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CHINA: Xinjiang - No children in church, Catholics told

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

While the imams of the ethnic Uighur and Dungan mosques and the only monk at the Buddhist temple in Ghulja (Yining in Chinese), the capital of the Ili-Kazakh autonomous prefecture of China's northwestern Xinjiang region, declined to talk to Forum 18 News Service without permission from the National Religious Committee, the state body that controls religious communities, the Catholic priest was open about restrictions. "We are citizens and taxpayers just as much as the atheists, but in the eyes of the state we are second-class people," Fr Sun Zin Shin complained. He said bosses threaten to sack parishioners who work in state enterprises if they do not stop attending church, while the authorities are particularly vigilant in checking that minors do not attend Catholic churches. He said one schoolboy who managed to get into last December's Christmas service in Nilka despite a police checkpoint to prevent this was subsequently beaten for doing so by his teacher. Nor are services permitted away from the four local registered Catholic parishes. But local ethnic Russian politician Nikolai Lunev defended the restrictions as being enshrined in law.

Relations between Catholics and the authorities in Ghulja (Yining in Chinese), the capital of the Ili-Kazakh autonomous prefecture of China's northwestern Xinjiang region, are "far from ideal", local Catholic priest Fr Sun Zin Shin told Forum 18 News Service in the city on 17 March. He complained that the authorities in the city, which is 100 kilometres (60 miles) east of the border with Kazakhstan and 600 kilometres (375 miles) from the regional capital Urumqi, demanded that the Catholics reduce the size of the cross on their church. According to Fr Sun, parishioners who work in state enterprises are threatened with the sack by their bosses if they do not stop attending church. One of his parishioners, a schoolteacher who asked to remain anonymous, told Forum 18 that if the authorities learnt that she was a Catholic she would be dismissed immediately.

Fr Sun claims that the authorities are particularly vigilant in checking that minors do not attend Catholic churches, of which four are registered in the prefecture. He cited cases in Ghulja and Nilka (120 kilometres east of Ghulja) when state officials visited Catholic families and warned them that they would have "problems at work" if their children did not stop attending church. During the Christmas services last December, police checkpoints were even set up outside the Catholic churches in Ghulja and Nilka to prevent children from attending. One schoolboy from Nilka, who nevertheless managed to get into the Christmas service, was subsequently beaten for doing so by his schoolteacher.

Fr Sun Zin Shin believes that the main problem for Catholics in the Ili-Kazakh autonomous prefecture is that the authorities forbid them from holding services anywhere but in the registered churches. "In many towns we don't have a registered church, but we have parishioners, yet we are categorically forbidden to hold services in private apartments under threat of several days' administrative arrest," Fr Sun told Forum 18. "The authorities basically regard believers as potential terrorists. They try to control our activities completely. We are citizens and taxpayers just as much as the atheists, but in the eyes of the state we are second-class people. We have the absurd situation that we are paying taxes and these same officials and law-enforcement agencies watch us and prevent us from professing our faith. I am not afraid to speak about this openly. I want the whole world to know about the problems of believers in the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region."

However, other local believers were much more cautious. The pastor of the local Protestant church, Luda Li, told Forum 18 in Ghulja on 17 March that she and her community have no problems with the authorities since they follow precisely instructions from the National Religious Committee, the state structure present at all levels from the village up to national level which is responsible for control over religious communities. It is indicative that the rules for the functioning of religious communities issued by the National Religious Committee of the Ili-Kazakh autonomous prefecture hung on the wall of Li's office. Li said that these rules forbid the holding of services except in registered churches. She added that before conducting a baptismal ceremony the religious community must ask permission of the secular authorities. A wedding ceremony is permitted only if the couple have already registered their marriage with the secular authorities.

Forum 18 learnt that the main problems of the Orthodox community in Ghulja are the absence of an Orthodox priest and the poor state of the church building. Chinese law states that foreign priests can work permanently in the country only with permission from Beijing, and now there are no native Orthodox priests left in China. In December 2003 the dean of the Zharkent prefecture of the Astana and Almaty Orthodox diocese of neighbouring Kazakhstan, Fr Vianor Ivanov, spent a week under house-arrest in Ghulja and was then deported from China for illegally working with local Orthodox believers (see F18News 9 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=406).

In 1992 the authorities spent public money to rebuild the Church of St Nicholas in Ghulja which was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76. However the church was rebuilt not on its previous site, which is still a patch of waste ground, but at the Russian Orthodox cemetery. "According to Chinese law the territory of religious buildings destroyed during the Cultural Revolution should be returned to the religious communities," members of the Ghulja Orthodox community who asked to remain anonymous told Forum 18. "However, the waste ground where the Orthodox church used to be was sold not to the religious community but to a private person who is not Orthodox. If the waste ground had been returned to us we could have rented out part of the land and used the income not only to rebuild the church but also to support impoverished members of our community." The Orthodox Christians also claim that the rebuilt church is unsuitable for services as it was handed over to the believers with significant technical faults.

Forum 18's attempts to get information from the imams of the ethnic Dungan and Uighur mosques were unsuccessful as the imams insisted that Forum 18 first get permission for an interview from the National Religious Committee. The rules for the functioning of religious communities issued by the National Religious Committee of the Ili-Kazakh autonomous prefecture were also on display in the courtyards of both mosques.

Yen Shi, the monk at the Buddhist Shinzyanmunfu monastery-temple in Ghulja, likewise refused to speak to Forum 18 without permission from the National Religious Committee. Nevertheless, he did reveal that only one Buddhist temple is open in Ghulja and that he is the only monk living at the temple. Yen Shi also emphasised to Forum 18 that he does not have the right to talk with foreign journalists without the agreement of the National Religious Committee. "Even local people who want to find out about Buddhism have to get the permission of the National Religious Committee before talking with me," he told Forum 18 on 19 March. The rules for the functioning of religious communities issued by the National Religious Committee were also on display in the courtyard of the temple.

Discussing the situation of religious communities in Ghulja, Nikolai Lunev, a deputy in the tenth All-Chinese Political Consultative Council - a consultative body incorporating China's national minorities - explained the legal restrictions. "Under Chinese law schoolchildren do not have the right to attend religious institutions," he told Forum 18 on 19 March. "The law also forbids the holding of services except in officially registered places of worship."

The multi-faith city of Ghulja is fairly typical of provincial cities in the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region of China and the religious policy of the city's authorities appears to be typical for other places in the region.

For more background information see Forum 18's Xinjiang religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=414

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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