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UZBEKISTAN: Registration denial leads to prosecution risk

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

The Protestant Peace Church, just outside the capital Tashkent, and the capital's Jehovah's Witness congregation are the latest victims, which Forum 18 News Service knows of, of the state's refusal to grant registration to religious communities it does not like. Both communities are now at risk of prosecution, with the possibility of large fines and jail terms. The reasons given to the Peace Church for the decision, in a letter which contained grammatical mistakes seen by Forum 18, included the claim that the application contained "many grammatical and spelling mistakes." None of the reasons given are specified by Uzbekistan's religion law. A Jehovah's Witness spokesperson told Forum 18 that the impact of the decision on Jehovah's Witnesses will be "a never-ending cycle: the police periodically fine our believers because of the activities of unregistered religious congregations, while the justice authorities simply ignore our attempts to register those religious congregations."

A Protestant church in the town of Chirchik [Chirchiq], a suburb of the capital Tashkent, and the capital's Jehovah's Witness congregation are the latest religious communities to complain to Forum 18 News Service about the state's denial of registration for them, on what they believe to be specious grounds. Refusal to register a religious community – the most common official tactic to obstruct activities of religious communities the government does not like – has serious implications.

The country's religion law makes the activities of an unregistered religious community subject to prosecution, both as administrative and criminal offences (see eg. F18News 28 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=440 and 17 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=455). Criminalising unregistered activity is against international law. A senior religious affairs official told Forum 18 that in the whole of 2004, only one new non-Muslim religious community was registered in the whole of Uzbekistan.

Protestant sources told Forum 18 that, on 7 January 2005, the Tashkent regional Justice Department refused to register the Peace Church, a Protestant congregation in Chirchik. In its response to the church justifying the refusal, which Forum 18 has seen, the Justice Department wrote that:

- 1. In the Uzbek text of the religious organisation's statutes there are many grammatical and spelling mistakes.
- 2. In the church's statutes there is no information as to when and by what church body the church statutes were approved.
- 3. Earlier, in 1998-2002, this church carried out its activities under the name 'United Church of Evangelical Christians' and was not part of any church association .
- On the basis of the above and following the requirements of the 'Rules regarding the assessment of applications for state registration of religious organisations in the republic of Uzbekistan' .your application for state registration of your Statutes has been left unassessed "

Article 10 of Uzbekistan's religion law, which specifies what the statutes of religious organisations need to contain, does not state that any of the requirements of the regional justice department are necessary. Ironically, the Justice Department's reply to the Peace Church also contains a number of grammatical errors.

The Tashkent community of the Jehovah's Witnesses has long been denied registration, despite renewed attempts to register since March 2004. "The Tashkent Justice Department simply refuses to accept our application documents," Jehovah's Witness spokesperson Andrei Shirobokov, told Forum 18 in Tashkent on 8 February.

He points out the impact of such decisions on his fellow Jehovah's Witnesses. "It results in a never-ending cycle: the police periodically fine our believers because of the activities of unregistered religious congregations, while the justice authorities simply ignore our attempts to register those religious congregations."

After the revised religion law was adopted in 1998, introducing the ban on unregistered religious activity, all registered religious organisations had to undergo re-registration and all those without registration had to register.

Begzot Kadyrov, senior assistant at the government's Committee for Religious Affairs, told Forum 18, from Tashkent on 15 January, that up to 1998 a total of 151 non-Muslim religious organisations were registered. He said this figure had now risen to 186, but admitted that most of these had been registered in 1998 itself, 101 of them in the first six months after the law's adoption. Only four new non-Muslim organisations were registered in 2003, three of them Korean Protestant and one Russian Orthodox. In 2004, he added, the only non-Muslim organisation registered was a Jewish community in Fergana [Farghona].

On the basis of information from a variety of sources, Forum 18 estimates that the number of unregistered religious communities, of all faiths, seeking registration to escape persecution from the authorities is at least 100. More than ten of these communities have more than the hundred adult citizen members needed to register.

Nevertheless, Kadyrov claims that the problems for unregistered religious communities "can be resolved". "First of all, they can challenge the Justice Department's decision in court," he told Forum 18. "But more rational would be for the believers to address themselves directly to us for help." Forum 18 notes that such requests for assistance have largely failed to help in the past. (END)

For background information, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom

survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105 .

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at

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

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