

22 May 2003

KYRGYZSTAN: "Medieval khan" closes mosques

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

The regional Muslim leader has accused Asan Erinbayev, head of Karadarya district in southern Kyrgyzstan, of "blatantly arbitrary" action in closing six out of nine local mosques. "He behaves like a medieval khan," Dilmurat haji Orozov told Forum 18 News Service from Jalal-abad. He said the Muslim community would be campaigning for the return of the mosques to believers. When Forum 18 visited the district on 9 May, Erinbayev arrived by car within ten minutes and forced Forum 18's car to stop. He made no attempt to deny the closures, but claimed the mosques had been built on state-owned land. "Now that the mosques have been closed, I can monitor the activities of the imams on my territory," he told Forum 18.

Asan Erinbayev, head of the rural district of Karadarya, 30 kilometres (20 miles) west of the regional centre Jalal-abad in southern Kyrgyzstan, has closed down six of the nine functioning mosques in the area, local Muslims told Forum 18 News Service in Karadarya on 9 May. The Muslim leader in Jalal-abad region has accused Erinbayev of "blatantly arbitrary" action in closing the mosques. "He behaves like a medieval khan," Dilmurat haji Orozov told Forum 18 from Jalal-abad on 19 May. "As well as closing down six mosques, he has also sacked the imam of the central mosque in his district and appointed another in his place!" He said the Muslim community would be campaigning for the return of the mosques to believers.

Within ten minutes of Forum 18's arrival on the territory of Karadarya rural district, a Zhiguli car appeared and forced Forum 18's car to stop. The man who got out of the Zhiguli introduced himself as Asan Erinbayev and said that "he had learnt that journalists were operating on his territory". He then asked Forum 18 for its "authorisation to enter his territory". Forum 18's correspondent had to explain that he was in Kyrgyzstan legally and had the right to move around the country without special authorisation.

Erinbayev made no attempt to hide his closure of the mosques. "Yes, I did close the mosques because they had deliberately been built on state-owned land," he insisted to Forum 18. "Also, the imams in various mosques were preaching different things and I closed down some of the mosques so that they would not argue among themselves." He claimed that as the Karadarya district borders Uzbekistan "I have to monitor carefully the mood of believers". "It had got to the point where some imams were performing marriage ceremonies before the bride and groom had registered at the registry office! Now that the mosques have been closed, I can monitor the activities of the imams on my territory."

The district stretches for around 25 kilometres (15 miles) and local Muslims, who asked not to be identified, told Forum 18 that it is now very difficult for elderly believers to reach the remaining functioning mosques. They maintained that Erinbayev believed he could operate with complete impunity because his brother, Baimat Erinbayev, is a deputy of the regional assembly. They also alleged that Baimat Erinbayev is "one of the most influential mafia members in the region".

Orozov said Erinbayev distorted the facts when he claimed that the mosques he closed down had been built on state-owned land. He insisted that at the start of the 1990s, when land from collective farms was redistributed, this land was handed over so that mosques could be built. "Before Erinbayev, all the heads of the district believed the mosques were functioning legally," Orozov told Forum 18. "Erinbayev simply wants to govern the believers in his area."

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