

7 April 2003

UZBEKISTAN: Muslims fined for prayers in closed mosque

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Six Muslims in the village of Katarzan in the Uzbek section of the Fergana valley, including the local imam, were fined after holding prayers at their closed mosque in February to mark the Muslim festival of Uraza Bairam (Feast of Sacrifice or Id al-Adha). Local Muslims, who preferred not to be named, told Forum 18 News Service that some 300 believers had gathered for prayers on 12 February at the Aman-Buak mosque – closed by the authorities five years ago - because they had not managed to get to the nearest registered mosque five kilometres (three miles) away. The judge told Forum 18 that he could not remember if he had fined the six. "I have a lot of things to do and I simply cannot remember everything."

Six Muslims in a village in the Uzbek section of the Fergana valley, including the local imam, were fined after holding prayers at their closed mosque in February to mark the Muslim festival of Uraza Bairam (Feast of Sacrifice or Id al-Adha). Local Muslims, who preferred not to be named, told Forum 18 News Service in the village of Katarzan in Tokukurgan district of Namangan region that some 300 believers had gathered for prayers on 12 February at the Aman-Buak mosque. They say believers decided to hold prayers at the mosque because they had not managed to get to the nearest registered mosque, which is situated five kilometres (three miles) from the village.

Subsequently the chairman of the court of Tokukurgan district, Yunusjon Rakhimov, fined the imam 5,000 Uzbek soms (37 Norwegian kroner, 5 Euros or 5 US dollars), while five other believers were fined 1,000 Uzbek soms each. The judge imposed the fines because the mosque is not registered at the regional justice ministry, citing Uzbekistan's religion law which bans unregistered religious activity. The mosque was deprived of registration in 1998 during a widescale crackdown on religious activity.

Local Muslims told Forum 18 that in Tokukurgan district the authorities have established a quota for the opening of mosques - no more than one a year. Therefore Katarzan's Muslims have so far not tried to register the Aman-Buak mosque.

Local officials claimed not to remember the fines handed down on the Muslims. "To be honest, I simply do not remember whether I did or did not fine believers from the Aman-Buak mosque," Rakhimov told Forum 18 on 25 March in the village of Tokukurgan, on the outskirts of Namangan. "I have a lot of things to do and I simply cannot remember everything."

That same day, the deputy head of Tokukurgan district Karimjan Khudoinazarov told Forum 18 that he "could not recall any instances where believers had been fined for holding services in an unregistered mosque". Khudoinazarov also categorically denied that the authorities had set a quota for the opening of mosques.

Before the adoption of the 1998 religion law, which required all places of worship to re-register, there were 1,200 mosques functioning in Namangan region. "Today there are just 185," the chairman of the regional committee of the Independent Organisation for Human Rights, Gulyam Khalmatov, told Forum 18 on 26 March in Namangan. "The authorities are using various pretexts to try to limit the number of mosques in our region."

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