

Adventure in Azerbaijan BY ALAN DOERKSEN

BELOW:
A missionary shares his faith with Azeris in the countryside.



AZERBAIJAN (INS)--Life for Christians in the Central Asian nation of Azerbaijan has become very difficult. But **Intercede** is investigating how we can assist the ministries of local evangelical Christians.

In late March and early April, Intercede board member Dr. Yanis Smits traveled to Azerbaijan to meet with Christian leaders. This was his second visit there in five years.

"It was a very worthwhile fact-finding trip," reported Smits in April. "I established good connections with the Azerbaijani Christians. They are doing a great job. This is a completely indigenous work.

Unfortunately, two Christians were arrested just before Smits' arrival in Azerbaijan. He explains that a team of American evangelical Christian volunteers were spending two weeks doing short-term mission work in that



ABOVE:
Christians pray before a sports competition. Christians in Azerbaijan use sports as a means to reach people with the Gospel.

country. They were speaking to people on the streets about their faith. While they were there, somebody reported they were having a house meeting, and two Americans were arrested. Soon afterward, they were released.

This incident troubles Smits and Azeri Christians. "Brethren say this is destroying the church," he asserts. Although the Americans are now free to go, local Christians could face lasting consequences such as lost jobs. Because of that incident, Smits was unable to meet with some Azeri Christians.

Smits refers to the American team as "very naive."

The Azeri government sent out a press release giving out names and addresses of Azeri

Christians connected with that outreach work. Smits is concerned that those Christians could be targeted by anti-Christians.

Persecution of Christians is a problem in Azerbaijan. "It is on the same level all the time," explains Smits. Authorities "are trying to prevent new churches from being opened." In one place, it has been reported but not confirmed, that they even planted narcotics to frame Christians as lawbreakers.

"Since the independence of Azerbaijan, for Christians, life has become very difficult," Smits asserts. "Although the country claims it has religious freedom, the reality is not such. In Azerbaijan, there are 25 evangelical churches in which there are only 300 believers. That is officially. In reality, there are many more. When I was in Baku, the capital city, about four or five years ago, they were meeting in old workshops that are made into meeting rooms." At that time, about 400 people packed into those meeting rooms.

"Throughout Azerbaijan there are small groups of believers. Most of the churches are not officially registered, or cannot get that registration so easily. Now there is one small church 450 km from Baku, where Pastor A. was imprisoned." Two or three years ago, it was reported that drugs were planted in his home, and he was arrested.

"During his absence, another brother, T., was having the meetings. He was accused of having a pistol in his possession, which of course was planted. On February 4 was his trial. He was given a suspended sentence. He is under house arrest." Smits believes that authorities "are trying to procrastinate so that interest in the West will subside." One international evangelical agency wrote to the Azeri president about this case. The government responded with a letter "that was just empty talk," asserts Smits. "We are praying and asking other people to pray."

When Smits was in Azerbaijan a few years ago, he spoke with government officials about religion. "Of course they tried to be very polite. At the same time, they are demagogues. They know how to speak kindly, but not to change their mind. I

The Azeri government sent out a press release giving out names and addresses of Azeri Christians con

Help Still Needed in Sudan



LEFT:
An Azeri
underground
Sunday School.

was speaking of their condition, about the return of the only prayer house which was actually built as a prayer house—and which was taken away after World War 2.” That prayer house is now being used as a cinema.

“When I was there a few years ago, the church out of their own poverty tried to support refugees mainly from Armenia, because Armenia was throwing out Azerbaijanis. There is old ethnic hatred between Azerians and Armenians.

“Azerbaijan is a rich country because it has oil,” explains Smits.”The population is mostly Muslim—about 97 percent. However, that is mostly cultural Islam. There are also some sects of Muslims that are very fundamental, very hateful for Christians. Christians are a very small minority. On the other hand, evangelical believers have been there more than 100 years. Some Christian tradition in a very small minority is very strong.”

Smits says he appreciated that one Azeri Christian told him that though people abroad pay attention to all kinds of problems happening in Azerbaijan, God is blessing the Azeri church. Muslims are becoming Christians at many Christian gatherings. “I know that they need help—prayer help more than anything else. And also publicity of their plight—which always helps—because they are people out of their own poverty helping others.”

Smits himself speaks the Russian language, which is widely spoken in Azerbaijan. Originally from the former Soviet state of Latvia, Smits has served as a pastor in Latvia before and after Communism—often under dangerous conditions. He has also served as a pastor in Canada, and currently resides in Fort Erie, Ontario, and serves on the Board of Intercede International.

SUDAN (INS)—Intercede supporters have been generous in meeting the needs of **Southern Sudan Mission**. In the last issue of *Mission Gateway*, Intercede shared SSM’s needs to complete construction of the Savannah Children’s Centre, to dig a bore well, and to provide a rugged four-wheel drive truck. Since then, Intercede supporters have donated \$15,000 to meet these needs; \$35,000 is still critically needed to make up the shortfall.

SSM is grateful that Intercede supporters have sent generous donations and a shipping container of much-needed goods to Sudan. That container arrived recently, and SSM missionaries received it joyfully.

“Donation of a 40-foot container by Intercede full of different items and materials such as agricultural equipment, medical equipment, office equipment, and school supplies is a very big development achieved so far this year,” declared SSM leader John Okumu.

The material support sent by Intercede with the container has solved many of the outstanding personal material needs of the children. But a clean water bore-well and water storage system and a finished Centre are still ongoing priorities for these children.

“Intercede is the leading partner in support of all programs of the ministry financially, materially and morally through prayers,” reports Okumu. “I hope you from Intercede will sincerely join us at the Savannah Children Centre in your support morally through prayer and material support. May God bless you abundantly—and thanks.”



TOP PHOTO:
SSM missionaries
receive bicycles
sent from Canada
through Intercede.

BOTTOM PHOTO:
A child in the care
of SSM is happy
to receive a doll
and other gifts
sent in Intercede’s
Overseas Material
Aid container.

For more information and a quarterly Field Report from this ministry, contact Intercede mentioning this project codes: 514SSM.

ected with that outreach work. | Intercede supporters have donated \$15,000 to meet these needs...