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CHINA: Xinjiang - Controls tighten on Muslims and Catholics

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A Muslim in the Ili-Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture in China's north-western Xinjiang region has complained of ever tighter restrictions on Muslims, even since the ban on the Sala Sufi order in August and closure of two local mosques. "Now that the Sufi believers have been dealt with, traditional Sunni Muslims are being persecuted," Abdu Raheman told Forum18. He says the authorities have arrested some Muslims in possession of "unauthorised" religious literature and have ordered some Muslim young men to shave off their beards. Forum 18 learnt that priests and those active in Catholic parishes have been put under surveillance, while – in the absence of native priests - Orthodox Christians complain they are still being denied a priest from abroad. One Protestant said an underground church would not even try to register as it feared repercussions on its members when registration is refused.

Both Muslims and Catholics in Ghulja (Yining in Chinese), capital of the Ili-Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture in the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region of north-western China, have complained to Forum 18 News Service of tighter restrictions on their activity. "The situation for Muslims has worsened over the past six months, deteriorating even further after the authorities of the Autonomous Region banned the Sufi Sala order in August," local Muslim businessman Abdu Raheman told Forum 18 in Ghulja on 21 September. "Now that the Sufi believers have been dealt with, traditional Sunni Muslims are being persecuted." Local Catholics told Forum 18 that surveillance on them has been stepped up in recent months, while Orthodox Christians complain they are still not allowed a priest from abroad.

It remains unclear why the Sala Sufi order was banned in August and numerous practitioners arrested. At least two mosques of the Hui (Chinese Muslim) minority have been closed by the authorities over the past three months (see F18News 26 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=659).

Raheman – who owns the largest honey-producing company in Ghulja - reports that the security services have launched a campaign to hunt down religious literature in Muslim-owned shops and houses. "Several believers whom the authorities found in possession of unauthorised religious literature have been arrested," he told Forum 18. "There have also been cases where the authorities have ordered young Muslims to shave off their beards."

Raheman claims there are two reasons why he reckons Muslims in the more developed central regions of China have greater freedom than those in Xinjiang. "Firstly, the authorities are terrified of Uyghur separatism, whose underlying cause they believe is religion," he explained to Forum 18. "Secondly, the leadership of the autonomous region is very provincial and likes to carry on applying its original harsh measures."

As part of the crackdown on Catholic activity in the past six months, Forum 18 learnt that priests and those active in Catholic parishes have been put under surveillance. Forum 18's sources also stressed that the situation for Catholics in the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region is worse than it is for fellow-Catholics in China's central regions.

Catholics are still strictly forbidden by the authorities from any contact with the Vatican. Earlier this year the authorities ordered the size of the stone cross above Ghulja's Catholic church to be reduced. Catholics who work in state organisations have been threatened that if they do not stop attending church, they will lose their jobs. The state ensures that no children or young people attend the four Catholic churches in the Ili-Kazakh Autonomous Region registered with the authorities. In 2004 there were even police points outside Catholic churches in Ghulja and the town of Nilka during Christmas services to ensure that no schoolchildren attended (see F18News 4 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=537).

At first glance, the state does not obstruct religious life in Ghulja. Several mosques cater to Muslims of different ethnic backgrounds, whether Uyghur, Dungan or Uzbek. Although Christians in the city number only a few hundred, Ghulja has a Protestant, a Catholic and an Orthodox church. Moreover, places of worship are often built at state expense.

Yet the state tries to maintain complete control over all religious organisations. National-religious committees, which form part of the administration of every town, control the lives of believers. Religious communities may only start operating once they have registered with the national-religious committee, and only people whose candidacy has been approved by the authorities can become

religious leaders. The leaders of all religious communities have to attend meetings of the national-religious committees. Believers also have to display in their places of worship a poster published by the national-religious committee setting out the rules governing the activity of religious groups.

Some religious communities limit their activities to prevent conflicts with the state. Wang Yan Zhen, an assistant to the pastor of a local Protestant church, told Forum 18 on 23 September in Ghulja that the congregation has no problems with the authorities because it follows precisely the instructions from the national-religious committee. "Local Protestants have no contact with believers abroad, and their congregation is made up mostly of elderly people," a Catholic who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 in Ghulja. "So it is no surprise that, unlike us, they have no problems with the authorities."

Several underground Protestant groups also operate in Ghulja. One Protestant in the city said there are several reasons why they did not want to join the registered Protestant church. "Firstly, they belong to a traditional branch of Protestant belief, while we are Pentecostals," the Protestant – who preferred not to be named - explained to Forum 18. "Secondly, we think the church has compromised itself by having too much to do with the authorities. We would like to register our community, but we know that the authorities will never process our registration application. However, if we officially declare our presence without having been registered we will make all sorts of problems for ourselves. Our believers could be sacked from their jobs. So we prefer to operate underground."

Foreign missionaries in the town have intermittently faced problems. Forum 18 has learnt that around six years ago two foreigners – teachers at a local pedagogical institute who were distributing Christian literature - were deported from Ghulja.

The main problem facing Ghulja's Orthodox community is the lack of an Orthodox priest, Forum 18 found. Under Chinese law foreign priests may only work in the country on a permanent basis if they have permission from Beijing, and no local Orthodox priests are left in China. In December 2003 Fr Vianor Ivanov, the dean of the Zharkent district of the Astana and Almaty Orthodox diocese of neighbouring Kazakhstan, spent a week under house arrest in Ghulja and was then deported from the country because he had been working illegally with Chinese believers (see F18News 9 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=406).

"In May a delegation of officials came here from Beijing and we asked them again if Orthodox priests could come from Kazakhstan to hold services in Ghulja, even if only on feast days, but they replied that it was impossible under Chinese law," a local Orthodox believer, who preferred not to be named, told Forum 18. One Orthodox source told Forum 18 that four Chinese citizens have now completed training at Orthodox seminaries in Russia and are ready for ordination, but so far the Chinese authorities had not given them permission to work in China as priests. "Today there are Orthodox churches in Ghulja, Urumqi, Harbin and Erguni (inner Mongolia), but not one of them has a priest," the Orthodox Christian complained to Forum 18.

Ghulja, with its many different religious communities, is a typical provincial city in the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region and it seems likely that the authorities' religious policy in this city is similar to that operating in other populated areas 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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