

2 June 2008

KYRGYZSTAN: Mob, police and administration chief obstruct Christian boy's burial

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

After the death of a 14-year-old Baptist in Kulanak in central Kyrgyzstan, the local imam and a village mob prevented his burial in the village, even in land allocated two years earlier for Christian burials, local Baptists told Forum 18 News Service. A mob, some of them drunk, threatened the Isakov family and the police did nothing to protect them. Instead the police forced their way into the house, stole the body and buried it 40 kms (25 miles) away "in a disrespectful manner", Baptists complained to Forum 18. Talay Jakypov of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Naryn Region told Forum 18 the decision not to allow the burial in the village came in writing from the district authorities. However, a spokeswoman for the Regional Administration denied this to Forum 18, saying "the whole village" was against the burial. "We need a stronger law putting a constraint on all kinds of religious sects. Only then would we not have such problems," she added. Raya Kadyrova of the Foundation for Tolerance International says this is the latest of many such cases. She told Forum 18 the young boy's right to choose his faith must be respected. "In this case the state institutions decided that their decision is more correct – this is absolutely wrong."

The Isakovs, a Baptist family, was not allowed to bury their 14-year old boy after his death from heart failure on 19 May, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The head of the local administration, the police and a village mob obstructed the burial of the boy in his home village of Kulanak in Kyrgyzstan's central Naryn Region. The family told Forum 18 they then faced pressure which they feel is an attempt to drive them from the village. The case is the latest in a series of similar cases where ethnic Kyrgyz or local Uzbeks who have become Christians, Baha'is or Jehovah's Witnesses have been denied burial, Raya Kadyrova, head of the Foundation for Tolerance International, a Bishkek-based peacebuilding group, told Forum 18.

Talay Jakypov of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Naryn Region complained that the Isakov family wanted to violate Muslim traditions by not allowing the local imam to lead the burial. "However the decision not to allow them to conduct a Christian funeral in the village came in a written ruling from the district authorities," he insisted to Forum 18 on 29 May.

Aynura Teymirova, the press-secretary of Omurbek Subanaliev, the Akim (Head of Executive Authority) of Naryn Region, rejected this. She categorically denied that the district authorities issued any decision to bar the Baptists from burying their dead in Kulanak, whether in writing or not. "The whole village was against the boy being buried in Kulanak," she told Forum 18 on 30 May from Naryn, the regional centre.

Teymirova said that the Akimat (administration) suggested that the Baptists bury the boy 40 kms (25 miles) away in Akiyya, an abandoned place 5 kms (3 miles) from the town of Naryn designated for burying Kyrgyz who accept other faiths. However, the Baptists insisted on burying him in the village, where all but two families are Muslims, she added.

"It was not the first time such an issue arose over the burial of a Kyrgyz who accepted another faith," Teymirova said. All of this happens because of "a weak legal framework", she maintained. "The State Agency for Religious Affairs has in the past registered so many religious organisations and now we are reaping the consequences," she complained. "As a Kyrgyz national I am against the Kyrgyz accepting other faiths. We need a stronger law putting a constraint on all kinds of religious sects. Only then would we not have such problems."

Condemning such views is Kadyrova of the Foundation for Tolerance International. "It was the young boy's right to choose his faith and his choice must be respected," she told Forum 18 from Bishkek on 2 June. "In this case the state institutions decided that their decision is more correct – this is absolutely wrong. It is not their business to agree or disagree with the choice. Their role is to protect the decision of the young boy who died and his close family."

After the boy's death, the Isakov family and some 20 fellow Baptists were planning to bury the body on the plot of land officially allocated to Baptists in the village as a graveyard in April 2006 by the district authorities.

Meanwhile some 30 men from the village led by the local imam, Kenjebek Imanov, came to the funeral, a Baptist from Naryn who wanted to remain unnamed because of possible reprisals from the authorities told Forum 18 on 29 May. "Some of the men were

drunk and brought spades and other farm instruments with them," the Baptist reported. "They threatened the family not to bury their son there and forced them to halt the burial." The men warned the family that they would not allow them to bury the boy anywhere in the village, let alone in the graveyard.

The Baptist identified some of the mob as Beyshen Satarov, Sukuy Jenaliev, Kanybek Usonov, Aydarbek Sokeev, Kalmyrza Kydyraliev, Ruslan Ashymov, Nurbek Orozakunov, Altymysh Kurmanaliev, Almaz Asanbaev and Aybek Usonov.

