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TAJIKISTAN: Authorities demolish mosques, synagogue and churches under threat

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

As the Muslim holy month of Ramadan continues, Tajikistan has admitted to demolishing mosques in the capital Dushanbe. "Those places weren't registered at the Ministry of Justice as mosques and they spoiled the architecture of the city," an official of the state Religious Affairs Department told Forum 18 News Service. Haji Nematullo Ahmadzod, the assistant to the imam at one of the demolished mosques, told Forum 18 that a group from the mosque went to Vasif Rustamov, the head of the city administration, to complain, but he refused to receive anyone about the issue. Ahmadzod said the community wants to take their complaint further "but no-one is willing to receive them". A Jewish synagogue in the city remains under threat of demolition, and fears have been expressed within the country that some Christian churches are also under threat. Payam Foroughi of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) expressed concern about the demolitions. "Individuals have the right to gather with their co-believers to worship where and when they choose, all within a reasonable manner," he told Forum 18.

The assistant to the head of the government's Religious Affairs Department has admitted to Forum 18 News Service that buildings used regularly for Muslim prayers in the capital Dushanbe have been demolished. "Those places weren't registered at the Ministry of Justice as mosques and they spoiled the architecture of the city," Saidbek Mahmudolloyev told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 8 October. Hikmatullo Saifullozoda of the opposition Islamic Revival Party (IRP) told Forum 18 the same day that three mosques were demolished in Dushanbe on 8 August, two in the city's 102nd District and one, which was attended by members of intelligentsia, in the Zarafshan District. Both districts are to the west of the city centre. He said one of the mosques in the 102nd District was rebuilt, only to be pulled down a second time by the authorities on 17 September. Other places in Dushanbe where Muslims have held prayers have also been closed down.

Saifullozoda told Forum 18 that each of the three demolished mosques could accommodate up to 100 worshippers and were generally full for Friday prayers. However, more worshippers would attend on special festivals.

The newly-restructured Religious Affairs Department has taken over the functions of the previous Religious Affairs Committee.

Haji Nematullo Ahmadzod, the assistant to the imam at one of the mosques in the 102nd District, told Forum 18 that he was away on 8 August when the mosque was demolished. "When I came back and saw what had happened the imam and I urged the people to restore the mosque, which they did," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 10 October, "only to see it destroyed a second time on 17 September." Ahmadzod said a group from the mosque went to Vasif Rustamov, the head of the city administration, to complain, but he refused to receive anyone about the issue. Ahmadzod said the community wants to take their complaint further "but no-one is willing to receive them".

Ahmadzod recalled that when the community tried to register their mosque in 1992, the head of the city administration told them to collect the necessary documents and they would register it. However, Tajikistan's civil war broke out that year and they could not register. Nevertheless, later in 1992 the community went ahead and built the mosque with money collected from people who attended for prayers. The mosque existed until its recent destruction.

A Doctor of Law who attended the Zarafshan mosque, who did not want to be identified for fear of reprisals, confirmed to Forum 18 that it too had been destroyed. "True it wasn't a mosque in the sense that the building outwardly looked like a mosque," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 3 October. "But it was a place where the Koran was read and prayers were recited. The city authorities didn't even bother consulting the people who had built it at their own expense. They didn't like it at all, to put it mildly."

Both Saifullozoda of the IRP and Ahmadzod report that while these three mosques were destroyed, many more were closed down.

"The authorities are afraid of the growing numbers of Muslim believers and therefore use these methods to try to halt their growth," Saifullozoda told Forum 18. He stressed that the places of worship that were destroyed had been built for people's religious needs. "The demolition of the mosques was done on the eve of the holy month of Ramadan, and was disrespectful to Muslim believers. It has disturbed Tajikistan's population."

Forum 18 tried to reach Etibek Ziyoyev, the head of the newly-restructured Religious Affairs Department, but his telephone went unanswered on 8 October. However, Mahmudolloyev, who reports to Ziyoyev, told Forum 18 he was "not competent" to say how many mosques have been demolished in Dushanbe. He directed all enquiries to Rustamov, the head of the city administration.

Forum 18 tried to reach Rustamov at the city administration, but the official who answered the phone said he was busy. She referred all questions to the deputy head, Firuz Ilmosov. Reached on 10 October, Ilmosov denied that any mosques have been demolished. "Those places that were pulled down were used for religious purposes illegally," he insisted. But he refused to tell Forum 18 how many such places were destroyed. "I am not authorised to talk to anyone about that."

Payam Foroughi, Human Dimension Officer at the Centre in Dushanbe of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), expressed concern about the demolitions. "While interpreting OSCE commitments dealing with 'freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief', for example the Helsinki 1975 document, which goes back to the founding days of the organisation, and many other OSCE documents dealing with 'freedom of association', individuals have the right to gather with their co-believers to worship where and when they choose, all within a reasonable manner," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 9 October. "Given the sensitivity of this issue, any action taken on the part to the authorities on so called 'illegal' houses of worship, needless to say, must be done in a delicate way so as not to disturb the existing peace and security enjoyed today in Tajikistan."

