecting and promoting international religious freedom is a top foreign policy priority of the Trump Administration.”

“These designations are aimed at improving the lives of individuals and the broader success of their societies. I recognize that several designated countries are working to improve their respect for religious freedom; I welcome such initiatives and look forward to continuing the dialogue,” he added.

Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback, in a call with reporters on Tuesday, cited a catalog of religious freedom violations perpetrated by some of these nations. They included Pakistan’s blasphemy laws, specifically the case of Asia Bibi, Myanmar’s mass violence against the Rohingya population and China’s imprisonment of

the Uyghurs and its treatment of Christians and Buddhists.

“China isn’t backing away from the religious persecution, it seems to be expanding,” he said. “This is obviously very troubling to the administration.”

According to the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, such “egregious violations” include “torture, degrading treatment or punishment, prolonged detention without charges, abduction or clandestine detention, or other flagrant denial of the right to life, liberty, or the security of persons.”

Congress is notified of the designations annually, and sanctions to pressure the country to change its behavior may be imposed if all non-economic means have been used.

According to Brownback, such sanctions are “double-hatted” – meaning the countries are sanctioned in other areas but also considered sanctioned as Countries of Particular Concern. China, Eritrea, Iran, Myanmar, North Korea and Sudan are all being sanctioned as such, but Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have had their sanctions waived due to “national interest,” Brownback said.

In addition to the Countries of Particular Concern designation, Pompeo “placed Comoros, Russia, and Uzbekistan on a Special Watch List for governments that have engaged in or tolerated ‘severe violations of religious freedom,’ ” and designated al Nusra Front, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula,

al Qaeda, Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, the Houthis, ISIS, ISIS-Khorasan and the Taliban as “Entities of Particular Concern,” according to the statement.

Pompeo made the designations in late November.

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent, bipartisan federal government commission established by the 1998 law, said the designation “demonstrates America’s strong and active support for freedom of religion and belief worldwide.”

“We are particularly gratified that, after years of documenting systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom in Pakistan, the State Department has finally added that country to the list of the world’s worst violators for the first time,” Chairman Tenzin Dorjee said in a statement to CNN. “We also welcome the new addition of Russia as a severe violator on the Special Watch List, but question whether Uzbekistan has sufficiently improved to be moved from the CPC list to the Special Watch List. In April 2018 USCIRF recommended that both of those countries should be designated as CPCs.”

Brownback said Uzbekistan had made “substantial changes.”

In December 2017, Pompeo designated China, Eritrea, Iran, Myanmar, North Korea, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as Countries of Particular Concern and placed Pakistan on the Special Watch List for severe

violations of religious freedom.

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## **CHINA: Woman driven to suicide by the Chinese Communist Government's long-term harassment: the case of Wang Hongli**

HRWF (04.12.2018) Wang Hongli was born in May 1971 and lived in Yongle Town, Xixian New Area, Shaanxi Province. In 2008, she joined The Church of Almighty God. In 2013, she was arrested by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) police for

attending a gathering, and after her release was subjected to police surveillance and harassment. In July 2017, the CCP police sought out Wang Hongli; they interrogated her and searched her home in an effort to extract information on the church. Throughout May 2018 the police sent her frequent menacing questions, demanding to know if she still believed in God, who the church leader was, etc. These disturbances left her absent-minded and ill-at-ease. Beginning in July of that year, the police started frequently showing up at her door, and their visits increased from once a week to once every two or three days. This was incredibly stressful for Wang Hongli.

On 2 August 2018, the police once again visited her home to threaten and harass her. Unable to withstand all those years of the police's threats and harassment, she committed suicide by swallowing pesticides; she was just 47 years old.

### ***Wang Hongli's arrest***

On 4 August 2013, Wang Hongli was arrested by the police of Jingwei Town in Gaoling County during a religious gathering. The CCP police were unable to get the information on the church they wanted through interrogation, so they released her the following day. In 2016, Wang Hongli got married and moved away, managing to evade local police surveillance. However, the CCP police did not let her slip away; they tried everything to ascertain her whereabouts.

On 5 July 2017, police from the Chongwenta North Road Police Station in Jinghe New City, Xixian New Area found her parents' home address. They threatened her family members, telling them

that they'd be arrested if they didn't disclose her whereabouts, and that she would be listed as a wanted criminal. Her family were pushed into calling her and telling her to come home.

Around 9 a.m. on 7 July 2017, two male officers from the Chongwenta North Road Police Station rushed to Wang Hongli's home to question her on whether she still believed in Almighty God; they ransacked the entire place. When they were unable to find any evidence of her faith, they demanded her to disclose her cellphone number and took photos of her as well as the interior and exterior of the home. At that time, Wang Hongli was home alone, and felt frightened. In a message she sent to church members, she wrote: "This blow has really weakened me, but I've seen God's protection. The police failed to find any evidence of my faith."

On 7 May 2018, a village cadre called Wang Hongli to the Village Committee office where five National Security Brigade officers had been waiting. The police questioned her on whether she still believed in God and who the church leader was. One officer also asked her: "Why didn't you respond to our text message? We need to know what you're doing!" They let her go after questioning. After that she continued to receive frequent menacing text messages from the police; this harassment was enormously stressful for her. She wrote in a letter to the church: "The police are constantly messaging me, disturbing me. I'm feeling really distraught and I can't get any peace of mind all day."