Baptist leaders and Alymbek Isakov, the father of the deceased boy, went the same day to Ishenbek Medetov, the head of Naryn region's Naryn district Akimat, to ask him to take measures to resolve the issue, the Baptist told Forum 18. "Medetov reprimanded the believers saying that they should have thought about the consequences before accepting another faith," the Baptist said.

Medetov then ordered his deputy Emil Alymkulov, district prosecutor Kanybek Kalbaev and Mahabat Jumaev, the Chief of the local police, to find a solution to the issue. The officials came to the village to hold discussions with the group from the mosque and the Baptists. "During the meeting on 19 May, the Muslim group restated their unwillingness to allow the burial in the village unless the family renounced their faith and accepted Islam," the Baptist said.

The officials, instead of calling for law and order and telling the Muslim group to respect the constitutional rights of the family, "unfortunately" supported the Muslim group's position, the Naryn-based Baptist told Forum 18. "The reaction of the officials was that the Baptists have the right to believe and the right to bury their son in this land but we cannot go against the Muslim group either," the Baptist told Forum 18. "Above all, Prosecutor Kalbaev said during the meeting that the decision to allocate a plot of land for the Baptists to bury their dead was not legal and he would have it repealed."

Almaz Paysalov of the Naryn district Prosecutor's office said that it was up to the district Akimat to decide where the boy was supposed to be buried. "The prosecutor went to Kulanak merely to check the reason for the death, which we found out was a natural cause," he told Forum 18 on 30 May.

Following the failure of the district officials to resolve the issue, Baptists asked Subanaliev, the Akim of Naryn Region, on 20 May to help them and take measures against the perpetrators, the Baptist told Forum 18. "The Akim was not willing to receive the believers, and they could only catch him after several hours of waiting when he wanted to get into his car while leaving the Akimat building," said the Baptist. Subanaliev told Alymbek Isakov, the father, to listen to the advice of the village imam and the other villagers.

When the Baptists insisted that Subanaliev order the local police to protect the family and allow them to bury the dead boy, he told the Baptists that "he could not in such a way restrict the rights of the villagers," Forum 18 was told. "If any violence takes place in the village over the issue, the Baptists are to blame," the Baptist reported Subanaliev as telling them.

Aleksandr Shumilin, the head of Kyrgyzstan's Baptist Union, says he does not believe that the whole village was against the Isakov family. "It was a group of people from the local mosque who provoked some men from the village to go against the family," he told Forum 18 from Bishkek on 29 May. He said he was not sure at whose instigation the mosque representatives acted.

The official media gave differing accounts of the events, most of which were biased against the family and the Baptists, the Naryn-based Baptist told Forum 18. The media claimed that the situation was under the control of Subanaliev. "Subanaliev was however not interested in helping the family," the Baptist added.

On 21 May Medetov himself together with Kalbaev and Jumaev came to Kulanak to persuade the Isakovs to either renounce their faith or give the body to the grandfather of the deceased boy, who is Muslim, to bury according to Muslim tradition, in which case the mother and father would not be allowed to attend the funeral, Forum 18 was told. "The Isakovs did not yield to any of those conditions," the Baptist said.

Meanwhile a mob from the village gathered around the family home where Christians and relatives of the boy had gathered from Kulanak and from other parts of Kyrgyzstan to support the family and offer their condolences. They mob demanded that they leave. "However, the friends of the family did not leave despite the threats from the mob," the Baptist said.

Medetov then invited a police detachment, which arrived in the village at 11 pm armed with batons. "The police ignored the family's request to break up the mob outside the house," the Naryn-based Baptist reported. "They did not even pay attention that one man in the mob, Kylych Tostokov, was hitting the believers and the father. Instead the police broke into the family house and took away the body of the boy despite the tears and crying in despair of the family members," the Baptist said.

The family then learned that the police had buried the body in Akkiya. The next day, 22 May, Isakov together with fellow Baptists travelled the 40 kms to Akkiya. There they found the body of his son buried "in a disrespectful manner" 70 cms (two feet) under the ground unwashed and in his clothes. "The heart-broken father dug out his son, washed the body, wrapped up in a clean, white sheet and buried him appropriately," the Baptist said.

