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TAJIKISTAN: Four religious communities reject government claims to OSCE

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Tajik official claims to an OSCE human rights conference in Warsaw over four religious communities have been contradicted by those communities. Officials categorically denied that the Jehovah's Witnesses, Ehyo Protestant Church and the Abundant Life Christian Centre had been banned. Yet on 29 September a Dushanbe court reaffirmed the ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses imposed in October 2007. "They are not allowed to function in Tajikistan, period," Nazira Dodkhudoeva of the Culture Ministry's Religious Affairs Department told Forum 18. Ehyo church members said that one year after being "suspended", officials still will not approve new wording of their charter and have told them they cannot function until this is finalised. Abundant Life reluctantly halted all its activity in May, it told Forum 18. The Tajik delegation also claimed to the OSCE conference that an alternative plot of land "has been provided" to Dushanbe's Jewish community in recompense for its synagogue, bulldozed earlier this year. Rabbi Mikhail Abdurakhmanov, expressed surprise at the claims. Meanwhile, another Protestant church Grace Sunmin is about to lose its worship building in Dushanbe.

Categorical denials by the Tajik official delegation to a human rights conference of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) that the Jehovah's Witnesses and two Protestant communities (Ehyo and Abundant Life, both based in the capital Dushanbe) are banned have been contradicted by those communities, Forum 18 News Service has found. A Dushanbe court confirmed the Culture Ministry's ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses on 29 September. "They are not allowed to function in Tajikistan, period," Nazira Dodkhudoeva of the Culture Ministry's Religious Affairs Department told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 8 October. "This is because the organisation violated Tajikistan's laws many times."

The Tajik official delegation to the OSCE conference also insisted that an alternative site has been offered to Dushanbe's Jewish community to compensate it for their synagogue which was bulldozed against their will in summer 2008. However, the head of the Jewish community, Rabbi Mikhail Abdurakhmanov, expressed surprise at the claims by the Tajik delegation. He told Forum 18 that no alternative site has been offered. And in a further move against a religious community, Dushanbe's Grace Sunmin Church is on the verge of losing its worship building which it bought legally a decade ago.

The Tajik delegation made the claims to the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw in a text posted to the OSCE website on 30 September. The text was read out to the conference by delegation member Mirzosharif Sharifov of the General Prosecutor's Office on 3 October. Amon Eshonkulov, also of the General Prosecutor's Office and a fellow-delegation member, repeatedly refused to tell Forum 18 on 8 October why his delegation had given out false information about these four religious communities.

The 29 September decision to uphold the ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses was handed down by the Military Tribunal of Dushanbe City Garrison. The ruling came nine months after the transfer to the Military Tribunal of the two appeals made by Tajikistan's Jehovah's Witnesses over the Culture Ministry's ban and over the confiscation of a shipment of their literature by Customs. "As soon as we get the copy of the decision we will appeal to the Supreme Court," a Jehovah's Witness representative told Forum 18 on 7 October.

Akramov (he did not give his first name), the head of the Military Tribunal's Chancellery, refused to discuss the Tribunal's decision. "The Jehovah's Witnesses will receive a copy of the decision soon," he told Forum 18 on 7 October. "And they will have one month to appeal."

The Culture Ministry banned the Jehovah's Witnesses throughout the whole of Tajikistan on 11 October 2007, though they were not told of the ban for a further six days. A large consignment of Jehovah's Witness literature sent from Germany was seized by customs officials in Dushanbe in 2007 (see F18News 18 October 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1036>).

Tajikistan's Jehovah's Witnesses complained - Forum 18 has seen the copy of the complaint - to the Shokhmansour District Court on 6 December 2007 to suspend the Culture Ministry ban until the court had examined their complaint. The Shokhmansour District Court on 24 December 2007 transferred the case to the Dushanbe City Garrison Military Tribunal, allegedly because of the Customs

Security Division's involvement, the Jehovah's Witness reported.

Asked what would happen to the hundreds of ordinary Jehovah's Witnesses, Dodkhudoeva of the Religious Affairs Department told Forum 18: "For God's sake they can go on believing in their religion - they just must not propagate it on the streets." She was unable to say whether the Jehovah's Witnesses could meet at homes for prayer and scripture reading. "You should ask our chief specialist Saidbek Mahmaddullov on that," she responded.

Mahmaddullov was not available on 8 October. His secretary told Forum 18 he was in an important meeting, and asked to call back in the afternoon. Forum 18 was told early afternoon on the same day that he had already left the office.

In contrast to the statement by the Tajik delegation to the OSCE conference in Warsaw, Ehyo church members told Forum 18 on 8 October that they have been banned from openly functioning in Tajikistan since the beginning of 2008, even though the authorities have refused to put this in writing. "We have been meeting low-profile in different locations all this time," one member reported. "Our church made amendments to its charter several times, and met the Religious Affairs Department in April, May and September of this year. Each time we were given different excuses for not being registered." Officials said that until the amendments were accepted they were banned.

"One of the major stumbling blocks for the Religious Affairs Department in our charter is the term evangelisation," he complained. "One way or another we want to share our faith with others, which is one of our fundamental rights."

Dodkhudoeva insisted to Forum 18 that the Religious Affairs Department is considering re-registering the Ehyo church soon. "I cannot tell you how soon," she said, "but I am sure that the Culture Ministry Board will make a positive decision on their registration." She claimed that they have agreed practically on all points of the charter with church representatives.

