

## While “Jehovah’s Witnesses” were meeting Azerbaijani officials, their supporters were arrested

The members of the religious organisation “Jehovah’s Witnesses” Makhluk Ahmedov and Ismail Bagirov were detained in the Azerbaijani settlement Lokbatan. According to the information received, the detained were engaged in agitation, and 10 “religious books forbidden to be disseminated” were confiscated from them, the Azerbaijani information portal “Haqqin.az” says referring to the information provided by Ministry of Internal Affairs press-service.

The author of the article draws the readers’ attention to the fact that they were detained at the time when Mubariz Gurbanli, the chairman of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations of Azerbaijan, was having a meeting with the “Jehovah’s Witnesses” European association representatives Mark Hanson, Vasil Kalen and the members of the local community.

It’s worth mentioning that in 2007 the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan accused “Jehovah’s Witnesses” and other religious organisations of “maintaining close cooperation with the Armenian churches.” However, as it turned out, the real reason for the ban on “Jehovah’s Witnesses” activities in Azerbaijan is that the members of that religious community don’t serve in the army, and the mass expansion of such kind of religious communities in the republic has a negative influence on the fighting efficiency of the Azerbaijani army.

According to the US Department of State report on “Religious Freedom” published in 2013, the existing restrictions on religious freedom were applied selectively by the Azerbaijani government. Particularly, the restrictions are applied to the so-called “non-traditional” religious groups, including “Jehovah’s Witnesses” and unregistered Muslim groups.

The report also states that in spite of the fact that the Azerbaijani constitution acknowledges the religious freedom, in practice the laws and the policy of the authorities restricts that freedom. The Azerbaijani authorities have committed raids in some religious services, confiscated the materials of religious character, persecuted and arrested the Muslim and Christian community members.

Besides, the religious groups face burdensome requirements of the government during their registration. The registration process in itself is a lever used by the Azerbaijani authorities against unwanted religious groups. The same groups, when operating without registration, fall under persecutions by the government, including fines and courts demanding their closure, the US Department of State USA reads.

The Government of State report, published in summer, 2014 also criticizes the Azerbaijani authorities. It states that despite the assertions of the Azerbaijani government that tolerance is reigning over the country, the situation of the religious freedoms has deteriorated during the past years – religious organisations have been closed down, arrests and fines being applied against them.

**Source:** Panorama.am