

17 February 2006

KYRGYZSTAN: Intolerance against Christians highlighted by murder

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

The recent murder of an ethnic Kyrgyz convert to Christianity, Saktinbai Usmanov, was the culmination of a long series of intolerant incidents, Forum 18 News Service has found. Usmanov was the only Christian in his village. The intolerance was encouraged by the village Mullah, Nurlan Asangojaev, although most of the attackers were themselves drunk, which is forbidden in Islam. Asangojaev arranged for Usmanov to be banned from community events after his conversion, which is very painful for the traditionally community-centred Kyrgyz. He has also barred Usmanov from being buried in the village cemetery. Mullah Asangojaev has since Usmanov's murder told Forum 18 and others that "I can't offer any convincing proof, but I am sure that Saktinbai was killed by Protestants because he wanted to return to Islam." This is strongly denied by Saktinbai Usmanov's son, Protestant Pastor Ruslan Usmanov, who told Forum 18 that this is a "monstrous slander." There are numerous incidents of intolerance, including official hostility, towards Christian converts from Muslim backgrounds throughout Central Asia, Forum 18 has found.

The late December murder of a Protestant in a village in eastern Kyrgyzstan has highlighted the difficulties for ethnic Kyrgyz of Muslim backgrounds in rural areas who convert to Christianity, the widespread social exclusion that allows attacks to go unpunished and the difficulties finding somewhere to bury Christians who die in areas without non-Muslim graveyards.

Saktinbai Usmanov, who became a Protestant Christian in 1990, was murdered on 29 December 2005 in Zhety-Oguz village in Zhety-Oguz region on the southern bank of Lake Isyk-kul [Lake Ysyk-Köl], Aleksandr Klyushev, head of the Association for Religious Organisations in Kazakhstan told Forum 18 News Service. Saktinbai Usmanov's son, Ruslan Usmanov, a Protestant pastor who lives in Kemin district in central Kyrgyzstan, came to visit his father after Christmas 2005 and stayed with him until late evening. On 3 January 2006, Saktinbai Usmanov's neighbours discovered his body. A number of knife-wounds were found on his body, and his head had been smashed in.

As soon as news spread of Usmanov's death, a large crowd of villagers blocked off the road to make it impossible to bury his body in the village cemetery. The villagers explained that a non-Muslim could not be buried in a Muslim cemetery. It was only several days later that the Zhety-Oguz district authorities allocated a patch of land for Usmanov's burial, outside the area occupied by the Zhety-Oguz cemetery.

Ruslan Usmanov told Forum 18 on 12 February in the village of Zhety-Oguz that he himself had not lived in the village for several years. "Naturally, I don't know who killed my father. There's an investigation under way, and I hope my father's murderers will be found. The only thing I can say at present is that my father came from a Muslim background and when he adopted Christianity, he angered many Muslims."

There had been previous attacks on Saktinbai Usmanov. Some four years ago, some masked intruders burst into his home, held a knife to his throat and threatened to kill him if he did not return to the "faith of his ancestors". There were also what his son called "loutish escapades", including an occasion when some villagers on a tractor pulled down the fence around Saktinbai Usmanov's house.

Deliberate ostracism also took place, because of Saktinbai Usmanov's faith. "The village mullah, Nurlan Asangojaev, told the villagers that my father, as one who had rejected his faith, could not attend weddings or funerals, and from then on my father was stopped from attending these events. The Kyrgyz traditionally celebrate all the important events in life together. Therefore the fact that my father was not allowed to attend community events was a painful ordeal for him," his son told Forum 18.

Mullah Asangojaev, after Saktinbai Usmanov's death, also started to spread rumours that he had actually been murdered by Protestants because he was apparently intending to return to Islam. "Even Agym, the republic's newspaper, seized on this ridiculous rumour. I am absolutely outraged by this monstrous slander, and I intend to demand that the newspaper print a retraction," Ruslan Usmanov told Forum 18.

Saktinbai Usmanov's neighbours Erkin Bekcheraeva and Gulbush Isaeva confirmed to Forum 18 in the village that the villagers

wanted nothing to do with Saktinbai Usmanov, because they felt he was "a traitor to the faith of his ancestors". "Saktinbai was always trying to preach his religious beliefs to his fellow-villagers and distribute Christian literature. That used to make people very angry," Isaeva told Forum 18.

"Saktinbai was a good, kind man. He used to help the poor. But people could not forgive him for rejecting the faith of his ancestors. Even before the tragedy, his home was burgled several times. Prior to his death, he was virtually destitute – there was nothing left in his house," Bekcheraeva told Forum 18.

