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TAJIKISTAN: Why should one small village have three mosques?

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Jumokhon Giyosov, Deputy Chair of the Government's Religious Affairs Committee in Dushanbe, has defended the government moves to bring back about 1,700 Tajik students studying Islam abroad, of whom he says 719 have already returned. "We need to bring order to the process of going abroad to study religion," he told Forum 18 News Service. He rejected suggestions that the instructions violated students' right to gain religious education of their choice. Khusravbek Rakamov, Deputy Head of Badakhshan Regional Administration's Religious Affairs Division, defended the enforced closure in November of 32 unregistered Sunni Muslim mosques in his mountainous region. Ten of them are now seeking registration, and Rakamov claimed to Forum 18 that the rest "agreed with us to discontinue their activity". "Why for instance should there be three mosques in Zing village of Darwaz – a small village where only 600 people live?" he asked. Officials told Forum 18 that those continuing to operate unregistered mosques will be punished.

Of about 1,700 Tajik students studying Islam abroad, all of whom have been called upon by President Emomali Rahmon and Tajikistan's Government to come home, 719 have already returned in recent months, one official told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Dushanbe. Meanwhile, authorities of the Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Region in eastern Tajikistan have halted the activity of the region's 32 unregistered Sunni mosques. A regional religious affairs official questioned why one small village should have three mosques. Also halting unregistered Friday prayers in their offices in Dushanbe under pressure from the Justice Ministry was Tajikistan's Islamic Renaissance Party, Central Asia's only registered Islamic political party.

From the time the controversial 2009 Religion Law came into force, officials have been insistent that they would stop all unregistered religious activity – without any exceptions - and were imposing extra-legal controls on the religious communities they registered (see F18News 15 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1431).

Conflicting claims

Tajik officials have made conflicting claims on why the students have returned from Islamic studies abroad. Religious Affairs officials told Forum 18 that because of what they claim is the risk of these students being prepared as future terrorists, the Tajik authorities warned the families of the students and the governments of the countries where the students studied to return them. At the same time, some Tajik diplomats abroad claimed to news agencies that the students returned voluntarily.

The campaign to bring back students studying religion abroad was launched by President Rahmon in August (see F18News 2 September 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1483).

Parents and students were afraid to speak to Forum 18 about the issue for fear of the authorities. Only a few unnamed students and parents complained to some Tajikistan-based news agencies that the students studied Koran and were forced to return to Tajikistan.

While some of those studying Islam abroad were children, some as young as 6, Forum 18 understands that the vast majority were adults, some as old as 31. Religious Affairs officials refused to tell Forum 18 what the proportions of adult and child students were. "I have observed that the proportion of children among the returning students would be up to 10 percent," a local independent journalist wishing to remain unnamed told Forum 18 on 2 December.

Tajikistan's authorities have also recently focused on imposing tighter control on Islamic education inside the country, with a nationwide operation which involved police raids on the homes of Muslims privately teaching children the Koran. Administrative and criminal cases were opened against private Muslim teachers and parents who "do not allow" their children to go to school (see F18News 2 September 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1483).

Tajik state television also on 19 November reported that prosecution bodies investigated many cases of attracting children between 7 and 18 to religious education across Tajikistan without their parents' consent.

Why were students ordered to return?

Jumokhon Giyosov, Deputy Chair of the Government's Religious Affairs Committee in Dushanbe, told Forum 18 on 1 December that the government's instruction to return roughly 1,700 Tajik students from abroad deals only with those studying religion in Islamic countries. He said that 719 students had returned by that date. Asked why the students were ordered to return, he responded: "We need to bring order to the process of going abroad to study religion. We need to know who invites these students, who studies where and what, and so on."

Asked where these students would now continue their studies, Giyosov said, "We have the Islamic University, other higher education institutions and medresses [Islamic colleges] where they can learn the fundamentals of Islam." Told about the earlier complaints of lack of medresses, he said, "We have enough Islamic schools in Tajikistan for them to enrol in."

When Forum 18 asked why the authorities claimed that Tajik students were trained as terrorists abroad, Giyosov said, "We, for instance, are not against students attending Al-Azhar University in Cairo, where more than 900 Tajik students study." He would not say which schools the government was against. "The right order of things is that the University should give us their quota and then we interview the candidates and decide who to send."

Giyosov rejected suggestions that the order for students to return to Tajikistan violated their right to gain religious education of their choice. "We are just trying to bring some order to this sphere," he repeated to Forum 18.

Did the students return voluntarily?

Giyosov also told Forum 18 that the Tajik government has verbally agreed with the Egyptian authorities that if by the end of the year the remaining Tajik students do not return, the Egyptian authorities should deport them. He said there has been no such agreement with the authorities of Iran, Pakistan or Saudi Arabia. Asked what measures the Tajik authorities will take against those students who insist on staying back or go abroad to study religion privately, he claimed: "There will be no serious measures."

However, Tajik diplomats in Pakistan and Egypt told RFE/RL's Tajik Service, as the agency reported on 10 November, that hundreds of Tajik students have "voluntarily" abandoned their studies at religious schools in those countries and returned home. Muhammadi Muzaffarov, Tajik Consul in Egypt, similarly told the agency that more than 130 students returned home from Egypt of their own volition.

But at Dushanbe airport, a man who gave his name as Salmon, and who was waiting for his grandson to return from Egypt, reportedly said that the Tajik authorities pressured them to persuade their children or grandchildren to return home. Salmon added that his grandson was a student at one of the schools of Al-Azhar Islamic University, but had been pressured to abandon his studies.

A few unnamed students also said that they were forced to return, and would like to go back to Egypt at the first opportunity to continue their studies, ferghana.ru reported on 9 November.

