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UZBEKISTAN: Protestants in north-west "illegal"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

The last legal Protestant church in north-west Uzbekistan has been closed by the Karakalpakstan region's Justice Ministry, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. As all unregistered religious activity in Uzbekistan is illegal, the church cannot now legally operate. Klara Alasheva, first deputy Justice Minister, denied that her ministry's closure of the church was persecution of the Protestant minority. "We warned the church last year not to conduct missionary activity but they carried on regardless," she told Forum 18. Alasheva also denied that Uzbekistan's ban on missionary activity violated its international human rights commitments. "That's what you're claiming, but we're legal specialists," she told Forum 18. The authorities in north-west Uzbekistan have long conducted an anti-Christian campaign, but Protestants in the region are known to still be active. Catholic sources have denied a claim by Alasheva that there is a registered Catholic parish in Nukus.

Klara Alasheva, first deputy Justice Minister of the Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] autonomous republic of north-west Uzbekistan, vigorously rejected suggestions that her ministry's decision to close down the last legal Protestant church in Karakalpakstan constitutes persecution of the Protestant minority. "We warned the church last year not to conduct missionary activity but they carried on regardless," she told Forum 18 News Service from the regional capital Nukus on 2 June. Although none of the more than twenty Protestant churches known to function in the autonomous republic now has registration – a crucial lack as all unregistered religious activity in Uzbekistan is illegal – Alasheva denied that her ministry operates a de facto ban on registering Protestant churches.

The board of the Justice Ministry formally removed registration from the Emmanuel church on 4 May, both Alasheva and Protestant sources told Forum 18. The Nukus-based Pentecostal congregation is led by Pastor Nazim Nebiev. The decree, signed by Karakalpakstan's Justice Minister Davlatbei Holmuratov, justified its decision by the fact that church members had been fined administratively last September for missionary activity, that two female church members had conducted religious activity among fellow-students of Nukus University, that the church holds its services in premises registered for business purposes and that it held services also at two other premises in Nukus, which belong to the Full Gospel Pentecostal Church in the capital Tashkent.

Protestant sources pointed out to Forum 18 that no church members have been prosecuted for conducting religious activity at Nukus University.

"Our decision to close down the church was not immediate," Alasheva told Forum 18. "We warned them in writing last year about their missionary activity." She said a court in the town of Kungrad north-west of Nukus had handed down administrative fines on three church members last autumn for conducting such activity, which is illegal under Uzbek law in defiance of the country's international human rights commitments.

Alasheva rejected suggestions that Uzbekistan's ban on missionary activity violates international commitments. "That's what you're claiming, but we're legal specialists," she told Forum 18. "Everything has been done in accordance with the Constitution of Karakalpakstan, the Constitution of Uzbekistan and the country's laws."

Alasheva said it was right to punish the church as a whole because the missionaries had been sent out by the church. She said her ministry regarded the fact that those convicted last year had not appealed against their punishments and that the church has not so far challenged the removal of registration in court as proof of guilt.

Officials in Karakalpakstan have been engaged in a long-running campaign to crush Protestant and Jehovah's Witness activity. When a Protestant convert near Nukus was assaulted by fellow-villagers, the local public prosecutor's office was more interested in threatening local Protestants than punishing the guilty (see F18News 11 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=557). Last year a number of Protestant students were expelled from their university (see F18News 13 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=476), while other Protestants were interrogated, threatened and subjected to house searches (see F18News 30 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=310). Jehovah's Witnesses too have been threatened and assaulted (see F18News 14 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=299).

Both Alasheva and Khalifa Mirzaakhmedova, head of the Justice Ministry department that registers social and religious organisations, refused to tell Forum 18 how many religious communities in Karakalpakstan have registration. Alasheva said Muslim mosques are registered, as well as one Russian Orthodox church and one Catholic church in Nukus. She said one local Buddhist community has recently applied for registration. Alasheva implied, but refused to say exactly, that these are the only registered religious communities in Karakalpakstan.

Catholic sources in Uzbekistan have told Forum 18 that the church has five registered parishes in the country, none of them in Nukus or Karakalpakstan region. The Orthodox diocese has however confirmed that there is one Orthodox church registered in Nukus.

"Anyone who applies for registration in accordance with the law will get it," Alasheva went on to claim to Forum 18. "There are no obstacles. This includes Protestant churches."

Despite Alasheva's assurances, among the Protestant churches denied registration is the Nukus-based Peace church, led by Pastor Khym-Mun Kim. Stripped of registration in 2000 after officials complained it was conducting "illegal" religious work with children, the church has tried several times since then to regain its registration, so far in vain (see F18News 3 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=152). Jehovah's Witnesses too have tried in vain to register communities in Karakalpakstan.

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For an outline of the repression following the Andijan uprising, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all faiths as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=546

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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