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UZBEKISTAN: "Protestants cannot work as teachers," ideology official declares

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

An ideology official in the town administration of Muinak in the autonomous Karakalpakstan republic who helped have a Protestant sacked as a sports teacher in a local school last July after he refused to renounce his faith has explained why. "I am convinced that a Protestant may not work as a school teacher in Uzbekistan," Jalgas Saidmuratov told Forum 18 News Service. "Our state is moving towards Islam." The sacking of Lepesbai Omarov violates Uzbekistan's constitution and religion law, which proclaim Uzbekistan a secular state and outlaw discrimination on religious grounds. Karakalpakstan is a religious freedom black spot, with only one non-Islamic religious community that has been able to gain registration.

An ideology official in the town administration of Muinak in the autonomous Karakalpakstan republic in north-western Uzbekistan, on the now dry shore of the Aral Sea, has made no attempt to deny to Forum 18 News Service that a school teacher removed from his job in July was sacked because of his religious beliefs. Jalgas Saidmuratov, deputy head of the ideological department, had repeatedly summoned Lepesbai Omarov and ordered him to renounce his beliefs as a Protestant. "I did indeed have conversations with Omarov," Saidmuratov told Forum 18 from Muinak on 29 September. "I do not know the precise reason for his dismissal, but I am convinced that a Protestant may not work as a school teacher in Uzbekistan. Our state is moving towards Islam."

Omarov had been working as a sports teacher in a local school. Although summoned by Saidmuratov, an official, Omarov was marked down without his knowledge as having been absent from work on these days. On 15 July he received a reprimand for his absence, but was not even made aware of it. On 22 July Omarov was dismissed because of his absence from work.

Despite Saidmuratov's assertions, there is nothing in Uzbek law about any restrictions to the choice of profession according to religious affiliation. The constitution declares Uzbekistan a secular state, while Article 4 of the law on religion declares that "citizens of Uzbekistan are equal in law regardless of their religious affiliation".

The Karakalpakstan Cabinet of Ministers' representative for religious affairs, Nurula Jamolov, said he knew nothing about a Protestant being sacked because of his religious beliefs. "Of course a Protestant has the right to work as a school teacher and no-one has the right to sack him for that," he told Forum 18 from the regional capital Nukus on 29 September. "Separate from that is the fact that he has no right to preach to his pupils. I must establish whether Omarov was preaching and then I can raise the question of his reinstatement at work."

Of all Uzbekistan's regions, Karakalpakstan republic has seen the greatest number of recorded incidents of state pressure on religious minorities. Throughout the autonomous republic only one non-Islamic religious community has been registered - the Emmanuel Pentecostal church.

Within Karakalpakstan, Muinak has the worst record over infringements of the rights of believers. The hakim (administration chief) of Muinak district, Jarylkan Tursynbekov, has declared an outright war against the local Protestant community. Speaking to Forum 18 in Muinak at the end of last year, Tursynbekov said he "would not tolerate the activity of Protestants" on the territory over which he had authority.

The police periodically enter the homes of local Protestants, take them to the police station and subject them to beatings. For example, on 17 December last year the police raided the home of local Protestant Kuralbai Asanbayev, who was being visited at the time by fellow-believer Rashid Keulimjayev. They were both detained at the police station where they were beaten and tortured, with police officers putting gas masks on them and closing off the air supply. The hakim said that even if the Protestants did manage to collect the 100 signatures required for registration, they would still not be allowed to establish a Protestant church in Muinak (see F18News 17 March 2003).

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