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RUSSIA: Kabardino-Balkaria Muslims still afraid

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Little has changed for practising Muslims in the North Caucasus republic of Kabardino-Balkaria since a state crackdown on alleged Islamic extremists culminated in a failed 2005 uprising, Forum 18 News Service has been told. The capital of what is a traditionally Muslim region still has only two functioning mosques. In violation of Russia's federal Religion Law, organised Islamic activity is possible only within the republic's Muslim Spiritual Directorate. Mosque-goers report that they are still watched by the state or turned in to police by older worshippers, forcing many young Muslims to pray at home. "The Soviet times have come back," the widow of one remarked to Forum 18. Mufti Anas Pshikhachev defended police surveillance of mosques, telling Forum 18, "The state must know everything." State representatives have rejected allegations of abuse.

Little or nothing has improved for practising Muslims in the North Caucasus republic of Kabardino-Balkaria over the past three years, local Muslims and human rights defenders have told Forum 18 News Service.

With over a quarter of a million inhabitants, Nalchik, the capital of this traditionally Muslim region, still has only two functioning mosques, they point out. Organised Islamic activity is possible only within the republic's Muslim Spiritual Directorate, and mosque-goers continue to be monitored by the state (see F18News 20 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1173).

A state crackdown on alleged Islamic extremists culminated in the failed October 2005 Nalchik uprising, in which 144 people were killed and over 100 wounded (see F18News 18 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1171).

Following the uprising, Kabardino-Balkaria's then newly incumbent President, Arsen Kanokov, promised radical change. The republic's Muslim Spiritual Directorate "has no authority and we will change its leadership," he told Russian daily newspaper Izvestiya in a 20 October 2005 interview. While maintaining that mosque closures preceding the uprising were a "forced measure", President Kanokov also admitted that there had been "a certain distortion" in its application.

One of those closed, Nalchik's second functioning mosque was re-opened in 2007 in Aleksandrovka District, the widow of Anzor Tengizov - whom police shot dead in the street on 27 June 2007 in unclear circumstances – noted to Forum 18 on 23 July. "But otherwise everyone prays at home." Mosques are open in the republic's villages, she added, "but there are only old men there. If young people go, then it is recorded straight away. The Soviet times have come back."

Six mosques were closed down in Nalchik in 2004 (see F18News 19 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1172). Previously, young mosque-goers reported being blacklisted by police as Islamic extremists and subjected to beatings and more severe torture (see F18News 20 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1173).

"The police don't leave people in peace," Ali Pshigotyzhev, a worshipper at Nalchik's central mosque, remarked to Forum 18 on 24 July. The central mosque opened in 2004 and also houses Kabardino-Balkaria's Muslim Spiritual Directorate. "The young guys say that if someone new goes to Friday prayer, the old people take him to the police," Pshigotyzhev added. "Especially if he has a beard – then he's a Wahhabi, an extremist, a bandit. To them a young Muslim is a potential terrorist."

"Wahhabism" is a loose term for Islamic extremism commonly used in Russia and Central Asia (see F18News 8 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1004).

Ali Pshigotyzhev's family has been adversely affected by Kabardino-Balkaria's treatment of Muslims in a number of ways (see F18News 21 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1175).

Fear of reprisals means many young men simply don't attend mosque anymore, Arsen Mokayev told Forum 18 on 25 July. Mokayev's brother, former Guantanamo Bay inmate Rasul Kudayev, is currently – and his family believe wrongly – detained for participation in the 2005 Nalchik uprising (see F18News 18 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1171).

Arsen himself does not attend mosque, even though he lives opposite one in Khasanya, a village on the edge of Nalchik. He explained to Forum 18 that this is not because he fears being monitored, but because he does not want to be drawn into disputes.

Young Muslims not aligned with Kabardino-Balkaria's Muslim Spiritual Directorate and who earlier saw themselves as a republic-wide jamaat [Arabic: assembly or congregation] led by Anzor Astemirov and Musa Mukozhev no longer form a coherent community, local lawyer Larisa Dorogova told Forum 18 on 23 July. She believes some meet at home in small groups, but is no longer in contact with them. "If there is a Muslim opposition now, it keeps its convictions extremely well hidden," she said. "The jamaat has become vulnerable – they could be detained at any time, so they can't make any pronouncements."

The assistant directors of the unregistered – and now defunct – Kabardino-Balkaria Islamic Research Institute, Astemirov and Mukozhev are wanted by police in connection with the 2005 Nalchik uprising (see F18News 28 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1180).