However, Khusravbek Rakamov, Deputy Head of Badakhshan Regional Administration's Religious Affairs Division, said that 20 students from the region study Islam in Iran's medresses. "None of them have come back yet but we have spoken with their parents and explained that there is a danger that under the guise of religious education their children may be trained to become terrorists," he told Forum 18 on 29 November from the regional capital Khorugh. Rakamov could not explain to Forum 18 in which schools they trained as terrorists.

The state commission that checked up on mosques in Badakhshan's Darwaz district distributed to attendees 400 CDs of a documentary prepared by state television, the Regnum.ru news agency reported on 19 November. The documentary tells how Tajik youth attending medresses in Islamic countries abroad were being prepared as future terrorists.

Muslim unregistered activity in Badakhshan halted

Badakhshan regional authorities in early November checked up on the activities of 32 unregistered mosques, and gave them ten days to submit documents for registration or else stop their activity. Local Muslims and officials told Forum 18 that all the mosques, located in the west of the mountainous region, are Sunni. All have been forced to halt worship.

Most of Badakhshan's Muslim population are Ismailis, who belong to a branch of Shia Islam under the authority of the Aga Khan. Ismailis have told Forum 18 that while they generally do not pray in mosques but in private homes, which do not register with the authorities, they have not faced official harassment (see F18News 15 November 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1511).

Rakamov of Badakhshan Regional Administration's Religious Affairs Division said that the check-ups revealed that 28 mosques in Darwaz district and four mosques in Vanj district were operating without state registration. "We gave them a warning to submit their documents by 20 November for registration," he told Forum 18.

He said that only 10 of those mosques from Darwaz district submitted registration applications by the deadline, and that the

documents have already been sent to the Government's Religious Affairs Committee in Dushanbe. Nazira Dodikhudayeva of the Committee in Dushanbe told Forum 18 on 1 December that it has not yet received the documents.

Why cannot Muslims meet in public places for worship?

Asked why local Muslims cannot meet for worship publicly in places of their choice, Rakamov said that many of the remaining 22 unregistered mosques are "old stores or car repair shops, which do not look good, and are not clean places". He also argued that "why for instance should there be three mosques in Zing village of Darwaz – a small village where only 600 people live?" Rakamov said that the authorities asked the residents of Zing village to use one mosque.

Asked if this did not violate local people's religious freedoms, Rakamov said that they "should first collect documents in the order established by law and then show that they are financially able to build an appropriate mosque".

Dodikhudayeva of the Religious Affairs Committee in Dushanbe was unable to explain to Forum 18 why Muslims cannot meet for prayers in places they choose if they do not have the means to build mosques.

Asked what further measures would be taken by the regional authorities against the remaining 22 mosques if they continued unregistered activity, Rakamov claimed that all those communities "agreed with us to discontinue their activity". When Forum 18 insisted with the question, he said the authorities would deal with those communities "strictly according to the Law", but did not explain what this meant.

Likewise Dodikhudayeva said that if in future any of these communities continue unregistered activity, they would be punished. She did not specify what these punishments would be.

Sardorbek Azorabekov, Badakhshan Region's official religious affairs expert, told the Russian news agency Regnum.ru on 19 November that local people could attend the central mosque in Darwaz district until they could register their mosques. Local Muslims told the news agency that they were not happy with the official decision, since the majority of the mountain villages are at least 50 kms (35 miles) from Darwaz, the district centre. They pointed out that especially in the winter, they could not travel so often to the central mosque.

IRP warned by Justice Ministry to stop prayers

The Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) has reluctantly bowed to government pressure to stop holding Friday prayers in the Party headquarters in Dushanbe. Shamsiddin Saidov, Chief of Administration of the IRP, said that they held their last assembly for Friday prayers on 26 November.

"We received a warning letter from the Justice Ministry dated 23 November to stop prayers in the Party premises within 10 days," he told Forum 18 on 1 December. "Otherwise, the letter said, the Ministry would take a legal action against the Party in the Supreme Court under the Law on Political Parties to strip our registration."

IRP members were ordered to stop unregistered prayers in the party headquarters during a police raid in October, and party member Imam Zuboidullo Rozikov was later fined for leading unauthorised Friday prayers and sermons in the party headquarters. An unexplained fire destroyed the IRP's cultural centre in Dushanbe which was used as a mosque for women (see F18News 15 November 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1511).

The Party leadership decided in the near future to ask the Constitutional Court to rule on the constitutionality of the Religion Law, since each citizen of Tajikistan has the right to freely assemble and worship, Saidov added.

What will happen to non-Muslim unregistered activity?

Asked how many non-Muslim organisations are still awaiting registration, Dodikhudayeva of the Religious Affairs Committee in Dushanbe told Forum 18, "practically all the existing ones were re-registered". Asked about the continuing nationwide ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses, she said that only the courts could decide whether they will ever be able to regain their registration and expressed doubts that the community will be able to regain its registration. "They repeatedly violated the laws in the past," she claimed, without specifying which laws.

Since being banned in October 2007, Jehovah's Witnesses have tried unsuccessfully to have the ban overturned through the courts. They have faced raids and threats of prosecutions by the police and National Security Committee (NSC) secret police (see F18News 15 November 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1511).

Dodikhudayeva also insisted to Forum 18 that the Baptist Union headed by Alexandr Werwai will not be given registration since "there is already one registered" Baptist Union. "According to the new Religion Law we cannot register more than one central body for the same denomination," she claimed.

Officials re-registered the separate Association of Evangelical Christians-Baptists headed by Igor Samiyev and rejected the application by the Baptist Union Werwai leads (see F18News 15 November 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1511). (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=1553.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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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