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CHINA: Religious freedom in Xinjiang

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Religious freedom in China's north-western Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region of north-western China (previously known as Eastern Turkestan), Forum 18 News Service has found, is dominated by pervasive state control. This affects both the indigenous Muslims, who make up about half the local population, and religious minorities. Control is enacted through national-religious committees, part of the administration of every city, which enforce compulsory registration and approve the appointment of all religious leaders. They must come to meetings of such committees. Forum 18 learnt that at such a meeting in Ghulja in August, officials threatened to dismiss a Patriotic Catholic priest if he preached again against abortion. Children under 18 are officially banned from attending places of worship, though Forum 18 observed that this rule is widely ignored. "We believe that children need to finish their education and develop their personalities before they can make an informed decision as to whether they are believers or atheists," an official of Urumqi's national-religious committee told Forum 18. Contact with fellow-believers abroad remains restricted, leaving smaller religious communities isolated.

The Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region (previously known as Eastern Turkestan) is situated in the north west of China and borders Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Russia. With 16 per cent of China's territory, it is the country's largest province. According to official Chinese statistics, Xinjiang has a population of 19.3 million. Around half of the population is now Chinese, while the other half speak Turkic languages and practise Islam. Of the latter, Uighurs constitute 42 per cent, the Kazakhs 6.2 per cent and the Kyrgyz 1 per cent.

Pervasive state control makes it difficult to collect information on what the state regards as the sensitive issues of religious freedom or relations between the Chinese state and Xinjiang's religious believers. Almost all those interviewed by Forum 18 News Service said that if the authorities knew they had supplied a journalist with "negative information", they could suffer serious consequences. Several interpreters refused to work for Forum 18 once they found out that it was investigating religious freedom issues.

Forum 18 discovered that all the believers it had interviewed in recent years had been questioned by the Chinese special services, which had tried to find out why Forum 18 was visiting China and, on an earlier visit, to establish the whereabouts of the correspondent, but at the time he had already crossed the Chinese border. For that reason Forum 18 cannot reveal the names of sources.

At first glance, it appears that believers in Xinjiang suffer no persecution from the authorities. Places of worship for a wide range of faiths function virtually everywhere in the region. Moreover, such places of worship are often built at state expense (for example, the authorities built the Orthodox church in the town of Ghulja - see F18News 9 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=406). Priests at larger places of worship receive a small state salary. Muslims have their own hospitals staffed by Muslim women doctors and serving only other Muslim women. There are also Muslim restaurants.

At the beginning of September Xinjiang's communist party leader even declared at an international exhibition in Urumqi that the level of religious observance among the population needed to be raised.

But in helping believers, the state is trying to keep religious communities under its control. "In many ways China today is even freer than countries in the West," a Protestant who preferred not to be named told Forum 18. "We have very democratic laws on free enterprise. There is virtually no street crime in China and there is no need to be afraid to walk the streets at any time of day or night. However, Beijing does not allow any ideology to be preached in public that goes against official communist party policy."

National-religious committees, which form part of the administration of every city, maintain control over the life of believers. Religious communities may become active only once they have been registered at the national-religious committee, and only people whose application has been endorsed by the authorities may become leaders of religious communities. Leaders of all the religious communities have to attend meetings of the national-religious committees, where officials tell them what policy they must pursue with believers.

Forum 18 learnt that at a meeting of the national-religious committee in August, officials strongly criticised the priest of the local parish of the Catholic Patriotic Association in Ghulja (Yining in Chinese) for preaching against abortion in one of his sermons.

Officials warned the priest that if he continued preaching ideas that went against Communist Party policy, he would lose his job.

Under an unwritten rule, a believer may not hold a senior position in a state organisation, or be a school teacher. The deputy head of the national religious committee in Urumqi, Shi Si Shin, admitted to Forum 18 that young people aged under 18 are not allowed to attend places of worship. "We believe that children need to finish their education and develop their personalities before they can make an informed decision as to whether they are believers or atheists," he told Forum 18 on 14 September.

In 2003 Forum 18 saw posters in the mosques in the city of Kashgar in south-western Xinjiang, saying that children aged under 18 years old were not allowed to attend mosque (see F18News 23 September 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=143). Interestingly, this year in Urumqi, Ghulja and Turpan in north-eastern Xinjiang (where the population is not as devout as in south-western Xinjiang) Forum 18 saw no such posters. "My children have been accepted as Pioneers at school," a Catholic, who preferred not to be named, told Forum 18. "They believe in God and do not want to wear the red scarf. But I'm frightened to tell the teachers that I don't want my children to be Pioneers. I'm afraid I may lose my good position at a state-owned company."

To be fair, many of the prohibitions put in place by the Chinese authorities are mild and are not enforced. Forum 18 frequently saw children in places of worship of various faiths. "When I was appointed head teacher, I was called to a meeting at the city administration and told it was advisable for head teachers to join the Communist Party," one Muslim told Forum 18 in Urumqi. "I said I couldn't do that because I had grown up in a very devout family. The officials laughed, but even so they did appoint me head teacher."

Chinese policy is reminiscent in this respect of Soviet communist policy in the 1980s. If senior officials and students did not display their piety publicly, the Soviet authorities generally turned a blind eye towards their religious beliefs.

However, if Beijing occasionally demonstrates a certain leniency towards local believers, the Chinese authorities are quick to prevent the import of any religious ideology from abroad, leaving many smaller religious communities isolated. Under Chinese law, foreign missionaries are not allowed to work on Chinese territory. Any religious literature or objects may be imported only with the permission of the authorities.

The authorities also try to limit access by believers to foreign websites that are critical of Beijing's policies. Posters in many Internet cafes in Xinjiang warn that clients must not visit such websites. (For the results of Forum 18's investigation into the Chinese authorities' extensive blocking of access to foreign religious and political websites, including those covering Xinjiang's Muslim Uighurs, see F18News 21 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=366).

At the same time, Beijing is quick to stop any missionary activity on its territory. Last December an Orthodox dean based in neighbouring Kazakhstan, Fr Vianor Ivanov, was arrested by Chinese customs officials after trying to bring Orthodox literature and baptismal crosses into the country without permission from the Chinese authorities. Fr Ivanov was taken to Ghulja and held under house arrest in a hotel for a week, during which he was taken each day for questioning by the state security services. Fr Ivanov was then deported back to Kazakhstan, and all his religious literature and baptismal crosses were confiscated (see F18News 9 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=406).

Forum 18 found in the Bortala-Mongolian autonomous prefecture that portraits of the Tibetan Buddhist spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, currently in exile in India, may not be displayed in Buddhist temples (see F18News 13 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=409).

Under Chinese law a foreign member of the clergy may work in China on a temporary basis only with Beijing's permission, and Chinese students may study abroad only after obtaining authorisation from the authorities. In practice, the authorities are generally unwilling to issue such authorisations.

There are no priests in Xinjiang for either of the functioning Orthodox churches - in Urumqi and Ghulja. Although there are no educational establishments in China itself where Orthodox priests can train, the Chinese government appears to be in no hurry to authorise an Orthodox priest to come to serve in Xinjiang from abroad and has prevented Orthodox believers from Xinjiang going to study in foreign seminaries. "We have asked the Chinese authorities for permission for our representative to go and study at a seminary in Russia, but we have had no reply," one Orthodox believer told Forum 18 in Urumqi.

A printer-friendly map of China (including Xinjiang) is available from <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=china>

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