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KYRGYZSTAN: No prayers in school, Muslim children told

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Muslim pupils who perform daily prayers complain they are now being persecuted in schools in Bazar-Kurgan in southern Kyrgyzstan. Local resident Salimakhar Batirova told Forum 18 News Service how the director of her daughter's school had entered the class and asked who practised Islam. Five pupils came to the front of the class, whereupon the director wrote down their names and left. "Then the teacher, Mashrapkhan Isakulova, started to hit the children on their heads and faces. She told them to conceal the fact that they were carrying out Islamic practices. She kept the children in after lessons and sent for their parents." The head of the district administration categorically denied that any order had been given to find out which pupils are studying Islam. "We are simply concerned about the activity of the Hizb-ut-Tahrir party," Khaldarabai Shamsuddinov insisted to Forum 18. "Its activity has become much more dangerous since the launch of military action by the United States and Great Britain."

Muslim pupils who perform daily prayers complain they are now being persecuted in schools in the town of Bazar-Kurgan, 30 kilometres (20 miles) west of the city of Jalal-abad in southern Kyrgyzstan, where ethnic Uzbeks make up around 80 per cent of the population. "On 18 April the school director, Torajan Jurayev, entered Class 1 of the Khamza school, at which my daughter Omina Batirova is a student, and asked who practised Islam," local resident Salimakhar Batirova told Forum 18 News Service on 6 May in Bazar-Kurgan. She reported that five pupils came to the front of the class, whereupon the director wrote down their names and left. "Then the teacher, Mashrapkhan Isakulova, started to hit the children on their heads and faces. She told them to conceal the fact that they were carrying out Islamic practices. She kept the children in after lessons and sent for their parents."

Omina Batirova confirmed to Forum 18 that she had been beaten. She said the teacher had told them the order to expose the pupils practising Islam had come from high up. Isakulova told the students that other pupils would keep an eye on them, including when they were at home, and that if they continued to practice Islam they would be turned over to the police.

However, the school director denies that there has been such an order from high up. "I have the right to know what pupils are involved in, in case they get involved in various religious movements," Jurayev told Forum 18 on 6 May.

A similar incident took place in Bazar-Kurgan's School Number 3. A ten-year-old pupil, Mamijan Makhmajanov, told Forum 18 on 9 May that he and his classmate Numajan Akhmajanov had been called in by their head teacher Rovshan Akhmedov on 20 April. The head teacher immediately asked the children if it was true that they were "Wahhabis", a term widely but inaccurately used in Central Asia to denote Islamic fundamentalists. Akhmedov told the pupils they could perform their prayers only once they had finished school. "Alisher Navoi must be your prophet," he told the children, referring to the fifteenth century local poet.

Yet Akhmedov denied to Forum 18 that he had forbidden pupils to carry out religious rituals. "I just wanted one thing: that the children should not just study Islam, but their other lessons as well," he insisted. "They were learning virtually nothing in school, and were trading at the market instead."

Akhmedov's claim has been at least partially confirmed. The mother of one of the boys, Makhira Khaldarova, admitted that the children hardly attend school at all. "Our husbands are members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir," she told Forum 18, referring to the radical Islamist organisation - banned in Kyrgyzstan - which calls on Muslims worldwide to unite under a single caliphate. "The teachers constantly tell our children what a dreadful organisation it is, and so we decided that it would be better if they did not go to school and instead learnt a trade at the market."

Speaking to Forum 18 on 9 May, the imam-hatyb of the central mosque in Bazar-Kurgan, Takhtsam Satvaldiyev, said he had heard that pressure was being put on children who followed Islam. He believed that this pressure had been initiated by the district authorities.

"At the beginning of April the regional administration held a conference on religious extremism which was attended by district leaders and imams," the chairman of the Bazar-Kurgan section of the Jalal-abad human rights organisation Justice, Azimjan Askarov, told Forum 18 on 9 May. "A decision was taken at the conference to wage a widescale war on religious extremism, making use of teachers and imams." He said he believed the incidents in Bazar-Kurgan were connected with the conference. He added that there is "some information" that the campaign against school pupils has got under way in other districts of Jalal-abad region. He said

he had heard that school teachers have also questioned pupils who observe Islamic rituals in the mountain village of Arslanbob, 100 kilometres (60 miles) north of Jalal-abad.

It appears a campaign to expose pupils who observe Islamic rituals has indeed been launched throughout the whole of southern Kyrgyzstan. Similar incidents have been recorded in Osh region, which neighbours Jalal-abad region, where schoolgirls who wear the Islamic headscarf, the hijab, have been facing pressure (see separate F18News article). It is far from coincidental that such a campaign has been initiated in southern Kyrgyzstan. Ethnic Uzbeks make up about 30 per cent of the population, and are generally far more religiously active than the formerly nomadic Kyrgyz. It is in the predominantly Uzbek districts of southern Kyrgyzstan that Hizb-ut-Tahrir is most active.

"I myself am a believer and say prayers five times a day," the head of the Bazar-Kurgan district administration Khaldarabai Shamsuddinov told Forum 18 on 9 May. "I am just delighted that schoolchildren are observing all the religious rituals. And so I categorically deny that we have given an order to find out which pupils are studying Islam." He denied that anything was said at the Jalal-abad conference about stopping people from carrying out religious rituals. "We are simply concerned about the activity of the Hizb-ut-Tahrir party," he insisted. "Its activity has become much more dangerous since the launch of military action by the United States and Great Britain."

Since the outbreak of the Iraq conflict the activity of Islamic radicals in southern Kyrgyzstan has indeed intensified. A slogan written anonymously on the building of the Bazar-Kurgan administration proclaimed: "American imperialists - hands off Iraq!", while unidentified people wrote on Bazar-Kurgan's central mosque: "Muslim, without a caliphate, you have no future!"

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