The family of the deceased boy told Forum 18 on 30 May that now the village council made more trouble for them by not giving them water to irrigate their crops. Their children have been beaten and threatened by other children in school but the leadership took no measures to protect them. The family feels they are being pressured to leave the village.

Teymirova, spokeswoman for the regional Akim, rejected this to Forum 18 and insisted that no-one in the village is touching them. "They can have all the water they water for their land," she said. "There is no reason for concern." She could not however explain to Forum 18 how it was possible that the village which she had said earlier was in a state of "unrest" had suddenly become so quiet.

More official media reports came out after this incident. "The media supported by the Kyrgyz authorities report that the Baptists are to blame for initiating a religious conflict," the Naryn-based Baptist complained. The Baptist added that Christians have been left to wonder now whether this means every Christian who dies, no matter in what part of Naryn Region they lived, will be taken all the way to the Akkiya graveyard to be buried.

Kanatbek Murzakhilov, the deputy head of the State Agency for Religious Affairs, said that the Baptists did not ask the agency to help them with a place for burial. "The district authorities suggested a place to them but they did not want it," he told Forum 18 from Bishkek on 29 May.

Murzakhilov could not explain why the Baptists could not bury their dead in their own village. "The district authorities are in charge of land issues," he answered vaguely. Pressed by Forum 18 whether the Baptists could still re-bury the boy in their own village if they wished to, Murzakhilov responded: "Let them talk to us, and we will see what we can do."

Protestants told Forum 18 that they are now afraid that the government will use this case to pass a very restrictive Religion Law. "The first signal for this came from the speaker of parliament," the Baptist reported. "Immediately after the Kulanak events he announced that parliament urgently needs to make amendments to the existing Religion Law in order to tighten control over different religious organisations."

The Presidential Administration rejected a repressive Decree in February that would have restricted freedom of thought, conscience and belief. However, many of Kyrgyzstan's religious communities remain highly concerned by continuing moves to introduce restrictions into the Religion Law (see F18News 4 March 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1096).

Members of the Baptist and other churches asked Kyrgyzstan's President, Kurmanbek Bakiev, in an open letter to punish those responsible for violating the family's rights to exercise their faith and protect the believers' rights in the future.

Christian leaders are planning further moves. "They want to start a legal investigation of the case to punish the perpetrators," the Baptist said. "This may be an important precedent to resolve similar problems." Although this is not the first time Christian Kyrgyz had problems trying to bury their dead, the Baptist added, it is probably the first time the issue has been so publicly discussed and is asking for the President's attention.

Protestants living in or conducting missionary activity in what are perceived to be "Muslim" villages – especially in southern Kyrgyzstan – have faced rising pressure in recent years. This has included physical attacks and petitions to the authorities to have their churches closed down. In the worst case so far, Saktinbai Usmanov, an ethnic Kyrgyz convert to Protestant Christianity, was murdered in December 2005 in Zhety-Oguz village in Zhety-Oguz region on the southern bank of Lake Isyk-kul [Lake Ysyk-Köl] (see F18News 17 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=729).

In July 2006, a crowd of about 80 people broke into the house in the southern Kyrgyz village of Karakulja of the missionary pastor Zulumbek Sarygulov. They beat him senseless, broke two of his fingers and threw him out of the house. They then opened a shed containing religious literature, including several dozen Bibles, and burnt it all in the courtyard; and then wrote "For Sale" on the house in Kyrgyz. Three police officers stood by watching, but without intervening (see F18News 27 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=846).

Kadyrova of the Foundation for Tolerance International told Forum 18 that tensions between ethnic Kyrgyz of Muslim or nominal Muslim background and those who have joined other faiths is strong especially in villages. "This tension first emerged over funerals," she noted. "Imams refused to bury non-Muslims according to Muslim rites, or families were divided over which rites should be used to bury converts. Often converts were refused burial in village graveyards which many regard as for Muslims." She said officials then became involved in decisions which should be left to individuals and their close families to resolve.

Kadyrova believes this is a crucial impetus for moves to tighten the Religion Law. "Today there are very strong voices from government institutions that Kyrgyzstan is too open and vulnerable to new religious movements," she told Forum 18. "Both Muslim and Russian Orthodox leaders support this view." (END)

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

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Kyrgyzstan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=30>.

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 Kyrgyzstan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=kyrgyz>

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