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UZBEKISTAN: Authorities foment protests to close Baptist holiday camp

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Using a letter from local Second World War veterans as a pretext, the authorities in Bostanlyk district near Tashkent have removed registration with the state land registry from a Baptist holiday camp, effectively closing it down. But Sobir Suleimenov, assistant to the council chief in Kizil-Su, the closest village to the camp, denied to Forum 18 News Service that the veterans wanted the camp closed. Villagers told Forum 18 that the authorities had encouraged protests against the camp. Rakhmatullo Ilyasov of Bostanlyk district administration, who ordered the registration cancellation, told Forum 18 that the law enforcement agencies had complained that "shady people" ran the camp and that its further functioning is therefore "inappropriate".

The local authorities have written to the Baptist Union effectively closing down a holiday camp it owns near the capital Tashkent. Rakhmatullo Ilyasov, first deputy head of Bostanlyk district hakimiat (administration), wrote that Second World War veterans had objected that the camp near the village of Kizil-Su was partially located on the site of an old cemetery and that therefore it should be refused registration by the state land registry. Ilyasov confirmed to Forum 18 News Service that the camp had been refused registration yet gave a different reason. "The issue of the Baptist holiday camp is very complex," he declared on 9 July. "We received a letter from the law enforcement agencies stating that there were people with shady backgrounds on the camp management, and therefore it was deemed inappropriate for it to function on our territory." Villagers in Kizil-Su told Forum 18 the authorities have encouraged protests against the Baptist camp.

In his 1 July letter to the Baptist Union, of which Forum 18 has received a copy, Ilyasov noted that the Union bought the holiday camp in October 2000 on the open market from the joint-stock company Chirchik-sut for 5 million sums (now worth 34,212 Norwegian kroner, 4,018 Euros or 4,970 US dollars).

"However, on 16 May 2004 an appeal N12-72 was received by the hakimiat of Bostanlyk district from 11 veterans of the Great Patriotic War from the village of Kizil-Su," the letter claims. "The appeal points out that a village cemetery is situated on the territory of the holiday camp bought by the Baptist Union, and requests that the proposed facility should not be situated in the area of the cemetery. Therefore, under articles 21, 22 and 25 of order No. 387, approved by the justice ministry of the Republic of Uzbekistan and dated 7 January 1998 'On issuing state registration for buildings and equipment', registration by the state land survey has been halted."

Not recognised as having the right to own the holiday camp land, the Baptists could be ordered to leave the facility at any time.

The camp manager Dmitri Pitirimov expressed displeasure that Ilyasov's letter had become public. "I did not want this news to become known to the press, at least for the time being," he told Forum 18 at the camp on 10 July. "I hope I will be able to maintain my existing good relations with the district authorities. All I can confirm to you is that the registration of our holiday camp by the state land survey has indeed been halted."

That the appeal from the war veterans served as a mere pretext for the cancellation of the registration was confirmed by Forum 18's inquiries in Kizil-Su and the area around the camp. "Our village used to be situated alongside what is now the Baptist holiday camp, but in the 1950s the authorities moved us to a new site, because the village was in a mountainous region that was hard to reach," local imam-hatyb Tushinbai Turtayev told Forum 18 on 10 July in Kizil-Su. "Naturally, our village cemetery remained in its original position."

He said a road was built shortly afterwards across the cemetery, and the road-workers had to exhume dozens of skeletons. "Our villagers were certainly unhappy to have a road built across the cemetery, but I have never heard of anyone protesting against the Baptist camp, as its territory is at some distance from the cemetery."

Forum 18 found that the edge of the abandoned cemetery is indeed in the Baptists' holiday camp, as is the case with neighbouring holiday camps owned by the companies Uzdaewoo and Tsvetmet, but unlike the Baptists the managers of the latter holiday camps have not experienced any problems with the authorities.

As the Baptist holiday camp is several kilometres away from the village of Kizil-Su, the nearest populated area, it is hard to imagine that Christians who are living completely separately should have aroused upset among the Muslims. "We don't have any problems with the Baptists here," Sobir Suleimenov, assistant to the head of the village council, told Forum 18 on 10 July in Kizil-Su. "Rather, they give our village a lot of humanitarian aid."

Suleimenov confirmed that the war veterans had written a letter to the Bostanlyk district about the abandoned cemetery, but assured Forum 18 that the petition was in no way directed against the Baptists. "The old men simply asked for the road to run to the side of the cemetery," he declared. "The Baptists' holiday camp does not bother them. In the last resort, the Christians will have to cordon off just a few metres of their land which do indeed constitute the edge of the former village cemetery."

Several villagers, who preferred not to be named, told Forum 18 frankly that the authorities were deliberately trying to set them against the Baptists. "We're being told openly: if you want the road to go round the cemetery, write a letter to the district administration asking them to close the Baptists' holiday camp."

It is easy to explain why the authorities are trying to close down the Baptist holiday camp. Parents take holidays at the camp with their children and the government is traditionally mistrustful of children's religious education. In February the justice administration for Khorezm region in north-west Uzbekistan stripped the Baptist church in the regional centre Urgench of registration in punishment for its work with children. The church ran camps for children in the summers of 2002 and 2003 and also ran a children's club in 2003 (see F18News 7 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=356).

In August 2000 the authorities ordered the Peace church in Nukus in Karakalpakstan to reregister on the grounds that the church was conducting "illegal" work with children. "The reason they gave for removing our registered status was that we had organised a summer camp for children from poor families," Pastor Khym-Mun Kim told Forum 18 last year. "Since 2000, the Peace church has tried to register three times, but the authorities have refused them each time on various pretexts" (see F18News 3 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=152).

The old Soviet system of children's Pioneer camps has been dismantled in Uzbekistan and today no children's summer camps remain. It appears that for this reason the Baptists' holiday camp, which includes children among its users, arouses the authorities' particular displeasure.

For more background, see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>

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