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TAJIKISTAN: "No rights to organise prayers"

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

Tajikistan is continuing to close down places of worship in the capital Dushanbe, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Unregistered mosques have been closed down by city authorities, the country's only Jewish synagogue has been bulldozed, while Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses find it difficult to use their places of worship. Defending the closures, Shamsiddin Nuriddinov of the City Executive Authority told Forum 18 that the mosques they closed were public halls, and people had "no rights to organise prayers" there. Members of Dushanbe's Grace Sunmin Protestant Church told Forum 18 that they may be evicted from their building "within a couple of weeks". The Jehovah's Witnesses and one Protestant organisation are still suspended, under decisions imposed in late 2007. The Tajik parliament is still considering a new draft Religion Law, which would impose sweeping restrictions on freedom of religion or belief.

The authorities in the Tajik capital Dushanbe have continued to close down places of worship in the city, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Mosques not registered with the Culture Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee have been closed down by special commissions of the city authorities. Defending the move, Shamsiddin Nuriddinov of the City Executive Authority, who headed the commissions, told Forum 18 on 15 January that the places they closed down were so-called public halls, and people had "no rights to organise prayers" there.

The country's only Jewish synagogue in Dushanbe has been confiscated and bulldozed, while Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses find it difficult to use their places of worship (see F18News 8 October 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1200). Members of Dushanbe's Grace Sunmin Protestant Church told Forum 18 that if their last-ditch appeal fails, they may be evicted from their building "within a couple of weeks".

The Tajik parliament is still considering a new draft Religion Law. If adopted, it would impose sweeping controls on religious activity and religious associations, particularly on mosques. All registered religious organisations will have to re-register by 1 July 2009. Those that fail to do this or who no longer meet new more restrictive registration criteria will lose their legal status (see F18News 17 December 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1230)

Abdukayumi Kayumzod, a local journalist from Dushanbe, told Forum 18 on 15 January that a majority of the 147 mosques in the city's Sinai district were closed down between 2006 and late 2008. In October to December 2008 alone, he said, the special commissions closed down and sealed several mosques in the district and sacked the imams. Kayumzod said he has personally seen the seal placed by the authorities on some of the buildings. He added that the special commissions warned imams of some others not to hold prayers in their mosques, although they did not seal their buildings.

Kayumzod told Forum 18 that the special commissions - established in 2006 by order of Mahmadsaid Uboydulloev, the Head of Dushanbe's Executive Authority - include representatives from the City Executive Authority and district police officers. "The commissions went around the city and found that many places of worship used by Muslims in the city did not have official registration," he said.

Kayumzod told Forum 18 he knows of several imams who, in the wake of the mosque closures, were fined 50 to 150 Somonis (102 to 306 Norwegian Kroner, 11 to 33 Euros or 14 to 43 US Dollars) for their religious activity.

One imam of a closed mosque in Sinai's 33rd micro-district (suburban area) confirmed to Forum 18 on 15 January that he had been fined, but refused to discuss the fine and closure for fear of the authorities. His mosque had been closed and sealed in late October 2008 and he was sacked as imam.

Another imam in Sinai district told Forum 18 that city officials warned him in late December that people should stop gathering in their mosque. "They did not seal our mosque but warned us that we should not meet there," the imam - who asked not to be identified - complained to Forum 18 on 15 January. Despite the warning they have continued their prayers in the mosque, the imam added. "Our mosque has existed since Soviet times," he said. "The people built it with their own funds, and I don't understand why we shouldn't use the building for our prayers."

Nuriddinov of the City Executive Authority – who headed the special commissions until December 2008 - told Forum 18 that he does not remember how many imams were fined or their names. Yet he insisted the imams were fined for "illegal" activity as the "public halls" were not authorised for worship but were designed for recreation and games for the public.

