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CHINA: Xinjiang - Apparent tolerance of religious belief, but with tight state controls

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Religious believers in Ghulja (Yining in Chinese), a Xinjiang provincial town with Muslim, Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox communities, do not on first glance currently appear to experience difficulties from the Chinese state. Authorised Christian and Muslim places of worship are frequently built at state expense, Forum 18 News Service has found. But the state tries to keep all religious organisations under complete control, and also, so Forum 18 has been told, limits the size of Catholic and Muslim places of worship, as well as restricting the number of mosques. "I have land and the money to build a mosque, but the authorities think it inexpedient to open a religious building in the new housing districts," Abdu Raheman, Muslim owner of Ghulja's largest honey-producing company, complained to Forum 18. Unregistered Chinese and Uighur Protestant communities do exist, but they mainly have to operate in secret. Although Jehovah's Witnesses have been in Ghulja, as far as Forum 18 has been able to establish they have not set up a religious community.

Religious believers in Ghulja (Yining in Chinese), capital of the Ili-Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture in the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region of China, 100 kilometres (60 miles) east of the border with Kazakhstan and 600 kilometres (370 miles) west of Urumqi [Ürümqi], the capital of the autonomous region, do not on first glance currently appear to experience difficulties from the state. It is a relatively typical provincial Xinjiang town and the religious policies pursued by the authorities there are probably the same as those followed in other populated areas of the region.

There are several mosques in the town and, in spite of the fact that Christians in the town number only a few hundred, the town's Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox communities have their own churches. The authorities allow mosques to be built according to believers' ethnic groupings, so there are several Uighur and Dungan mosques in Ghulja, and even one Uzbek mosque. Moreover, the churches and mosques are frequently built at state expense. For example, the authorities built the Orthodox church in Ghulja in 1992. The Baitula mosque was rebuilt in 1996 (today it is the largest mosque in the Xinjiang-Uighur region). Speaking to Forum 18 on 21 March, an aide to the imam at the Baitula mosque, Adyljan Usman, said that around 30 per cent of the mosque's construction costs were met by the state.

However, the state tries to keep all religious organisations under complete control. National-religious committees, which form part of every town's administration, control the life of religious believers, and are led only by candidates approved by the state authorities. Leaders of all religious communities have to attend meetings held by the national-religious committee. Religious believers also have to display in their places of worship the rules governing the functioning of a religious community issued by the committee. An example of these rules, outlining banned activities, was seen by Forum 18 in a Xinjiang mosque (see F18News 28 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=421). "Essentially, the authorities see believers as potential terrorists. They try to exert complete control over our activities. We are Chinese citizens and tax payers, like the atheists, but in the eyes of the state we are second-rate citizens," local Catholic priest Fr Sun Zin Shin told Forum 18 on 17 March in Ghulja.

Muslim believer Abdu Raheman, owner of Ghulja's largest honey-producing company, agrees with the Catholic priest. "In recent years, significant progress has been made in China in terms of economic freedom, but there have been very few changes in religious life. The state still tries to control completely the life of believers." To support his view, he cited an incident in the Dungan village of Lyuda-Dai, 70 kilometres (44 miles) west of Ghulja and 30 kilometres (19 miles) east of the border with Kazakhstan. He reported that in February, after local believers had spent three years building a mosque and when it was virtually complete, the authorities decided to close it down, justifying their actions with the excuse that the building's dimensions were too large. "As a result, the Muslims have had to put up a tent opposite the virtually complete mosque which they are using for religious ceremonies," Abdu Raheman told Forum 18.

This not the only case in Ghulja where the authorities has demanded that the size of a religious building be reduced. The authorities demanded that the stone cross erected above the Catholic church should be made smaller (see F18News 28 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=532).

Abdu Raheman also claims that the authorities are deliberately restricting the number of mosques, with not one mosque in Ghulja's

new housing districts. "I have land and the money to build a mosque, but the authorities think it inexpedient to open a religious building in the new housing districts," he complained.

He maintains that the authorities are quite tolerant of the different religious movements within Islam (most Uighurs and Dungans follow the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam). "In recent years, so-called Wahhabis have appeared in Ghulja. Actually, the word is simply slang, and people known as Wahhabis are followers of the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam. In principle, the authorities don't touch them on condition that these people attend registered mosques," he told Forum 18.

In the Central Asian republics that border China, the slang term "wahhabi" is also applied to followers of the Hanbali school, Muslims the authorities dislike, as also by some Uzbek officials to Jehovah's Witnesses, and there have been instances where so-called Wahhabis have been arrested on trumped-up charges. Abdu Raheman also said that around 20 per cent of Dungan Muslims follow Sufi Islam (there are virtually no Sufi Muslims among the Uighur population), who also encounter no opposition from the authorities on condition that they follow the demands of the national-religious committee.

In spite of the authorities' harsh policy, Forum 18 has learnt that unregistered Protestant communities do exist in Ghulja. "In the 1930s quite a large number of Pentecostals moved to Ghulja from Russia," Nikolai Lunev, a member of the ethnic Russian minority and a deputy in the tenth All-Chinese Political Consultative Council - a consultative body incorporating China's national minorities - told Forum 18 in the city on 19 March. "However, after the Cultural Revolution almost all the Ghulja Russians left. Today, there are just two or three Pentecostal families left. On Sundays the old people meet to pray and no-one restricts their freedom."

However, this tolerant policy of the authorities is more of an exception to the rule. For example, unregistered Chinese and Uighur Protestant communities have to operate in secret. Since the beginning of the 1990s, when the border was opened with neighbouring Kazakhstan, Jehovah's Witnesses have been recorded as coming from Kazakhstan to Ghulja, but as far as Forum 18 has been able to establish, they have not managed to set up a religious community in Ghulja. (END)

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

For further information, see Forum 18's surveys of: the prospects for religious freedom in China at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=292 ; the Chinese legal system and religious freedom at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=309 ; public security system control of religious affairs at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=422 ; "Religious distortion" & religious freedom at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=462 and how religious believers resist state religious policy at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=491 .

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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