In July 2018, the police started frequently showing up at Wang Hongli's house to harass her— the frequency of which increased from once a week to once every two or three days. Every time,

four officers would arrive in a police car and charge into her home wearing their police uniforms, pestering and interrogating her for half an hour or longer. Frightened, she was frequently unable to eat or sleep—her suffering was great. Tormented, she confided in her mother that she was afraid if she was arrested, she'd be unable to withstand the torture and would sell out other brothers and sisters in the church, which was something she didn't want to do. She didn't dare have any contact with them for fear of implicating them.

At 9 a.m. on 2 August 2018, four officers from the Chongwenta North Road Police Station once again burst into Wang Hongli's home to interrogate her and left after about thirty minutes. Unable to bear the long-term police harassment any longer, she killed herself by drinking pesticides that very day.

At 10 a.m. the next day, her family found her corpse in the bathroom of her home in the Anju Jinghe Community.

Wang Hongli, was driven to her end by the Chinese Communist government.

### **HRWF Comment**

Members of The Church of Almighty God applying for refugee status in the EU, South Korea, Australia, Canada, the United States should be granted political asylum and should never be sent back to China.



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## **CHINA: House church raided twice for standing up to authorities**

*In the past two months, law enforcement and government agencies ransacked a Sola Fide church in Hunan because its leadership refused to join the government-controlled Three-Self Patriotic Movement.*

By Shen Xiang

Bitter Winter (21.11.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2DU7RvF> – On September 16, more than thirty officials showed up at a Sola Fide house church in Hengyang city's Zhengxiang district in

China's southern province of Hunan.

Officials from Political and Legal Affairs Committee, Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau, Urban Management Bureau, police station, and other state institutions stormed in and ordered the believers to end their gathering, as "privately setting up a meeting place was a violation of the law."

They then proceeded to tear apart the church's cross and other religious symbols. They also confiscated the Bibles, hymnbooks, electric equipment, piano, tables, chairs, audio speakers, and other items from the church. When one elderly believer tried to protest the looting, he was pushed aside and shoved to the ground.

The officials also took photos of all the believers and registered their ID details. The church's leader, Zhang Jian (pseudonym), was taken into custody for "disrupting social order." He was transported to the local Public Security Bureau and interrogated about the church's funds and bank details. He was released soon after.

Within days after the raid, members of the congregation put the church back together again and resumed meetings. However, on October 28, the officials showed up again to raid and loot the church, as before.

As per inside information, the authorities are harassing the church because Mr. Zhang had previously refused to join the government-controlled Three-Self Church. Officials from the

Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau repeatedly came to the church during the week leading to the first raid ordering Zhang Jian to register with the government-approved Patriotic Movement or face the consequences. Each time, he refused, saying that he would instead be imprisoned than join the Three-Self Church.

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## **CHINA: Liaoning and Shanxi Buddhists report cases of harassment**

*Even the most innocent faith-related practices or rituals may cause troubles with authorities in present-day China.*

By Piao Junying

Bitter Winter (16.11.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2A7i4An> – Ever since the implementation of the new Regulation on Religious Affairs, any act of faith has come under scanner in China. Not only are believers rebuked or harassed for their actions, but they are also threatened to the point of paranoia.

In early September, the police arrested more than 20 elderly Buddhists in Donggang city of northeastern Liaoning simply for reading scriptures together in one of their homes. To show their heft, the officers arrived in four cars and came armed with guns. They claimed that all private religious meetings had been prohibited by the state and seized the group's books, under the pretense of checking if they had anti-Party content in them.

Among the arrested Buddhists, more than ten out-of-town Buddhists were taken to a police station for questioning, while locals Buddhists were made to register their information on the scene, and next day, they were called in for questioning and were threatened that if they don't give up their faith, the next three generations of their family will not be allowed to serve in the Chinese army or seek a government job.

An eyewitness from the village revealed that he heard the Buddhists singing songs praising the Party in the police station. He said, "The songs saved them. The police took the singing as the sign of support for Mao Zedong and released them."

Another villager said that the government's policies are becoming increasingly difficult to understand and follow. Speaking about some previous arrests, he said, "When these old ladies have nothing to do, they sing together and recite Buddhist scriptures. This does not mean that they oppose the Communist Party. Why arrest them?"

The level of control over religious belief in China is such that even the most innocuous faith-related act may result in huge problems with authorities. Li Gaizhen (pseudonym), a Buddhist from Taiyaun city in the northern province of Shanxi told Bitter Winter that since March, her daily life is monitored only because her religious status had been registered in official records.

In May, she decided to buy some fish from the market and release them into a nearby lake as part of the Buddhist practice known as Life Release. She was called immediately into the police station for questioning, and the deputy director intervened personally to "learn about her situation."

She was questioned at length about her faith and told that by releasing fish into the water, she had caused "disturbance to the public order." She was later forced to sign a document guaranteeing that she was no longer a Buddhist. Given such intense scrutiny for even the minutest aspects of her life and faith, Ms. Li now lives in fear of authorities and possible implications against her family.

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