Local journalist Kayumzod disagreed, explaining that although these places were registered during Soviet times as public halls and had not received official registration from the Religious Affairs Committee since Tajikistan's independence in 1991, it was "clear" to everyone that people used them as mosques. "The commissions gave permission only to some of the halls to continue as mosques for prayers five times a day but closed most of them down," he told Forum 18.

Nuriddinov rejected criticism of the closures, pointing to the 57 cathedral mosques as well as many other mosques in Dushanbe where prayers are recited five times a day. "I cannot say how many praying Muslims there are," he told Forum 18, "but I believe those mosques could accommodate all the Muslims wishing to attend for prayer."

Saidbeg Mahmadulloev of the Religious Affairs Committee likewise insisted that there are plenty of mosques for Muslims in the city. "No one has complained to us about their mosques being closed down," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 14 January. "People attending public halls for worship do not necessarily need registration from the Committee but they must get the consent of the local administrations."

The government strenuously denied to an Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) that it had closed religious communities and demolished places of worship, a claim which the communities themselves strongly disputed (see F18News 8 October 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1200).

Mahmadulloev of the Religious Affairs Committee told Forum 18 that the closure of the mosques was unrelated to the ban on the Salafi Islamic school of thought, imposed by Tajikistan's Supreme Court on 8 January (see F18News 23 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1243).

Akbar Turajonzoda, Tajikistan's former Chief Mufti who is now a member of the upper chamber of Tajikistan's Parliament, however, rejected Mahmadulloev's claims. He reported that scores of people have complained to him about the enforced closures. "People from many mosques even collected documents and submitted them for registration, only to be turned down by the Religious Affairs Committee," he told Forum 18 on 15 January.

Turajonzoda reported that the authorities have closed down hundreds of Muslim places of worship since 2004. Asked why the authorities are closing mosques, he said he believed there was "an instruction from above" not to allow the number of mosques in the city to increase. He would not state who the instruction came from.

The authorities' action to close mosques violates people's rights, Turajonzoda said. "There are many old people who pray in these so-called public places," he stressed to Forum 18. "These people are not able to travel far, and the mosques are in their quarters or yards, usually next to their houses."

Many mosques have also been demolished in recent years (see F18News 10 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1032).

The enforced closure of mosques took place against the backdrop of similar moves against minority faiths. The authorities bulldozed Dushanbe's synagogue in summer 2008, leaving the community nowhere to worship (see F18News 8 October 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1200).

Grace Sunmin Protestant Church of Dushanbe is on the verge of losing its building. Church members complained that their attempts to challenge the High Economic Court's decision overturning the ownership of the church building have yielded no result. "We are still holding church services in the building," they told Forum 18 on 19 January from Dushanbe, "but within a couple of weeks we will probably be evicted."

On 29 August 2008 Tajikistan's High Economic Court made a decision to nullify the original 1997 sales contract and ruled to transfer the building to the City Hukumat (Executive Authority). Grace Sunmin members told Forum 18 in October that they were very disappointed with the court decision. After spending a large amount of money – which they calculate in hundreds of thousands of US Dollars – and energy in restoring the half-finished building they say it is hard for the church to accept this (see F18News 8 October 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1200).

On 16 October the Court had upheld its first decision from 29 August, and rejected the Church's appeal. The Church lodged a further appeal, but in a 2 December 2008 ruling, of which Forum 18 has seen a copy, the High Economic Court rejected the Church's cassation appeal and upheld its earlier decision.

Church members said they have one last chance to complain to the Supervisory Board of the High Economic Court, which they will do. "This Court is the highest possible instance dealing with property rights," they maintained. "However, we have very slim hopes

of getting anywhere."

The Jehovah's Witnesses had to stop meeting in the wake of an October 2007 Culture Ministry ban on their activity throughout the entire country, a ban they are trying to challenge through the courts. Two Protestant communities in Dushanbe also faced "temporary" bans. Abundant Life Christian Centre closed down in the wake of the ban, though the other – Ehyo Church – was officially able to resume its activity in late 2008 (see F18News 17 December 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1230). (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>.

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