Kabardino-Balkaria state representatives freely admitted to Forum 18 that organised Islamic activity in the republic is possible only within the Muslim Spiritual Directorate. The 127 registered Muslim communities and a further 20 unregistered groups all belong to that body, Dzhambulat Gergokov, who heads the religious affairs section of the republican parliament's Committee for Youth Affairs and Social Organisations, told Forum 18 on 25 July. Russia's 1997 Religion Law permits only one centralised religious organisation per confession in any given region, he maintained. Under the same federal Law, individual communities may not register unless they belong to that centralised religious organisation, he also claimed.

The 1997 Law in fact makes no such demands. A 1999 provincial Religion Law in the Volga republic of Tatarstan, permitting only one centralised religious organisation per confession in that region, was annulled in October 2003 for being at odds with the federal Law.

Asked about a possible lack of mosques in Kabardino-Balkaria following the 2004 closures, Gergokov pointed out to Forum 18 that there are now 141, as against six in 1996. Ninety-nine per cent of these were built with financial aid from the state, he added.

Mufti Anas Pshikhachev – who has remained in his post since late 2002 - was also upbeat about mosque provision. A week before Forum 18's interview, he said, he discussed plans to build five new mosques in Nalchik with President Kanokov: "Land has already been allocated for two (...) The president said he would give money." Asked for clarification, Pshikhachev maintained that President Kanokov would donate from his own private funds as a "rich businessman". Kanokov also funded the construction of the central mosque, the mufti pointed out to Forum 18 on 25 July.

Asked about younger Muslims' fear of being monitored by police, Mufti Pshikhachev assured Forum 18 he could "declare with authority that no one is persecuted for being a Muslim and going to mosque." He remains unconcerned by police surveillance: "Every state must have law enforcement agencies, and that's their job. If you're law-abiding, what's the problem? Let them monitor. I'm certain that in other countries every mosque – and not only Muslims, but Protestants, Orthodox – is also watched, because that's the role of the state. It's the state's prerogative; in order to defend, it must know everything."

While local lawyer Larisa Dorogova believes the situation for Muslims in Kabardino-Balkaria has not changed substantially since 2005, she did point out to Forum 18 on 23 July that her current work defending them would have been impossible under the republic's late president, Valeri Kokov.

Local human rights activist Valeri Khatazhukov also noted to Forum 18 on 24 July that he had been unable to work publicly under President Kokov, whose 1990-2005 term of office he described as "a harsh regime of personal power, completely corrupt."

Without wishing to suggest that the current authorities are ideal, Khatazhukov pointed out that his Kabardino-Balkaria Public Human Rights Centre is now able to conduct monitoring and initiate dialogue openly. It receives several individual complaints of abuse a month, he told Forum 18, generally concerning unlawful searches and detentions rather than mass instances of brutality such as those reported several years ago (see F18News 19 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1172).

More recent cases have included:

- On 16 November 2007 Astemir Bzhakhov of Zolukokoazhe village was detained and his house searched by police, according to Caucasian Knot, an independent Russian human rights website. During interrogation, Bzhakhov was reportedly punched and slapped in face with a notebook and asked for the names of everyone he knows who prays five times a day.

- In a 5 June 2007 open letter published by Caucasian Knot, Kabardino-Balkaria resident Ruslan Karabashev maintains that his name is on a police list and officers regularly check up on him in person or by telephone. During a late 2006 interrogation, he was reportedly asked how many years he had been praying, who taught him how to pray and which mosque he frequents. When Karabashev was ordered to report to police on 2 June 2007 and his wife and mother asked how his name could be removed from their list, an officer replied, "Just as soon as he stops praying five times a day."

- On 21 and 24 May 2007 four Muslims who had petitioned President Kanokov for mosques to be opened were detained, the Moscow-based Sova Centre religious affairs website reported. One, Valeri Elmesov, said police asked specifically about his appeal to the president.

Both Dorogova and Khatazhukov acknowledged as important milestones the departures in March 2006 and June 2007 of Kabardino-Balkaria's feared Interior Minister Khachim Shogenov and Public Prosecutor Yuri Ketov. However, they also viewed continued resistance to President Kanokov's reformist intentions by local branches of the law enforcement agencies as a major factor in the slow pace of change. These branches are "always trying to become autonomous forces, separate from political control and the people," Khatazhukov suggested to Forum 18.

Local officials dealing with religious affairs and a senior detention centre administrator have denied reports of abuse to Forum 18 (see F18News 18 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1171 and 19 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1172).

A spokesperson at Kabardino-Balkaria Public Prosecutor's Office refused to answer Forum 18's questions on 18 August.

Forum 18 is unaware of state repression towards non-Muslim confessions in Kabardino-Balkaria. (END)

For a personal commentary by Irina Budkina, editor of the <http://www.samstar.ru> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, see F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=947.

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>.

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

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