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UZBEKISTAN: Five-year registration denial for Namangan mosque

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Five years after it was closed by the authorities, Muslims in the Fergana valley city of Namangan have told Forum 18 News Service that their repeated attempts to register the Panjera mosque – where up to 500 people used to worship - have come to nothing. The day after a visit by OSCE officials in February, local officials warned the Muslims that "they could only meet with foreigners in the presence of the authorities". Local officials denied to Forum 18 that they knew anything about the repeated registration applications.

Muslims in the city of Namangan in the Uzbek section of the Fergana valley, who preferred not to be named, told Forum 18 News Service at the end of March that they had been trying for the past five years to register the Panjera mosque in the Alisher Navoi mahalla (sub-district) of the city, which was closed by the authorities in 1998. Local Muslims reported that up to 500 people used to meet for prayer at the mosque on feast days. According to Uzbekistan's law on religion, believers are not allowed to meet in an unregistered mosque. Because of the closure of the Panjera mosque, the old people of the Alisher Navoi mahalla have been deprived of the opportunity to attend prayers. It is hard for them to get to the nearest mosque, which is two kilometres (a mile and a quarter) away.

Local Muslims told Forum 18 that at the end of February believers from the Panjera mosque met representatives of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), who were visiting from Tashkent. They claim that the following day, the chairman of the Alisher Navoi mahalla committee, Mushin Khajabayev, and a member of the secret police, the National Security Service, visited them and warned that "they could only meet with foreigners in the presence of the authorities".

Per Normark, human rights officer at the OSCE office in Tashkent, confirmed that at the end of February staff from the OSCE office made an unofficial fact-finding trip to Uzbekistan's section of the Fergana valley and met a number of believers. "If it is true that believers have since encountered problems with the authorities, then that makes us puzzled," he told Forum 18 on 30 March in Tashkent.

Khajabayev admitted to Forum 18 that he had spoken to the Muslims in the wake of the OSCE visit but denied that there was anything sinister. "Currently, springtime in the city creates a dangerous fire risk," he told Forum 18 on 26 March. "I did indeed meet believers at the Panjera mosque along with one other person - I believe he was from the fire service. We made inquiries about the fire safety of the mosque and at the same time we asked the believers what they had been talking about with the foreigners."

According to believers at the Panjera mosque, they submit registration documents with the local authorities each year, but receive no reply. Attempts by Forum 18 to clarify with officials why the mosque has been unable to gain registration proved fruitless. "We have not heard anything about the Panjera mosque," the head of the department for social relations at the Namangan city administration, Akmal Atakhanov, told Forum 18 on 27 March. "Probably the believers sent the necessary documents for registration straight to the regional justice committee."

Under Uzbek law, believers seeking registration for their community must initially submit the necessary documents to the city administration. The city administration then writes a covering letter and sends the documents to the regional justice department. "What you say is the first I have heard about believers' problems at the Panjera mosque," the deputy chief of the justice department for Namangan region, Kamaluddin Ergashev, told Forum 18. "Probably their documents are with the city administration. At least, no documents have reached us."

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