The authorities have long sought to limit the number of mosques. Back in March Dushanbe city Prosecutor's Office announced a crackdown on what it called "illegal" mosques. Its representative Ilyos Ortukov said that 13 of the 148 unregistered mosques in Dushanbe would be demolished, another 28 would be allowed to work after registering with authorities and the rest would be closed down. "These unofficial mosques appeared in the early 1990s and the city administration wants to take them under its control," he was quoted by Associated Press as declaring.

Forum 18 believes that while informal Muslim places of worship have been closed down, the demolition of the three mosques in August was the first time any actual demolitions have taken place in the wake of the call.

Earlier drafts of the planned new Religion Law put limits on the numbers of mosques that could exist in given localities, as well as severely restricting the possibility for religious minority communities to function (see F18News 2 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=985). "Though the appropriateness and even legality of the draft law (under international law and commitments) can be debated," Foroughi of the OSCE told Forum 18, "this law is nonetheless yet to be adopted, a point which one hopes the authorities are aware of."

Religious minorities have expressed "deep anxiety," as they fear the draft Law will make it almost impossible for any non-Muslim religious communities to gain legal status. The government is currently refusing to accept new legal status applications.(see F18News 2 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=984).

Haji Nigmatullo Olimov, the Deputy Head of the Council of Ulems (Islamic theologians), insisted that none of Dushanbe's 57 small and 17 large "real" mosques were demolished. "Those that were demolished were just one-room or small shabby buildings used for weddings, funerals and sometimes for prayer. They were pulled down for different reasons," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 13 September. "The city authorities do not want people to be divided into small groups but attend larger mosques. Besides, those buildings make parts of the city look ugly."

Olimov claimed that the authorities had discussions with people attending those places to explain the situation and come to a consensus about their future. He insisted that there were no instructions by the Presidential Administration to limit the number of attendees at mosques.

The Council of Ulems, set up after the government disbanded the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Tajikistan, is widely viewed as being close to the authorities. It insists that all mosques across the country should be under its control (see F18News 8 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=796).

Saifullozoda of the IRP said that the authorities repeatedly proclaim that they respect the religious values of the people. "But the facts say the contrary," he complained to Forum 18. An open letter from the party to the Tajik President Emomali Rahmon expressing dissatisfaction, which was also signed by parliamentary deputies Haji Akbar Turajonzoda and Muhammadsharif Himmatzoda, was publicised on television in September. "Now we are all waiting to hear from either the President or higher authorities an explanation of these actions," Saifullozoda told Forum 18. "Only once in a press-conference did Dushanbe religious affairs official Shamsuddin Nuriddinov allege that all the reports of demolitions were a lie, and that the authorities have just been cleaning up the city."

Redevelopment of the centre of Dushanbe also threatens places of worship of a variety of faiths. In February 2006 the authorities began demolishing the city's – and the country's – only synagogue in the Ismoiliy Somoniy District to make way for a new Presidential Palace. The mikvah (ritual bathhouse), classroom, and kosher butchery at the century-old synagogue were demolished before an outcry brought the destruction to a halt (see F18News 22 February 2006).

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=731).

A member of the synagogue told Forum 18 on 10 October that the question of demolition "still hangs in the air". "Talks are still going on over when it might happen." Asked when the demolition might take place, Forum 18 was told: "Only the Lord God knows."

Other places of worship – including several Protestant churches – are sited in the redevelopment area in central Dushanbe. Some of these communities fears that they will lose their places of worship with little compensation and will in exchange be assigned plots of land some distance from the centre. Some have told Forum 18 they fear this will make it difficult for their members to reach any new place of worship in a distant suburb.

Forum 18 has tried to find out whether the destruction of mosques took place in other places in Tajikistan. Ibadullo Kalonzado of the Imam Hatip mosque in the northern town of Khujand told Forum 18 that it appears that demolitions have taken place only in Dushanbe. "At least I haven't heard of it happening in other places."

Saifullozoda of the IRP also complained of the compulsory attestation of imams, carried out ostensibly by the Council of Ulems. He insisted that there are no legal grounds for this attestation and questioned who has the authority to conduct the tests. "Based on the law all religious organisations are registered as legal entities. Now on what basis is one religious organisation [the Council of Ulems] going to test the members of other organisations [individual mosques]?" He regards the attestation as a way for the authorities to get rid of "undesirable imams who are law-abiding but may not submit to the will of the authorities".

As another example of what he termed state interference, Saifullozoda reported a recent case in Dushanbe where police demanded that the imam of a mosque allocate a room in the building for it to use. However, the imam refused to do so.

Olimov of the Council of Ulems rejects allegations that the attestation of imam-hatibs is designed to allow the authorities to install "desirable" imams. "The purpose is to appoint well-educated imams," he told Forum 18. (END)

More coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Tajikistan is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=31&results=50>

For more background see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=190

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

A printer-friendly map of Tajikistan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=tajiki>

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