"I can't offer any convincing proof, but I am sure that Saktinbai was killed by Protestants because he wanted to return to Islam," Asangojaev, imam-hatyb for Zhety-Oguz village, told Forum 18 on 12 February. He admitted that he had prevented Usmanov's burial in the village cemetery. "Our village is purely Kyrgyz. Its entire population is Muslim. It may be that many of them don't say their prayers five times a day, and even drink vodka. But none of them has rejected the faith of their ancestors. Therefore our cemetery is Muslim. Under Shariah law, only Muslims may be buried in a Muslim cemetery."

Zamir Turdukeev, acting head of the Zhety-Oguz district administration, explained that the local authorities "found a solution" and assigned a special plot for Usmanov's burial. "If there is a registered Protestant community in a particular village, the state is happy to provide it with land for the burial of fellow-believers," he told Forum 18 in Kyzyl-Su (the administrative centre for Zhety-Oguz district) on 13 February. "But the problem was that Saktinbai Usmanov was the only Protestant in the village."

He explained that the land occupied by the cemetery belongs to the state. "But ever since Soviet times the state has offered land separately for burials of Muslims, Orthodox and Protestants."

The issue of hostility to Muslims who convert to Christianity is a widespread problem in all the Central Asian republics.

In 1990, there was a terrorist attack (in which no-one was injured) on the Korean Protestant church in Dushanbe in Tajikistan, which was engaged in preaching among ethnic Tajiks. An investigation found that two students from an Islamic school were responsible for the attack.

According to the Tajik authorities, on 12 January 2004 Protestant pastor Sergei Besarab, who was doing missionary work among Tajiks, was killed in the Tajik town of Isfara. According to the Tajik authorities, members of a radical Islamic organisation Baiyat (Oath) murdered Besarab. In May 2005 12 members of Baiyat were convicted at Sugd regional court (north Tajikistan) of murdering the Baptist pastor and carrying out arson attacks on mosques and were sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment (see F18News 14 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=229).

In 2001 a group of ethnic Uzbeks from south Kyrgyzstan set up a kangaroo court which tried to convict fellow Uzbeks who had converted to Christianity.

Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have also seen cases where Muslim converts to Christianity have been the victims of kangaroo courts, with official connivance (see F18News 11 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=557). "When we adopted a law banning missionary activity, western countries accused us, saying this restriction was an infringement of human rights. But the problem is that in our particular circumstances, unfettered Christian propaganda among Muslims can result in bloody conflicts," Shoazim Minovarov, head of the Uzbek government's Religious Affairs Committee, told Forum 18 in 2005.

Officials in Turkmenistan are openly intolerant towards converts to Christianity, especially ethnic Turkmens (see personal commentary by a Protestant in Turkmenistan at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=728).

A related issue is intolerance – including death threats – by Muslims towards other Muslims who espouse what are seen as non-traditional approaches to Islam. In 2005 in Azerbaijan, west of Central Asia across the Caspian Sea, the Islamic scholar Nariman Gasimoglu was the victim of Iranian-inspired death threats for his Islamic religious views, and the police were reluctant to take action to counter this (see F18News 30 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=534).

There are at least two factors underlying the intolerant attitude of Muslims towards Muslims who have converted to Christianity. Under Islamic law, Muslims who reject their faith have to be punished. Tajiks and Uzbeks are particularly devout Muslims, and representatives of these two nationalities see those who have converted to Christianity as apostates. However, among the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, who used to be nomads not so long ago, Islam is practised on an everyday superficial level and is closely linked with pagan beliefs. Interestingly, only a negligible minority of people from these nationalities perform namaz or observe fasts, and almost all the men drink alcohol – which is forbidden under Islam. Interestingly, villagers in Zhety-Oguz told Forum 18 that Usmanov was most often abused by drunks.

It is also possible that Kazakhs and Kyrgyz people see those who have converted to Christianity as having lost their national identity. "Most of my fellow ethnic kin drink alcohol and don't observe Muslims rituals, but nominally they consider themselves Muslims. They see those who have converted to Christianity as traitors who have rejected national customs." This is a sentiment expressed several times by Kyrgyz and Kazakh converts to Christianity when speaking to Forum 18. (END)

For background information see Forum 18's Kyrgyzstan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=222.

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all faiths as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338

For a personal commentary by a Protestant in Turkmenistan, about Turkmenistan's fictitious religious freedom, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=728

A printer-friendly map of Kyrgyzstan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=Kyrgyz>.

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