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KYRGYZSTAN: Uzbek claims and extremism law cause little change

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Uzbekistan has made unproven allegations of a link between Kyrgyzstan and the Andijan uprising. Despite the Uzbek claims and the passage of a new Kyrgyz extremism law, Forum 18 News Service has found little change in Kyrgyz government policy towards Muslims. The head of a state school in Osh, which borders Uzbekistan, and the head of the regional Religious Affairs Committee have both told Forum 18 that the only change has been that schools have been asked to note the names of children from devout Muslim families. The Religious Affairs Committee head told Forum 18 that "it's just a preventative measure to ensure that children don't fall into the hands of extremist groups. We are not preventing schoolchildren from attending mosques or observing other religious rituals." A local human rights organisation, Luchi Solomona, told Forum 18 that "it's possible that the authorities simply haven't shaken things up yet."

Following the Andijan uprising, Uzbekistan made allegations of a link between Kyrgyzstan and the Andijan uprising. Forum 18 News Service has investigated in Osh, which is on the border with Uzbekistan, whether the unproven Uzbek claims and the adoption of a new extremism law (see F18News 19 October http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=673) have led to Kyrgyz policy towards Muslims becoming more stringent.

"So far at least the law on extremism has not been implemented. I can declare with authority that since the events in Andijan and the adoption of the law on extremism, state policy towards believers remains unchanged. It's easy to demonstrate this – since the law on extremism was adopted, not one Hizb ut-Tahrir follower has been sentenced," Samsybek Zakirov, head of the Kyrgyz state Religious Affairs Committee in Osh region, told Forum 18 on 6 October in Osh. An outline of Hizb ut-Tahir's policy can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170

The Uzbek government claimed after the Andijan uprising that Kyrgyzstan had trained terrorists who took part in the uprising in three places: in the Panfilov state secondary school in Osh, southern Kyrgyzstan, in the same town's central stadium and on a military range near the village of Teke near Osh. Samsybek Zakirov, of the Osh regional Religious Affairs Committee maintains that the authorities are looking very carefully into every one of Tashkent's charges, but have not so far found them to have any substance. The central stadium and the Teke military range are both used by Kyrgyz government military and law enforcement agencies, who have denied to Forum 18 that Uzbek terrorists were trained there.

The Panfilov School appears to have been named by Uzbekistan because it is near the Suleiman Hills, a centuries-old and well-known place of pilgrimage for Muslims throughout Central Asia. Manzura Arslanova, head of the School, speaking to Forum 18 in Osh on 5 October, ridiculed the Uzbek charges, noting that she had explained to Uzbek public prosecutors the absurdity of the charges, which explanation they accepted. Arslanova was therefore astonished when Uzbek state TV subsequently claimed the school was a terrorist training camp.

Despite the Uzbek allegations, Arslanova told Forum 18 that she had not noticed any substantial change in state religious policy since the Andijan uprising. "The only innovation is that under a decree from the education department for Osh region, we have to make a note of the names of all the children from religious families. That doesn't mean that we intend to stop them from attending mosques. We are simply making sure than pupils do not get caught up in extremist groups," Arslanova told Forum 18.

Zakirov of the regional Religious Affairs Committee confirmed that schools are compiling lists of children belonging to religious families, also confirming Arslanova's explanation of this. He did not see this as infringing believers' rights. "It's just a preventative measure to ensure that children don't fall into the hands of extremist groups. We are not preventing schoolchildren from attending mosques or observing other religious rituals," he told Forum 18.

The head of the Osh human rights organisation Luchi Solomona, Sadykjan Makhmudov, agrees with Zakirov. "So far at least I have not seen any change in state religious policy. It's possible that the authorities simply haven't shaken things up yet," Makhmudov noted to Forum 18 in Osh on 6 October.

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

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

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

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=546

For an outline of the repression immediately following the Andijan uprising, see F18News 23 May http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567 and for an outline of what is known about Akramia and the uprising see 16 June http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586

For a report on growing Uzbek attempts to isolate religious groups, see F18News 3 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=665

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

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