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KYRGYZSTAN: Campaign to close down Pentecostal Church?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

With its congregations in Karakol and Osh closed down after failing to gain registration, a senior pastor of the Pentecostal Church of Jesus Christ has accused the authorities of launching a campaign to close down the Church and its affiliates. "We have not managed to register our affiliates in the provinces and the authorities are taking active advantage of that," Vasili Kuzin told Forum 18 News Service. The religious affairs committee warned Kuzin that if members of the closed Osh church continue to meet in private apartments, his Bishkek congregation will have its registration removed. Murmurzak Mamayusupov, chairman of the religious affairs committee, denied there was any deliberate obstruction. "No-one is putting obstacles in the way of their registration," he told Forum 18.

A senior pastor of the Pentecostal Church of Jesus Christ has accused the authorities of launching a campaign against it in recent months, using any excuses to close down the Church and its affiliates in various parts of Kyrgyzstan. Vasili Kuzin, pastor of the church in the capital Bishkek, told Forum 18 News Service on 13 June that congregations in Karakol and Osh have been ordered closed after registration was denied on various pretexts, while his Bishkek church is under threat. "We have not managed to register our affiliates in the provinces and the authorities are taking active advantage of that," he complained.

In Bishkek, the authorities have threatened to cut off electricity and water to the church because the buildings in which the church is based supposedly fail to meet building standards. "But our church in Bishkek is registered with the government's Committee for Religious Affairs and so the authorities are hard-pressed to find genuine reasons to put pressure on us here," Pastor Kuzin told Forum 18.

On 4 June two officials of the religious affairs committee visited the church in Karakol, a town on the shores of Lake Isyk-kul in north-west Kyrgyzstan. They had given no prior notification of their visit. They told Alima Shvidko, who pastors the congregation with her husband Dennis, that the church should be closed from that day because it was not registered. According to Shvidko, the church had submitted its registration application to the religious affairs committee in 1998, but officials had never processed it. "They keep saying there is something wrong with the papers, but won't say what needs to be done to put them right," she told Forum 18 from Karakol on 5 June.

At the beginning of this year, the church re-submitted its papers. However, when they submitted the registration application, the chief specialist at the committee told them the Church of Jesus Christ was a "monster" which they would deal with very shortly. Soon afterwards the committee responded that the registration papers had not been drawn up correctly, although the church maintains it had rectified all the previous errors.

The Church of Jesus Christ in Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan, which has existed for seven years and now has some 400 members, is experiencing similar problems. The church was closed down by the authorities in April for operating without registration. The church's pastor Sergei Makarov had submitted all the documents required for registration to the Committee for Religious Affairs two years ago. One year ago Makarov was told to amend the papers, which he did.

Four months ago, the pastor had a meeting with religious affairs official Botoev, who said the committee was satisfied with the papers and had decided to reregister the church. He said it was sending all the papers to the Osh religious affairs committee and that in two months Makarov's church would be registered. Now that same committee has closed down the church because the church does not have the right papers. Officials gave no written notification of the closure.

After the Osh church's closure its members began to meet in private apartments. However, according to Kuzin, he received a telephone call from the religious affairs committee warning him that such meetings were inadmissible and threatening that the Bishkek church would lose its registered status if church members in Osh did not stop meeting in apartments.

Besides refusing registration, the authorities are trying to put pressure on their churches in other ways, Pastor Shvidko told Forum 18. For example, the authorities claim the building in which the Karakol church is based does not conform to building standards, while the pastor of the Osh church is being told to pay 20,000 US dollars for the land on which the church is situated.

Kyrgyzstan's religion law does not make registration compulsory. However, registration of a religious association is required under a presidential decree dated 14 November 1996 "On measures relating to the religious rights of citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic". According to this decree "Religious organisations and their associations are required to undergo registration at the state commission for religious affairs, under the auspices of the government of the Kyrgyz Republic. The activity of religious organisations that are not registered is forbidden."

Under Kyrgyz law, the presidential decree holds "more weight" than the law. However in practice the authorities have almost never obstructed the activity of unregistered religious associations. For example, in the south of the country only around half the functioning mosques are registered with the religious affairs committee. Nor do Baptists who refuse to register on principle experience any difficulties. Unlike other Central Asian republics, no members of unregistered religious communities are known to have been prosecuted under the code of administrative offences.

"I am aware of the problem of the affiliates of the Church of Jesus Christ in Osh and Karakol," the chairman of the Committee for Religious Affairs Murmurzak Mamayusupov, told Forum 18 from Bishkek on 13 June. "No-one is putting obstacles in the way of their registration. Moreover, as a rule we try not to confront religious organisations that are operating without registration." He maintained that his committee has to take account of the "complexity of the situation" in the south of the country, where "Islamic fundamentalist groups" are active. "If we close our eyes to unregistered Christian associations, then we will have to pursue the same policy towards Islamic radicals."

Pastor Kuzin claims the Church of Jesus Christ is one of the fastest growing Protestant Churches in Kyrgyzstan, with around 9,500 members and some 20 affiliate churches in various parts of the country. He maintains that the main reason that the authorities feel no love for the church is its popularity with the native, historically Muslim population. He says around 30 per cent of the church's members are ethnic Kyrgyz.

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