**FORUM 18 NEWS SERVICE, Oslo, Norway**
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*The right to believe, to worship and witness*
*The right to change one's belief or religion*
*The right to join together and express one's belief*

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# TAJIKISTAN: When is a "temporary" ban permanent?

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

*Tajikistan in October 2007 "temporarily" suspended two Protestant organisations, Ehyo Church and the Abundant Life Christian Centre, and totally banned the Jehovah's Witnesses. However, there is little sign that officials will lift the suspensions soon, Forum 18 News Service has found. The Jehovah's Witnesses have appealed to the Supreme Court, whose decision is expected in perhaps two months. They particularly object to an "expert opinion" from the Institute of Philosophy and Law. Nazira Dodkhudoeva, of the Culture Ministry's Religious Affairs Department, told Forum 18 "Jehovah's Witnesses are difficult to satisfy." She stated that the Institute's "expert opinion was, of course, that they are a destructive cult." Abundant Life has stopped its activity, complaining to Forum 18 that "we are just tired of the whole process." Dodkhudoeva told Forum 18 that the Ministry will re-register Ehyo Church, but refused to say when. Meanwhile, the authorities have not yet bulldozed the Jewish community's threatened synagogue, and the community has launched a legal appeal.*

Seven months after Tajikistan in October 2007 "temporarily" suspended two Protestant organisations, Ehyo Church and the Abundant Life Christian Centre, and totally banned the Jehovah's Witnesses, the activity of all three organisations is still barred, Forum 18 News Service has found. Ehyo Church and Abundant Life, a religious education and humanitarian organisation, were both allegedly suspended for three months only. However, there is little sign that officials now have any timescale in mind to lift the suspensions.

At the time of the action against all three organisations, Saidbeg Mahmadulloyev, Head of the Information and Analytical Section of the Religious Affairs Department at the Ministry of Culture, denied to Forum 18 that Ehyo and Abundant Life would also be banned. "They are not in imminent danger of being banned. However, they committed some violations, which they need to correct." He saw no chance though that the ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses would be lifted (see F18News 9 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1045).

An appeal against the Culture Ministry's ban is in progress, Yuri Toporov, the lawyer for the Jehovah's Witnesses, told Forum 18 on 20 May. Jehovah's Witnesses are also appealing against a decision by customs officials in the capital, Dushanbe, to seize a large consignment of religious literature sent from Germany in the summer of 2007. Attempts to send literature to Tajikistan via Uzbekistan have been stopped by Uzbek officials (see F18News 24 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1039). Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany have now stopped sending literature consignments, until these problems are resolved.

Toporov of the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that two civil courts of Dushanbe, the Sino and Shokhmansour district courts, had been respectively investigating the literature and ban on activity cases. But both cases were then handed over by the courts to the Military Tribunal of Dushanbe Garrison. "The local Jehovah's Witnesses were given the reason that it was done because the Ministry of National Security officials were involved in both cases", he said.

Conscientious objection to military service has been cited as a ground for banning the Jehovah's Witnesses. However the Deputy Chief of the Tajik General Staff, Major-General Akbarjon Kayumov, apparently disagreed with this (see F18News 9 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1045).

Jehovah's Witnesses have appealed against the ban on their activity to the Supreme Court. The Military Tribunal judge, T. Kadyrov, has decided to suspend hearing the case until the Supreme Court makes a ruling. This might be in two months time. The Culture Ministry has been asked by the Military Tribunal to take no action on the ban until the Supreme Court makes a judgement. Toporov hopes that Jehovah's Witnesses "may have meetings now for the time being," he told Forum 18.

Toporov particularly objected to an "expert opinion" from the Institute of Philosophy and Law, at the Tajik Academy of Sciences, which the Culture Ministry asked for. Nazira Dodkhudoeva, of the Culture Ministry's Religious Affairs Department told Forum 18 on 20 May that she did not think the Institute of Philosophy and Law "did a bad job." Commenting on Toporov's objections, she stated that: "It's just that Jehovah's Witnesses are difficult to satisfy." She explained that "we first gave our expert opinion on their organisation, which they did not like". The Institute of Philosophy and Law was then asked for its opinion by the Culture Ministry. Asked what the Institute concluded, Dodkhudoeva stated that "their expert opinion was, of course, that they [Jehovah's Witnesses]


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are a destructive cult."

The Institute of Philosophy and Law is not, Toporov told Forum 18, on the Justice Ministry's list of organisations who can give expert opinions on religious organisations. He also stated that "The Institute gave a five-page analysis mostly comprised of materials containing subjective opinions drawn from different internet sources."

