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KYRGYZSTAN: Islamic headscarves arouse school director's anger

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Six Muslims whose daughters have encountered problems for wearing the Islamic headscarf, the hijab, in school in Karasu have appealed for help to the imam of the town's central mosque, his son Roshad Kamalov told Forum 18 News Service. School director Khalima Ibragimova invited the girls to the staff room, where she and a police officer with responsibility for minors searched the girls' bags and confiscated religious literature they found there. Ibragimova then told the girls she would exclude them from school if they did not stop wearing the hijab. Ibragimova defended her actions, telling Forum 18 she could see nothing unlawful in them. She maintained that school uniform does not allow girls to wear the hijab. However, Kyrgyzstan's senior religious affairs official disagrees. "The schoolgirls have the right to wear the hijab to school," Mumurzak Mamayusupov told Forum 18.

Six Muslims whose 14- and 15-year-old daughters have encountered problems for wearing the Islamic headscarf, the hijab, in school in the town of Karasu near the southern town of Osh have appealed for help to the imam of the town's central mosque. The imam's son Roshad Kamalov told Forum 18 News Service on 10 May that the parents had come to his father after Friday prayers on 18 April to complain that the director of the Lomonosov school where the girls study, Khalima Ibragimova, had invited their children to the staff room where a police officer with responsibility for minors was present. Ibragimova and the police officer searched the girls' bags and confiscated religious literature they found there. Ibragimova then told the girls she would exclude them from school if they did not stop wearing the hijab. When the girls protested, the police officer cited the Koran, telling them: "Remember, I am for Allah and the prophet!"

Speaking to Forum 18 in Karasu on 10 May, Ibragimova defended her actions, saying she could see nothing unlawful in them. She also categorically denied that she was following instructions from her superiors. "I am led only by my own experience of working as a school teacher. There is a school uniform in Kyrgyzstan that is obligatory for all schoolchildren," she insisted. When Forum 18 commented that the girls attended school in their school uniform, and that the school rules place no restriction on head gear, Ibragimova replied: "If the law on education states that schoolgirls have the right to wear the hijab, then I will be governed by that."

She also claimed that the girls' parents were members of the Islamist party Hizb-ut-Tahrir, and that soon after the incident someone had scattered leaflets around the school from that organisation, which is banned in Kyrgyzstan.

"A new campaign in the battle against Hizb-ut-Tahrir has now been launched in Kyrgyzstan," the director of the international Islamic centre, the former mufti of Kyrgyzstan Saijan Kamaluddin, told Forum 18 in Karasu on 10 May. "Several officials in rural areas are trying to gain favour and do things they were not asked to do." He quoted what he said was a common Uzbek saying about such people: "He was asked to bring a tyubeteika (skull-cap), but he brought a head."

Reports of threats to schoolgirls who wear the hijab come as other schools in southern Kyrgyzstan are cracking down on Muslim pupils who pray during school hours (see separate F18News article).

Kyrgyzstan's senior religious affairs official denies there is any nationwide campaign against Islamic practice in schools. "I categorically deny that there have been any orders from above to expose schoolchildren who follow Islam," the head of the committee for religious affairs, Mumurzak Mamayusupov, told Forum 18 on 12 May from the capital Bishkek. "This is an initiative of local officials. The schoolgirls have the right to wear the hijab to school." He said his office had already heard about the cases known to Forum 18. "But unfortunately we did not know the addresses of the schools where this was happening. Write and tell us the address of these schools and we will sort it out."

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