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UZBEKISTAN: No peace for Peace Church

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

For the fourth time since the Peace Protestant church in Nukus in Karakalpakstan had its registration stripped from it in August 2000, the church was raided by the police during Sunday worship on 24 August and two of its leaders subsequently fined five times the minimum monthly wage. "This is not the first time that I have fined the Peace church's leaders," judge Oibek Tureyev told Forum 18 News Service. "I can only repeat to you once again that under Uzbek laws registration is compulsory." One of the two leaders fined, Khym-Mun Kim, told Forum 18 the church has repeatedly tried to regain its registration. "We are law-abiding citizens and we want to be registered but the authorities are forcing us to operate illegally."

Two leaders of the Peace Protestant church in Nukus, capital of the autonomous Karakalpakstan republic in north-western Uzbekistan, were fined five times the minimum monthly wage in September for their leadership of the unregistered church, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Nukus city judge Oibek Tureyev imposed the fines of around 27,300 soms (196 Norwegian kroner, 24 Euros or 28 US dollars) on Khym-Mun Kim and Konstantin Kmit under Article 241 of the code of administrative offences, which punishes "violation of the law on preaching religious doctrines".

The fines followed a police raid on 24 August on the church's Sunday morning prayer meeting. Police officers took statements from all the 15 or so church members present, Khym-Mun Kim told Forum 18 on 30 September in Nukus.

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.

Since it lost its registered status the police have raided the Peace church four times (including the latest incident) and on each occasion the church leaders were fined (see F18News 12 March 2003).

Since 2000, the Peace church has tried to register three times, but the authorities have refused them each time on various pretexts. "I am convinced that the authorities are deliberately failing to give us registration because they do not want Christianity to become widespread in Karakalpakstan," Khym-Mun Kim told Forum 18. "We are law-abiding citizens and we want to be registered but the authorities are forcing us to operate illegally." Under the religion law the activity of an unregistered religious community is forbidden.

"This is not the first time that I have fined the Peace church's leaders," Judge Tureyev told Forum 18 on 30 September in Nukus. "I can only repeat to you once again that under Uzbek laws registration is compulsory." When Forum 18 responded that Uzbekistan was a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantees the right to meet freely for religious worship and teaching, and that according to Article 2 of the country's law on religion "if different rules are set out in an international agreement signed by the Republic of Uzbekistan from those contained in the Republic of Uzbekistan's law on freedom of conscience and religious organisations, then the rules of the international agreement will take precedence", Tureyev replied that he knew nothing about the covenant.

Likewise Nurula Jamolov, the Karakalpakstan Cabinet of Ministers' representative for religious affairs, knew nothing about the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. "I do not know why the Peace church is not succeeding in being registered, but according to our laws the activity of an unregistered religious organisation is forbidden," he told Forum 18 on 30 September.

Increasing attempts by Central Asian states to restrict religious freedom for groups that have not been able to attain registration or do not want it have come under fire from Abdelfattah Amor, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. "Many States, especially those of Central Asia, have used the compulsory registration of religious groups and the imposition of specific regulations governing them to restrict the exercise of freedom of religion or belief, often in violation of the international standards," Amor warned in his interim report to the UN General Assembly (A/58/296, 19 August 2003).

He stressed that registration procedures can only be legitimate if they are specified in law, reasonable, objective and transparent "and, consequently, if they do not have the aim or the result of creating discrimination".

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