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KYRGYZSTAN: Officials call for police to close embattled Baptist church

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

After an arson attack on a Baptist church, more than half a year after a violent mob broke into the church, local Baptists have complained to Forum 18 News Service that no-one has been prosecuted for either attack on the Karakulja church in southern Kyrgyzstan. The Religious Affairs Committee states that, as the church had been carrying on unregistered religious activity for many years, it was breaking the law and should be refused registration. It has also called for police to halt the Baptist's "illegal" activities. Pastor Aleksandr Nikitin told Forum 18 that "nothing in Kyrgyz law" says this. "We intend to go to court," he stated. Shamsybek Zakirov of the Religious Affairs Committee, declined to answer a question on whether the Committee had the right to refuse registration and told Forum 18 that officials treat the registration of religious minority organisations in different ways in different places. "If the activity of Christians seems likely to provoke violence by Muslims, then we are against the registration of a religious minority community in that particular place," he said. The police are reluctant to protect Baptists in Karakulja from violent attacks.

More than half a year after a violent mob broke into the Baptist church in the village of Karakulja, 100 kilometres (60 miles) east of the regional capital Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan, and four months after a second violent attack, no-one has been prosecuted for either attack, local Baptists have complained to Forum 18 News Service. The state Religious Affairs Committee has, Forum 18 has learnt, refused the church registration and has called on the police to halt its "illegal" activity. Officials refuse to defend the church's rights, arguing that the local population hates the Baptists. Aleksandr Nikitin, pastor of the Baptist church in Osh and Baptist coordinator in southern Kyrgyzstan, told Forum 18 on Osh on 5 March that the situation for Baptists in the village remains "depressing".

On 28 July 2006, a crowd of about 80 people broke into the house in Karakulja of the missionary pastor Zulumbek Sarygulov. They beat him senseless, broke two of his fingers and threw him out of the house. They then opened a shed containing religious literature, including several dozen Bibles, and burnt it all in the courtyard; and then wrote "For Sale" on the house in Kyrgyz. Three police officers stood by watching, but without intervening (see F18News 27 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=846). "A criminal case was opened on the basis of this hooliganism, but as was to be expected nobody was convicted," Nikitin told Forum 18.

"Meanwhile people continued threatening the pastor, and not just with empty words," he added. During the night of 12-13 November, unknown persons threw bottles containing a flammable substance at the prayer house. "Luckily church members were able to extinguish the fire, and called the police," Nikitin told Forum 18. "A criminal case was opened, but none of the arsonists was caught." He believes the authorities are conniving at the activities of the attackers.

On 1 December 2006 the government's Religious Affairs Committee sent Pastor Nikitin an official notification that the Karakulja church – a branch of his Osh church - had been refused formal registration (known in Russian as "uchetnaya registratsia"). It justified the refusal on the grounds that, according to the presidential decree Measures for Realising Kyrgyz Citizens' Rights to Freedom of Religion of 14 November 1999, activity by a religious community which has not received such formal registration is forbidden. As the Karakulja church had been carrying on religious activity without registration for many years, the Committee took the view that it was breaking the law. "For this reason the Religious Affairs Committee refuses registration to the Karakulja community," the department's letter declared.

"This is just absurd," Nikitin told Forum 18. "Nothing in Kyrgyz law says that if a church has been functioning without registration, and then wishes to obtain it, the Religious Affairs Committee has the right to refuse. We intend to go to court."

In Karakulja on 5 March, police Captain Kadyrbek Tursunbayev, who is responsible for contacts with religious organisations, showed Forum 18 a letter from the Religious Affairs Committee to the police chief in the village informing him that the Baptist community had been refused registration and proposing that the police "take measures to end the Baptists' illegal activity". Tursunbayev refused to tell Forum 18 what specific measures the police proposed to take, but said that "practically all the inhabitants of the village hate the Baptists". He said that the police intended to protect the Baptists "as Kyrgyz citizens", but could not guarantee that this protection would be effective.

Shamsybek Zakirov, adviser to the head of the state Religious Affairs Committee, declined to answer the question whether his Committee had the right to refuse registration to the Karakulja Baptists, merely because they had hitherto been carrying on their activities without registration. "Karakulja is a special case," he told Forum 18 in Osh on 7 March. "The local people there are angry about the Baptists' activity."

Zakirov said officials treat cases of registration of religious minority organisations in different ways in different places. "If the activity of Christians seems likely to provoke violence by Muslims, then we are against the registration of a religious minority community in that particular place," he told Forum 18. "But if the Muslims don't mind the religious minority, then that church will get registration even if it has previously been functioning without it."

Protestants conducting missionary activity in what are perceived to be "Muslim" villages – especially in southern Kyrgyzstan – have faced rising pressure in recent years, including physical attacks and petitions to the authorities to have their churches closed down. In the worst case so far, Saktinbai Usmanov, an ethnic Kyrgyz convert to Protestant Christianity, was murdered in December 2005 in Zhety-Oguz village in Zhety-Oguz region on the southern bank of Lake Isyk-kul [Lake Ysyk-Köl] (see F18News 17 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=729).

Similar problems have been seen elsewhere in Central Asia. In neighbouring Tajikistan a Baptist Pastor Sergei Bessarab was murdered in January 2004 (see F18News 27 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=330). In May 2005, a regional court sentenced 12 people found guilty of his murder to 25 years' imprisonment. (END)

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

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

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.

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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