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TAJIKISTAN: Banned church once again operating freely

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Despite a closure order from the government's religious affairs committee in April, the pastor of a Korean-led Pentecostal church in the northern town of Khujand says her church has been able to resume its activity. "I don't know whether or not our work has been closed down officially," Larisa Kagai told Forum 18 News Service, "but now, thank God, the authorities are not interfering in our activities." She said she had persuaded the committee to overturn its ban after visiting officials there. A committee official denied to Forum 18 recent reports that it had also banned Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses, denials backed up by Baptist and Jehovah's Witness leaders. "So far at least, thank God, we have no problems with the authorities," Oleg Pilkevich of Tajikistan's Baptist Union told Forum 18.

The pastor of a Korean-led Pentecostal church in the northern town of Khujand closed down by the government's religious affairs committee in April has told Forum 18 News Service that her church has been able to resume its activities and operate unimpeded. "I don't know whether or not our work has been closed down officially," Larisa Kagai of the Sonmin Sunbogim (Grace) church told Forum 18 on 14 September, "but now, thank God, the authorities are not interfering in our activities."

She said the religious affairs committee issued the closure order after one former church member "who had been exposed as a thief" wrote a denunciation of the church to the committee. "He grossly distorted the facts," Kagai reported. "That was when our problems started." But she said that after travelling to the capital Dushanbe she managed to persuade officials at the religious affairs committee to change their minds.

Sanobar Nurova, chief specialist on non-Islamic faiths at the government's religious affairs committee, admitted that her committee halted the work of the Sonmin Sunbogim church in Khujand in April. "The church had flagrantly flouted Tajikistan's laws – members of the congregation were actively preaching outside the confines of the church," she claimed to Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 14 September. "They had also opened a department offering Tae Kwon-Do courses for children and teenagers, but preached their beliefs at these classes without the permission of the pupils' parents."

Back in May, in the wake of the closure order, Madhakim Pustiev of the religious affairs committee had told Forum 18 that the activity of the church had annoyed Muslims and some of them had asked for the church to be closed, but had refused to say which laws the church had broken (see F18News 12 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=559).

Nurova maintained that Tajiks are tolerant and well-disposed towards Christians, including relatives who had converted to Christianity. "The only thing that arouses the wrath of Muslims is when representatives of other religions start actively preaching their beliefs in their midst," she told Forum 18. Nurova maintains that the most active believers in this respect are the Jehovah's Witnesses and members of Sonmin Sunbogim.

However, she categorically denied a 2 September report by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) that two other religious communities – the Baptists and the Jehovah's Witnesses – had been temporarily banned on 25 July. "We are aware of the article in IWPR, and we can say with conviction that the journalist has at the very least partially distorted the facts. We have not put a stop to the activities either of the Jehovah's Witnesses or of the Baptists."

The deputy head of Tajikistan's Baptist Union, Oleg Pilkevich, confirmed that the religious affairs committee has not banned his Church's activities. "So far at least, thank God, we have no problems with the authorities," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 14 September.

Anatoli Melnik, deputy head of the Council of Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan who is also responsible for monitoring the rights of his fellow-believers in all the Central Asian republics, also denied that Jehovah's Witness communities in Tajikistan had been banned. "We did hear about the publication of an article saying that the Tajik authorities had halted the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses in the country. I can tell you with authority that this report does not reflect the facts," he told Forum 18 from the Kazakh town of Shymkent.

For more background see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=190

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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