

Baptist pastor's trial begins; Azerbaijanis claim intimidation

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FALLS CHURCH, Va. (ABP) — A Baptist pastor in Azerbaijan, arrested in June on what his defenders say was a trumped-up charge, was scheduled to stand trial beginning Oct. 31.

Hamid Shabanov, 52, was arrested after police in the remote northern village of Aliabad, near the Georgian border, searched his house and claimed to find an illegal firearm and ammunition. Family members say Shabanov does not own a gun and allege that police planted the evidence as part of government efforts to intimidate and harass religious minorities.

Shabanov's arrest came three months after another Baptist pastor in the same town was released from prison. He had been jailed on charges of resisting arrest — allegations his supporters also claimed were trumped up. Pastor Zauer Balaev was set free in March after a worldwide campaign calling for his release, which included a plea from former President Jimmy Carter.

Leaders of the European Baptist Federation and Baptist World Alliance protested both arrests.

Supporters of Shabanov questioned procedures related to his trial. They say his detention is illegal, because a court order holding him expired Oct. 21. In August, officials held a hearing in the case without notifying Shabanov or his lawyer.

His trial was scheduled to begin Oct. 28, but police did not deliver him to the courtroom on time.

Elnur Jabiyev, general secretary of the Baptist Union of Azerbaijan, told the Baptist World Alliance that investigators have not released any documents about tests on fingerprints taken from the weapon. "Our efforts and the efforts of our advocate bring no fruits," he said.

Shabanov's attorney, Mirman Aliev, [told](#) the Christian news service Forum 18 the delays were on purpose. "They are deliberately drawing this out, as they don't want Shabanov to go to court," Aliev said. "They want to hold him for as long as they can."

Shabanov's brother told Forum 18 that officials want to imprison the church's leader in hopes the Baptist community will "fall apart."

Shabanov's village, Aliabad, has about 10,000 residents. It is made up almost entirely made up of members of the Ingilo minority, ethnic Georgians who were converted to Islam from Orthodox Christianity several centuries ago. Local officials there distrust the Baptists because they view them as unpatriotic, Christian sources say.

While Azerbaijan's constitution provides that persons of all faiths may choose and practice their religion without restriction, the United States State Department's latest report on international religious freedom found "sporadic violations of religious freedom by some officials" in the former Soviet republic.