

18 September 2003

CHINA: Xinjiang's Ismailis cut off from international Ismaili community

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

China's tens of thousands of Ismaili Muslims - ethnic Tajiks concentrated in the north western Xinjiang region - are isolated from the rest of the worldwide Ismaili community, Forum 18 News Service has learnt on a visit to the remote region. The Chinese authorities allow only one Ismaili mosque to function in Xinjiang's Tajik Autonomous District, and children under 18 are not allowed to attend. The mosque's state-appointed imam, Shakar Mamader, admitted that the Chinese authorities do not allow the Aga Khan, the hereditary leader of the Ismaili community, to provide aid to China's Ismailis. "There is absolutely no need for such help as the central government provides very substantial funding to the region," he claimed to Forum 18.

The tens of thousands of Ismaili Muslims of the Tajik Autonomous District in China's north western Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region are isolated from their fellow-Ismailis across the border in Tajikistan and elsewhere in the world, Forum 18 News Service found on a visit to Xinjiang between 8 and 10 September. There is only one Ismaili mosque functioning in the Tajik Autonomous District, in the district capital Tashkurgan, whose imam was appointed by the Chinese secular authorities.

The imam-hatyb of Tashkurgan's Ismaili mosque, Shakar Mamader, admitted to Forum 18 on 9 September that under Chinese law children are forbidden from attending the mosque up to the age of 18. He also admitted that the Chinese authorities do not allow the Fourth Aga Khan (the Ismaili spiritual leader) to offer any aid to the Tajik Autonomous District. However, Mamader believes "there is absolutely no need for such help as the central government provides very substantial funding to the region". He stressed that the Fourth Aga Khan had visited the region in 1980.

Mamader also declared that Ismaili preachers and clerics from neighbouring Pakistan (Tashkurgan is situated 100 kilometres or 60 miles from the checkpoint at the Chinese-Pakistan border) do not work in China. He believes there is no need for them to do so. "We have enough of our own experts on Ismailism," he insisted. However, other local Ismailis who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 that Pakistani Ismaili clerics are not allowed to preach on Chinese territory. Xinjiang's Ismaili community has no contact with Tajik Ismailis as there is not one checkpoint on the Chinese-Tajik border.

The Tajik Autonomous District is situated in the eastern Pamir mountains and borders Pakistan and Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region. There are about 50,000 people living in the Tajik Autonomous District identified as Tajiks in the Chinese census. However, these people can be called Tajiks only in the broadest sense. The Sarikoli and Wakhi Chinese Pamir nationalities, as well as the Tajik, Pakistani and Afghan Pamir nationalities who live in Chinese Pamir, speak languages belonging to the Eastern Iranian language group, whereas Tajik is linked to Western Iranian.

Unlike the Tajik Sunni Muslims, the Pamir nationalities practise Ismailism - a branch of Shia Islam which bears the clear influence of Buddhism and neo-Platonism. The current Aga Khan is the 49th hereditary imam of the worldwide Ismaili community. In contrast to other Muslims who pray five times a day, the Ismailis recite prayers only twice a day. They do not observe the Ramadan fast, nor do they ban the consumption of alcohol.

Externally, the villages of Chinese Pamir are virtually indistinguishable from the villages of Tajik Pamir. For example, the homes have an almost identical structure - the interior of the building has to have five columns, a number of sacred significance for Ismailis. However, there are substantial differences in the religious life of the Ismailis of the Chinese and Tajik Pamir.

In contrast to the ban on aid to the Ismailis of Xinjiang, the Aga Khan gives so much aid to the population of Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region that this area depends on his financial support. The headquarters of the Mountain Societies Development Support Programme, which the Aga Khan funds, has opened in the city of Khorog, the capital of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region. A similar office operates in the city of Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan, from where shipments of aid are dispatched by road to Tajikistan.

On 30 August the Tajik president Emomali Rahmonov laid the foundation stone for a new Ismaili Centre in the Tajik capital Dushanbe. In his remarks at the ceremony, the Aga Khan said the new centre would be "a place for contemplation, upliftment and

the search for spiritual enlightenment".

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY