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KYRGYZSTAN: Why did government newspaper attack missionaries?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

A Kyrgyz government newspaper in the capital, 'Vercherny Bishkek', has greatly exaggerated a minor failure to register with the authorities by Taiwanese and Russian missionaries at an Evangelical Christian Church in the capital Bishkek, and has announced that unspecified "measures" "are now being decided" by the government. Natalya Shadrova, a state religious affairs official, denied the newspaper's claims to Forum 18 News Service and described them as "ill-considered" and creating "a false impression of freedom of conscience in Kyrgyzstan." Her concern was echoed by the church's leader, Sergei Bachkala, who told Forum 18 that "such articles give our church a negative image in the republic." The newspaper denied that the article was published on government instructions, describing it as "restrained" and in neutral tones.

Kyrgyz government newspaper 'Vercherny Bishkek' reported on 3 August that "four missionaries at the Evangelical Christian church in Bishkek - one Taiwanese citizen and three Russians - broke Kyrgyzstan's law on religion in the course of a church service. This discovery was made by experts from the Kyrgyz government's state commission for religious affairs during monitoring and subsequent analysis of the activity of the religious organisation." The newspaper claimed that "the preaching by these religious ministers () was in contravention of the presidential decree 'On measures to achieve the rights of citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic to freedom of conscience and belief'" and that unspecified "measures to be taken against the preachers are now being decided".

In January 2004, an OSCE diplomat told Forum 18 of suggestions that the government might soon launch a campaign against Christian proselytism, fearing that the conversion of Muslims to Christianity and other faiths could lead to social tension (see F18News 7 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=222).

The Taiwanese and Russians were all guest preachers of the Bishkek church, which describes itself as "simply Protestant", without having any specific denominational affiliation. It is a member of the Association of Evangelical Christian Churches in Kyrgyzstan, whose head, Sergei Bachkala, told Forum 18 News Service on 17 August that "we simply forgot to warn the missionaries about the need to register, and once they had registered, the problem was resolved." He was, however, concerned that "such an insignificant incident" was reported in the government newspaper as unresolved when the incident had been resolved.

Natalya Shadrova, deputy head of the state committee for religious affairs, told Forum 18 on 17 August that, according to the 1996 presidential decree, "we do not have the right to stop them preaching, but they have to give us their details." Commenting on her committee's attendance at the service, which Bachkala told Forum 18 that he had no problem with, Shadrova said that "staff from our committee went to see them at a service and reminded them of the requirement to register. The Protestants apologised to us and said that they had simply forgotten to register." Disputing 'Vecherny Bishkek's claim of "measures" "being decided", Shadrova said that "We quickly registered them and the problem was resolved. Absolutely no-one intended to deport them."

Shadrova saw the 'Vecherny Bishkek' report "as an ill-considered step that has created a false impression of freedom of conscience in Kyrgyzstan," a concern shared by Bachkala, who told Forum 18 that "such articles give our church a negative image in the republic."

On 19 August, Forum 18 spoke to the acting head of the news department at 'Vecherny Bishkek', Vyacheslav Anikin, as Yevgeni Denisenko, who authorised publication of the article, was on leave. Anikin categorically denied that the article had been published on the instructions of the authorities, with the aim of creating a negative image of Protestants. He told Forum 18 that "We simply felt that this news was of interest. The report was restrained and in neutral tones, and I do not understand why the Protestants feel that we are trying to harm their image."

For background information see Forum 18's Kyrgyzstan 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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