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UZBEKISTAN: No hope of registration for minority faiths?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

"We have now lost all hope of registering our church. The authorities deliberately keep coming up with new excuses to refuse us registration," Khym-Mun Kim – a leader of the Peace Presbyterian church in Nukus, the capital of Karakalpakstan in north west Uzbekistan - told Forum 18 News Service. "The authorities say we have no right to hold meetings without registration. And in fact the police could descend on any of our services." Kim believes that the Karakalpakstan authorities are deliberately creating "intolerable" conditions for religious minorities. Only one non-Muslim religious community has managed to gain registration in the autonomous republic.

"We have now lost all hope of registering our church. The authorities deliberately keep coming up with new excuses to refuse us registration," Khym-Mun Kim – one of the leaders of the Peace Presbyterian church in Nukus, the capital of Karakalpakstan, an autonomous republic in north west Uzbekistan - told Forum 18 News Service. Non-Muslim religious groups have found it very hard to gain registration in Karakalpakstan. Only one currently has registration: a congregation of the Full Gospel Pentecostal church.

The Peace church's difficulties began in August 2000, when the authorities stripped the church of registration. "The reason they gave for removing our registered status was that we had organised a summer camp for children from poor families," Pastor Kim told Forum 18. "We simply wanted to help the children to relax in the summer, and to teach them about what is good." But, he added, the authorities regarded their charitable work as missionary activity because among the children holidaying at the camp were ethnic Kazakhs, Uzbeks and Karakalpaks (historically these peoples profess Islam). Uzbekistan's law on religion bans missionary activity.

Kim complains that since losing its registration the church has virtually had to go underground. "The authorities say we have no right to hold meetings without registration. And in fact the police could descend on any of our services. But we believe that people do not have to register a community in order to pray to God."

The Peace church - which has more than one hundred members - has made three unsuccessful attempts to register since 2000. On the most recent occasion, church leaders submitted registration documents to the Karakalpakstan Justice Ministry in April last year. In May they received an official reply ordering them to agree the membership of the church's council with the religious affairs official of the Karakalpakstan cabinet of ministers, Khusneidin Khamidov. In July Khamidov wrote to the church advising that "due to the lack of specialists in non-Muslim confessions in Karakalpakstan", the church leaders should apply directly to the national Committee for Religious Affairs in Tashkent.

In mid-October Kim's fellow pastor Konstantin Kmit travelled to Tashkent to lodge the registration application with the Committee for Religious Affairs. However Begzot Kadyrov, an official of the department for non-Muslim confessions at the Committee, declined to consider Khamidov's letter. Kadyrov also declined to put his refusal to consider Khamidov's letter in writing.

"Karakalpakstan's justice ministry refused to consider our documents without Khamidov's signature, but he had already said that we must apply direct to the Committee for Religious Affairs in Tashkent. And the Committee for Religious Affairs refused to consider our documents without an official letter from Karakalpakstan's justice ministry," Pastor Kim complains. "We ended up in a vicious circle."

Pastor Kim said the church then sent an official appeal to the chairman of Uzbekistan's Committee for Religious Affairs, Shoazim Minovarov. On 9 December the church received his response, saying that for registration to go ahead it had to have letters of recommendation from the mahalla (the mahalla is a district of a town made up of private dwellings) in which the church was situated. "For one thing, this stipulation contradicts the law: under Uzbekistan's law on religion, the activity of a church on the territory of a mahalla requires the agreement of the mahalla committee, but certainly not a letter of recommendation. Secondly, it is obvious that the chairman of the mahalla committee will refuse us permission to set up a church because he is afraid that the city authorities will sack him," Pastor Kim maintained. He reported that one of the chairmen of the mahalla committee had been sacked precisely because he gave permission for the church's activity.

Kim believes that the Karakalpakstan authorities are deliberately creating "intolerable" conditions for religious minorities in the autonomous republic. To illustrate his claim, Kim showed Forum 18 an interview about religious minorities in the Russian-language

newspaper Vesti Karakalpakstana (News of Karakalpakstan) with a leading specialist from the hakimiat (administration) of Nukus city, Raftdin Turdymyranov. The title of the interview is telling: "Unlawful activity continues. If we sell our faith, then what sort of people are we?"

It is noteworthy that Turdymyranov calls the Protestant churches, along with the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Baha'i community, "sects" (in Russian this word has very negative connotations). The tone of Turdymyranov's discussion with the journalist, Khojamuratova, demonstrates that both consider religious minorities an evil that threatens the population of Karakalpakstan. In her introduction to the interview Khojamuratova writes: "The most offensive thing is that these organisations (religious minorities) who are trying to propagandise their policies under the guise of religion are attracting people into their ranks by means of deceit and poisoning their understanding."

Turdymyranov claims that the activity of a "sect" does not conform to the "mentality of responsible people, who think about the future of society and the future of their children". It is evident that the interview, which appeared in the autonomous republic's main newspaper, reflects the official position of the Karakalpakstan authorities.

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