

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

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Police raid targets Jehovah's Witnesses in Azerbaijan

BAKU, Azerbaijan—Over 200 persons were gathered together for peaceful discussion of Bible topics Sunday morning, December 24, when armed policemen arrived along with television crews and local officials to bring the meeting to a halt. The police broke down the door of the rented facility and detained those in attendance. At least two attendees were beaten. Most were taken by bus to Police Department #34. Nationwide television reports subsequently portrayed Jehovah's Witnesses as dangerous antigovernment agents and international spies, banned throughout Europe.

The police did not produce a search warrant and refused to allow anyone to accompany them as they forced their way into other rooms in the building, since Jehovah's Witnesses have been renting space there on a regular basis. The search continued until 7:00 p.m. The police seized the contribution box with its contents, legal documents, several computers used for translating the Bible and Bible literature, and a large quantity of Bible literature. The officials who were present appeared to be orchestrating the raid.

Azerbaijani detainees were released at approximately 5:00 p.m. on December 24, 2006. On December 26 one of the detainees, a lawyer from neighboring Georgia who legally supported the local Witnesses, was released with apologies for his unlawful detention. The remaining five detainees include a citizen of the Netherlands, a British citizen, a Georgian and two Russian nationals, who are still being held.

The police department carried out a similar unlawful raid on an Azeri-language meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses in the same location on June 12, 2005, also arriving with television crews and giving the raid widespread publicity on local television.

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