Abundant Life Christian Centre has now decided to stop its activity, Shaukat Dusmatov told Forum 18 on 20 May from Dushanbe. "We made this decision because the authorities put a lot of pressure on us making it impossible to work," he complained.

The Culture Ministry claimed that it was suspending Abundant Life for three months only from 17 October 2007 "to fix problems in our charter", Dusmatov said (see F18News 9 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1045). Abundant Life then changed their charter – even though when it was originally registered in 2003 no objections had been made. On 7 January 2008 the Culture Ministry wrote back to Abundant Life, claiming that "corrections" still needed to be made. "On 15 January we sent another amended version to the Ministry," Dusmatov told Forum 18, "and we again received a negative answer on 30 March."

Dusmatov said that in addition to the written communications, Abundant Life also had numerous meetings with the Ministry to discuss their charter. "Each time we had a meeting Dodkhudoeva, in particular, gave us a whole list of things to change in our charter", he complained.

In the most recent meeting, Dodkhudoeva of the Culture Ministry's Religious Affairs Department could not point out any errors "apart from some grammar mistakes," Dusmatov stated. She also claimed that "the style of the charter's language did not sound to her like legal style." "We are just tired of the whole process and think we are losing time with all this bureaucratic hassle," Dusmatov complained.

Dodkhudoeva herself told Forum 18 that the Abundant Life Christian Centre would not be re-registered until they made the necessary amendments to their charter. "They sold books and other religious items in the past without an appropriate expert opinion given by our Department", she insisted.

She also argued that the Christian Centre Abundant Life had issues in their charter conflicting with the existing Religion Law. "The Centre also has too many functions, which go beyond the boundaries of a religious organisation", she said. She did not want to explain what exactly these issues were, saying that she did not have time to do this.

Dusmatov told Forum 18 that Abundant Life had always obtained the Culture Ministry's expert opinion before anything was sold in their bookshop. "The only complaint the Ministry told us about was that we did not give them copies of music CDs we sold," he said. "But the texts of the songs on those CDs had already been given to the Culture Ministry by another Christian organisation." The Ministry gave that organisation written permission to sell the CDs.

"We are the only Christian bookshop in Tajikistan", Dusmatov said, stating that many churches and religious organisations used the bookshop. "We want to publish, sell and disseminate Christian books", he said. "If we can't do it then what's the point of having our Centre". Abundant Life has now decided to "wait until a better law is brought in, which makes it possible for us to have a centre which could publish and disseminate Christian books," Dusmatov stated.

Tajikistan is working on a new Religion Law, which many fear will restrict freedom of thought, conscience and belief even more than this freedom is restricted at present (see F18News 27 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1052).

Abundant Life is not the only Christian-based organisation which is not a church having problems with the authorities. A humanitarian aid organisation known to Forum 18, which prefers at present to remain unnamed, is currently facing serious legal problems following unproven claims that it has engaged in "missionary activity." A variety of accusations have been made against the organisation, but the Justice Ministry only appears to be really interested in the alleged "illegal missionary activity." A senior Justice Ministry official told Forum 18 on 21 May that: "They will have four months to correct their shortcomings. Depending on their behaviour, we will see whether we want them to continue or stop their activity altogether."

Ehyo Church was, like Abundant Life, suspended by the Justice Ministry for three months in October 2007, for alleged problems with its charter. Just like Abundant Life, no questions had been raised when the charter was originally registered – in Ehyo's case in 2001 (see F18News 9 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1045).

Sayid Sharakhmetov of Ehyo Church told Forum 18 on 20 May that they had sent an amended charter to the Culture Ministry in February 2008. "We received a letter on 30 April asking us to make further amendments to our charter", Sharakhmetov said. After making further changes, Ehyo met Dodkhudoeva of the Culture Ministry's Religious Affairs Department on 13 May. "Dodkhudoeva promised us that the Minister would look at it and decide later whether to register or not", Sharakhmetov said.

Dodkhudoeva told Forum 18 that Ehyo Church had fixed the problems in their charter, and that the Ministry would soon re-register them. However, she refused to state when this will happen.


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The Jewish community had been given until 18 May to leave their synagogue in Dushanbe before it is bulldozed. The building of the Nani-Hayat (Bread of Life) Protestant Church is also threatened (see F18News 15 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1130).

However, the Jewish community has not left the synagogue and the authorities have not yet taken any action against them. Rabbi Mikhail Abdurakhmanov told Forum 18 on 19 May that the community had appealed to the court of the Ismoili Somoniy district of Dushanbe on 15 May to reverse the court's earlier decision. "Until the court examines the appeal, the authorities cannot bulldoze the building, and we will continue using it", he told Forum 18. (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=190.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

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

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY


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