

Caucasus: June '07

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Journalists from a number of Caucasus countries take part the first of a series of joint assignments. The city of Lenkoran in south-east Azerbaijan looks like any other provincial centre in Azerbaijan. Located on the Caspian Sea coast south of Baku, the region is well known for its vegetables and tea.

Much of the produce is traded with Iran, just 40 kilometres away, the local Persian-speaking Talysh having strong economic, cultural and religious ties with Azerbaijan's southern neighbour.

In the last week of June, five journalists from three Caucasus countries and two IWPR country directors visited the region to find out whether tensions in Iran and Islamic radicalisation in other parts of the world have had any effect on the traditionally peaceful co-existence of different religions in Azerbaijan.

This was the first of six planned "missions" that will be held during the three-year Cross Caucasus Journalism Network, CCJN, project, mainly funded by the European Union, which gives mixed groups of journalists a chance to cover significant events and crises in the Caucasus over the next two years.

In Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, the journalists visited the central mosque and the Orthodox church. The minister in charge of relations with religious groups, Hidayat Orujov, told the journalists that the state accords a range of rights, and that there were no problems between the country's Christian and Muslim faiths.

Father Mefodii, a priest at the Orthodox church, agreed. "Both religions have existed here for centuries. The Christians have never had problems living next to the Muslims and vice versa. We do not preach to each other about how things should be," he said.

However, the journalists did detect evidence of growing conservatism, with more and more young women wearing head scarves, which they are reluctant to remove for ID photographs. As a result, many do not have identity papers, depriving them of some fundamental rights, including the right to vote.

They also visited the village of Nardaran, about 35 km away from Baku, whose residents' conservative Islamic views have often led to tensions with the secular authorities. Villagers protesting over living conditions clashed with security officials in 2002. And they have since refused to elect municipal leaders because the candidates they put forward have been rejected by Baku.

Overall, though, the journalists concluded that relations between religious communities in Azerbaijan were peaceful and calm and that followers of Islam and Orthodox Christianity respect each other's faiths.

They felt that the underlying risks are above all economic - that if the promised oil wealth does not lead to higher standards of living, the ranks of radical religious movements may swell, even in tolerant Azerbaijan.

Those who took part in the trip have published stories in the local press in Azerbaijan, Georgia and the Russian North Caucasus - and more pieces will be appearing in IWPR's Caucasus Reporting Service.

Location: Caucasus
Stavropol
South Ossetia
North Ossetia
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