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UZBEKISTAN: Namangan's Muslims appeal in vain for mosques

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Muslims from the suburb of Rafik Mumin in the Fergana valley city of Namangan have complained to Forum 18 News Service that the authorities have repeatedly refused registration for the Donobad mosque which was closed down in 1998. Rejecting their latest application, the deputy leader of the city administration wrote to the Muslims at the end of March that it is "pointless" to register the mosque, because several mosques nearby are already functioning. "The authorities routinely give unofficial instructions to mahalla committee leaders to refuse registration to mosques," Gulyam Halmatov, chairman of the Namangan branch of the Independent Human Rights Organisation of Uzbekistan, told Forum 18.

Muslims from the suburb of Rafik Mumin in Namangan, a city in Uzbekistan's section of the Fergana valley, have complained that the authorities have repeatedly refused registration for a local mosque on various pretexts. Speaking to Forum 18 News Service in the city in early May, the Muslims, who asked not to be identified, said they have applied annually to the authorities for registration of the Donobad mosque which was closed down in 1998, but so far in vain. In their latest application, the believers sent all the documents required for registration to the city administration at the end of last year. On 28 March the deputy leader of the city hakimiat (administration), N. Abdullaev, wrote back to the Muslims, declaring that "it is pointless to register the mosque, because several mosques near it are already functioning".

Under Uzbekistan's 1998 law on religion, it is illegal for an unregistered mosque to function. Although a mosque is registered by the regional justice department, prior to this believers must obtain agreement to the registration from the administration of the mahalla (a small district of a city) as well as from the town authorities (or from the district in rural areas).

"Ever since most of the mosques in Uzbekistan were closed down in 1998, the authorities have used various pretexts to reject believers' requests to register mosques," Gulyam Halmatov, chairman of the Namangan branch of the Independent Human Rights Organisation of Uzbekistan, told Forum 18 in the city on 6 May. "The authorities routinely give unofficial instructions to mahalla committee leaders to refuse registration to mosques," he maintained.

Although formally the leaders of mahalla committees are elected by the local population, they are in practice appointed by the town authorities and therefore carry out their will unquestioningly. The system is virtually identical to that of Soviet times, when deputies at all levels were formally elected by the people. To illustrate his point, Halmatov pointed to Namangan's Abdullah Haji Ishan mahalla, whose residents have for several years been unable to register a mosque because the leader of the mahalla committee has refused to give her consent.

However, mahalla leader Nahmuda Najimidinova denied that she was obstructing believers' demands. "No-one has asked me for consent to the registration of a mosque in the district," she told Forum 18 on 7 May in Namangan. She insisted that she knew nothing about residents of the Abdullah Haji Ishan mahalla wishing to open a mosque. Yet only the day before Forum 18 had met residents - who asked not to be named - who confirmed that they had asked Najimidinova several times to approve the registration of a mosque.

Muslims at other closed mosques in Namangan have complained of the denial of registration (see F18News 8 April 2003).

"I personally have received no complaints from believers in Namangan region, so it is hard for me to comment on the circumstances you have cited," the chairman of Uzbekistan's committee for religious affairs Shoazim Minovarov told Forum 18 from the capital Tashkent on 7 May. "The law on religion does not say anything about functioning mosques not being able to operate near each other. It is probably easier for the authorities on the spot to understand the circumstances."

Minovarov went on to describe the Namangan region as a "distinctive part" of Uzbekistan. "Prior to 1998 there were twice as many mosques as schools and of course we could not put up with that situation."

The Fergana valley is the most religiously active area of Uzbekistan. Even in the Soviet era there existed an entire network of underground mosques and Islamic schools, medressehs, which existed outside the control of the communist government. At the beginning of the 1990s the Chechen terrorist Salman Raduyev studied at one of these underground medressehs.

The population of Namangan region is much more religiously active even than those in other regions of the Fergana valley. On public transport separate accommodation is unobtrusively provided for men and women. Halmatov calculates that about ten per cent of local men have, albeit unofficially, more than one wife and this is not publicly condemned.

In 1991 detachments of an Islamic police force operated here, intent on eradicating crime in accordance with Shariah law. The punishment for thieves who had been captured was extraordinary from the point of view of western jurisprudence. They were seated back to front on an ass and paraded through the town and tied to pillars in the town squares with passers-by spitting in their faces. Offenders were also whipped in the mosques. The leader of this Islamic police force was Tahir Yuldashev, one of the current leaders of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which tried by military means to establish a state of the Muslim faithful - a Fergana emirate.

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