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KYRGYZSTAN: "End persecution or we seek asylum," Pentecostals tell president

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Pastor Vasili Kuzin of the Pentecostal Church of Jesus Christ says his Church's open letter to President Askar Akayev vowing to seek asylum abroad if pressure on the Church is not ended is "a last resort". "We have no other way of attracting international attention to our unfortunate situation," he told Forum 18 News Service. Banned from registering in several towns and with its churches closed down or threatened, the Church now faces a tax demand of more than 100,000 US dollars, although religious groups are tax-exempt. Sharshak Usenov of the government's religious affairs committee rejects the Church's claims. "No-one is persecuting the Church of Jesus Christ and I do not understand what Kuzin aims to achieve with this letter," he told Forum 18.

The senior pastor of the Pentecostal Church of Jesus Christ has defended the open letter to President Askar Akayev from nearly all the Church's members vowing to seek asylum abroad if pressure on the Church is not ended. "The open letter to Akayev was a last resort. I believe the authorities have declared a real war against us," Pastor Vasili Kuzin told Forum 18 News Service on 15 July from the capital Bishkek. "We have no other way of attracting international attention to our unfortunate situation." A senior official of the government's committee for religious affairs said he is aware of the Church's letter. "There is freedom of speech in Kyrgyzstan and any citizen has the right to voice his opinion," Sharshak Usenov, chief specialist at the committee, told Forum 18 on 15 July from Bishkek. "However, I categorically deny that the facts cited in the letter bear any relation to reality. No-one is persecuting the Church of Jesus Christ and I do not understand what Kuzin aims to achieve with this letter."

The 30 June open letter to President Akayev, signed by nearly 10,000 church members, accuses the state of "using economic means to put pressure on believers". "Ethnic differences are being inflamed, the rights of ethnic minorities are restricted, and those who show themselves to think differently on religious and ethnic matters are persecuted," the church members complain. "The authorities are sending agents to infiltrate the church and are trying to destroy the church from within, using the National Security Service and the Committee for Religious Affairs to this end."

Pastor Kuzin said that if the president does not oblige "the departments subordinate to him to do away with the current legal violations, restore the rights and freedoms that have been breached and show support for the Pentecostal Church of Jesus Christ", the majority of its members will be forced to seek asylum in "fully democratic states" – the United States, Canada or member states of the Council of Europe.

A similar letter to President Akayev from the Church's young people complains that their charitable work helping other young people in prisons and children's homes is often obstructed by officials. "For us to be able to conduct any programme, we have to go to several agencies, which chase us in circles from one place to another before telling us bluntly: 'Look, lads, why do you need to do that? Who's paying you to do it?' Then they simply forbid us, without giving any reasons."

The latest move against the church has come from the tax authorities. After a recent tax inspection the church leadership was ordered to pay around 5 million soms (843,800 Norwegian kroner, 101,250 Euros or 113,700 US dollars) to the state budget. This tax was backdated several years and calculated on the donations made voluntarily by each church member out of their earnings. The Church describes the demand as "an illegal punitive fine", pointing out that under Kyrgyz law all religious organisations are tax-exempt.

Asked by Forum 18 why, in spite of the law, the Church was subject to taxation, Usenov replied that "this issue is not within the competence of the committee for religious affairs". However, one of the functions of the committee for religious affairs is to protect religious groups from unfounded moves by any state agency.

Pastor Kuzin claims the Church of Jesus Christ is one of the fastest growing Protestant Churches in Kyrgyzstan, with around 9,500 members and some 30 affiliate churches in various parts of the country. He maintains that the main reason that the authorities feel no love for the church is its popularity with the native, historically Muslim population. He says around 30 per cent of the church's members are ethnic Kyrgyz (see F18News 17 June 2003).

Kuzin maintains that the authorities are using any excuse to close down the church and its affiliates. In Bishkek the authorities have

threatened to cut off the church's electricity and water supply because the buildings in which the church is situated allegedly fail to conform to building standards. The authorities are using various pretexts to refuse to register the church's affiliates in Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan and Karakol in north-western Kyrgyzstan. There is a constant flow of hostile articles in pro-government newspapers, particularly in the influential Vecherny Bishkek (Evening Bishkek), which the Church describes as "defamation inspired by the authorities".

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