The situation with Abundant Life Christian Centre, however, is very different. Shaukat Dusmatov of the Centre told Forum 18 that the founders had already decided back in May to halt their activity altogether. "We were asked to change so many points in our charter that it made it impossible for us to function as we intended to," he complained.

He explained that one of the Centre's major functions was to assist all churches and Christian organisations in Tajikistan with their religious literature needs, whether importing from abroad or printing in the country. "The Department did not want this," he complained. "Realising that the idea of being involved in literature was going to be impossible we decided to stop."

Dusmatov said that so the Department would know that the Centre no longer officially functioned, on 11 September they brought a letter from its founders saying that it had halted all activity.

Dodkhudoeva insisted to Forum 18 that the Centre should not have stopped. "Well, if they were patient, and continued discussion with us we could have agreed on the amendments to be made to their charter," she said, despite the fact that discussions went on for nearly a year. Told that the Centre wanted to publish religious literature in Tajikistan, she responded: "Please, why not, of course they can do it."

Speaking to the OSCE conference in Warsaw, the Tajik officials insisted that Dushanbe's synagogue had been bulldozed solely in connection with rebuilding as part of the city's reconstruction plan. It stressed that the decision had been taken on the basis of a court order and claimed that an alternative plot of land "has been provided" for rebuilding.

The authorities had long been planning to demolish the synagogue, the only one in Tajikistan. "In 2004 the authorities made a decision to allocate us a new plot of land," Rabbi Abdurakhmanov told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 8 October, "but they never did." The April 2008 court decision clearly spells out that the Jewish community was to be evicted from the synagogue without any compensation in land or funds.

"May be the authorities will allocate us a plot of land," Rabbi Abdurakhmanov said, "but it is of no use at the moment since we do not have any funds to build a building." With nowhere to meet, the community has met not for worship ever since they were forced out of the building, he added.

Also affected by the city rebuilding plans was another place of worship, the Nani Hayat (Bread of Life) Protestant Church. Their building was destroyed by the Dushanbe city authorities in August (see F18News 1 September 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1181>).

Church members told Forum 18 on 7 October that they still have not received the promised compensation. "The official experts from the Mayor's Office appraised the building 383,000 Somonis (700,000 Norwegian Kroner, 83,000 Euros or 112,000 US Dollars) back then." We sent on 23 September an official letter to the city mayor's office, Forum 18 was told. Soon after the mayor's office informed us that they forwarded the letter to the Presidential administration's committee overseeing compensation awards for affected buildings in the rebuilding.

Dushanbe city authorities also demolished several mosques in September 2007 because they did not have approval from the Justice Ministry and "spoiled the architecture of the city" (see F18News 10 October 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1032>).

Dushanbe's Grace Sunmin Church told Forum 18 that it is still using its worship building, despite the court ruling overturning its ownership of the building. On 29 August Tajikistan's High Economic Court made a decision, a copy of which Forum 18 has seen, to nullify the original sales contract of the building from 2 July 1997. It ruled to transfer the building to the City Hukumat (Executive Authority) and to award compensation to the Church of 18,192,200 Tajik Rubles from the State Department of Support for Entrepreneurship and Department for Management of State Property. Rubles were the currency of Tajikistan between 1995 and 2000, when they were replaced by Somonis.

Grace Sunmin members told Forum 18 on 8 October that they were very disappointed with the court decision. After spending a large amount of money - which they calculate in hundreds of thousands of US Dollars - and energy in restoring the half-finished building they say it is hard for the church to accept this. Church members told Forum 18 their appeal against the ruling is due to be heard by the High Economic Court on 9 October.

Judge Zulfiyya Yusupova, who heard the case in August, did not allow international observers in the courtroom to monitor the hearing. Church members therefore left the courtroom in protest. The congregation has long battled with the Dushanbe city authorities through the courts to try to keep its property (see F18News 1 September 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1181>).

Jamshid Faizulloev, the Head of the High Economic Court's Chancellery could not explain what the amount indicated in Rubles in the court decision to be paid to the church as compensation would mean in current terms. "You should ask the National Bank of Tajikistan," he told Forum 18. "That is the exact amount the church had paid to buy the building back then."

The Grace Sunmin members speculated that the amount in the best case could mean something between sixty and eighty thousand US Dollars in 1997 when the building was bought. However, even that amount would be "drastically small" compared to what has been invested in the building, they told Forum 18.

Church members added that their senior pastor, Choi Yun Seop, a US citizen, was invited on 24 September for a talk on his visa status to the Foreign Ministry in Dushanbe. There he was told he would soon be stripped of his visa to Tajikistan, which is due to expire on 26 December.

Forum 18 was unable to find out why the authorities are threatening to strip Pastor Seop of his visa. Telephones at the Foreign Ministry went unanswered on 8 October.

The Tajik delegation to the OSCE human rights conference also reported that work on a new Religion Law "is still at the discussion stage". The controversial proposed new Law has been vigorously opposed by many religious communities. Many fear it will restrict citizens' right to freedom of thought, conscience and belief (see F18News 27 November 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1052>). (END)

More coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Tajikistan is at <<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=31>>.

For more background see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=190>.

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>.

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

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