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KYRGYZSTAN: Muslims say presence of male obstetrician violates their beliefs

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

The presence of a male obstetrician in a maternity hospital in Karasu in the southern Osh region has offended the sensibilities of local Muslims. Sadykjan Kamaluddin, head of the Kyrgyzstan International Islamic Centre, told Forum 18 News Service that the town's population is very devout and that Shariah law insists that only in cases of danger can men other than the husband see a woman naked. "This provision is in all the commentaries on Islamic law by learned theologians." Officials admitted there is no legal mechanism for balancing the rights of the employee and religious sensibilities. "To be honest, I simply do not know how to resolve the issue in this particular case," the country's senior religious affairs official told Forum 18.

Local Muslims in Karasu in Osh region of southern Kyrgyzstan are outraged that there is a male obstetrician working at a local maternity hospital, declares the head of the Kyrgyzstan International Islamic Centre and the country's former mufti Sadykjan Kamaluddin. "Our town's population is very devout, and under Shariah law a stranger may not see a woman's private parts," he told Forum 18 News Service on 7 March. "This provision is in all the commentaries on Islamic law by learned theologians." Kamaluddin claims that the only exception to this rule is when a woman's life is in danger and only men are nearby. He believes there is no such danger in this case, and therefore it is against Shariah law for the man to be attending women in childbirth. Officials concede that the doctor's presence has aroused strong passions, but say there is no legal framework to balance the rights of the doctor and the religious sentiments of the population.

As a result of the male obstetrician's presence, residents are unwilling to take their pregnant wives to the maternity hospital. In several cases, husbands have demanded a divorce once they have found out that a man delivered their baby. Some men prefer to deliver their child themselves, simply to prevent a man from seeing their wives naked. "Such home births may easily end in tragedy," Kamaluddin told Forum 18. Local residents and elected officials for the district have several times appealed to the authorities to remove the male obstetrician. "However, the authorities persist in categorically rejecting their request."

During Forum 18's visit to the maternity hospital on 7 March, the doctor on duty Damira Bekmatova admitted that there is indeed a male obstetrician working there, but she refused to confirm or deny reports that local residents are unwilling for a man to deliver their wives' babies.

Some local people believe the authorities' refusal to transfer the male obstetrician is linked to the fact that it has been demanded by members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir, an Islamist party banned in Kyrgyzstan which calls on Muslims throughout the world to unite under a single caliphate. "The debate over the maternity hospital is primarily political," Alakhan Baltabayev, an activist for the party, told Forum 18 on 7 March in Karasu. He argued that the authorities do not want to be seen to succumb to the will of a banned organisation.

Reached by Forum 18 on 9 March, the head of the Karasu town administration Adam Zakirov was remarkably frank in admitting that there had been unease among the local population over the maternity hospital and claimed that the male obstetrician had already been transferred to another job.

However, when Forum 18 noted that it had established that he was still working at the hospital, Zakirov changed his tone. "It's a very complex issue. Ours is a democratic secular state. And when all's said and done, if we sack the male obstetrician, we will be infringing his rights as a citizen of Kyrgyzstan," he declared. "On the other hand, a section of the local Muslim population is indeed unhappy with the fact that there are men working at the local maternity hospital, and we have to respect their religious convictions. We will resolve this issue and transfer the male obstetrician to another job so that he does not offend Muslim feelings."

The head of the government's committee for religious affairs, Omurzak Mamayusupov, found it hard to respond to Forum 18's query over whether any laws regulated such conflicts. "Kyrgyzstan is a secular state and under our laws, men and women have equal rights," he told Forum 18 on 10 March. "At the same time, we have to respect believers' rights. To be honest, I simply do not know how to resolve the issue in this particular case."

The country's chief obstetric gynaecologist, Roza Amirayeva, told Forum 18 on 10 March that foreigners from Muslim countries generally insist that men do not attend the delivery when their wives give birth. She said the health ministry always concedes to such requests, but said they are very rare. Amirayeva maintained that there have been no similar appeals from Kyrgyz residents on the issue and so the health ministry has not issued special provisions to regulate this problem.

Situated on the border with Uzbekistan and populated by ethnic Uzbeks, Karasu is regarded as the stronghold of the Hizb-ut-Tahrir party in Central Asia. This is far from the first time that problems have arisen between the authorities and local Muslims. Last year directors of local schools forbade female pupils from attending lessons wearing the hijab, the headscarf worn by Muslim women and girls that covers the head and neck (see F18News 12 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=52).

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

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=222

A printer-friendly map of Kyrgyzstan is available at

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

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