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KYRGYZSTAN: Mobs twice exhume body – with impunity?

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Mobs in two villages dug up the body of deceased Protestant Kanygul Satybaldiyeva, insisting non-Muslims cannot be buried in village cemeteries. Police, secret police and officials observed the exhumations but did not stop them. Officials took Satybaldiyeva's body and claim to have buried it elsewhere.

On 14 and 17 October, mobs in two different villages of Kyrgyzstan's western Jalal-Abad Region exhumed the body of deceased Protestant Kanygul Satybaldiyeva, a 76-year old member of Jesus Christ Protestant Church. They objected to the burial of a non-Muslim in public village cemeteries. Police and National Security Committee (NSC) secret police officers, as well as local and regional officials, observed the exhumations but did nothing to stop them, Forum 18 has learned.

Amid contradictory official assertions of what they did with the body after the second exhumation, Satybaldiyeva's family as of the evening of 19 October does not know where the body is.

"I pray that they did not throw away the body somewhere," Satybaldiyeva's daughter, Zhyldyz Azayeva, lamented to Forum 18 on 19 October. "I hope that we can soon find out where my mother's body is."

"I continue in my faith in Jesus Christ but I am afraid for my own life, for my 19-year old daughter and 80-year old father," Azayeva added. "I would like to move out of the area, but cannot leave my father behind."

"We just want peace and that we can peacefully practise our faith," Pastor Nurgazy Babanazarov of the local Protestant community told Forum 18 on 18 October. "I don't know whether the Imams are provoking people. Whoever is organising this does it for one purpose: to humiliate in the eyes of society Kyrgyz who became Christian."

No state protection of right to burial

State officials - including from the Interior Ministry and the State Commission for Religious Affairs (which oversees religious issues) in the capital Bishkek, as well as Jalal-Abad Regional and Ala-Buka District Administrations – refused to explain to Forum 18 why Satybaldiyeva could not be buried in public village cemeteries and why they did not protect the right of her family to bury her with the rites that they chose in the cemetery of her choice.

One official claimed that a case had been initiated against those who had dug up Satybaldiyeva's body, but other officials seemed unsure of this (see below).

The State Commission for Religious Affairs referred Forum 18 to Chief Specialist Zamir Tursunbekov. "We are working locally to explain to people about religious freedoms," he claimed to Forum 18 from Bishkek on 18 October. "Jalal-Abad is a southern region, and people there have deeper Islamic beliefs, and they do not accept Christians or others to be buried in their cemeteries."

Tursunbekov would not say why the government has not resolved this long-running problem.

Why won't government resolve burial problems?

The government has long failed to ensure that people may exercise their right to bury their dead with the religious ceremonies and in the cemeteries they would wish. Protestants, Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees have complained about this problem, which causes families and communities great distress. In January 2014 in Jalal-Abad Region, an imam barred the burial of a Protestant woman in the village cemetery, and in another village the imam stopped a Protestant pastor from participating in the funeral of his Muslim brother. In Kyrgyz culture it is extremely important that a brother take a central part in the funeral of a sibling (see F18News 6 June 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1966).

Asked why the Government does not resolve long-standing problem of burials of adherents of non-Muslim religious communities, the central government in Bishkek on 18 October referred Forum 18 to Ulan Ismailbekov, Expert of the Education, Culture and

Sports Section, overseeing religious affairs.

Ismailbekov said only that Satybaldiyeva's body was buried in Jalal-Abad region on 17 October. He refused to answer any of Forum 18's questions about why the government has not solved long-running burial problems, claiming that "we will call you back". Forum 18 received no calls or answers in writing as of the end of the working day in Bishkek on 19 October.

Violence, death threats, hate speech

Mob interference in the rights of families and communities to bury their deceased with the rites and in the cemetery of their choice is not the only violence individuals who are not from the dominant Muslim community can face because of their faith. Officials sometimes choose not to stop such violence or punish the perpetrators.

In July 2015, officials in Kemin in northern Chui Region summoned members of a local Protestant Church to the Kenesh (council). Some Muslims threatened the Church with violence if it continued its activity. Although police and NSC secret police officers were present and heard the threats, no one was prosecuted. The Kenesh ruled the following month to ban the Church (see F18News 3 March 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2155).

Ahmadi Muslims, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 18 October that they still cannot meet for worship publicly, since they have no state registration and that they are "afraid for their lives because we receive death threats by email from Kyrgyz nationals". It appears that the emails were sent from outside Kyrgyzstan, they said.

Following the December 2015 murder of Ahmadi Muslim Yunusjan Abdujalilov in the village of Kashkar Kyshtak in Osh Region, police arrested nine suspects (see F18News 18 February 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2150).

Ahmadis said the investigation of the murder case continues, with the suspected individuals having been under arrest. They stated that the trial of the murder suspects began on 8 July. Karasu District Court charged 10 individuals, some of whom are suspected in having ties with terrorist groups fighting in Iraq and Syria. "Under the charges some of them may receive lengthy prison terms and some may receive life in prison," the Ahmadis said. They declined to give more specific details of the case.

"We do not meet for worship publicly, but our believers have peace and quiet in Kashkar Kyshtak at the moment", Ahmadis stated.

Some religious communities think that contributory factors to violence against them and their followers are the blocking of registration applications by the State Commission for Religious Affairs, the NSC secret police, and local authorities, the banning of the unregistered exercise of freedom of religion or belief by communities, and the impossibility for those with fewer than 200 founders of gaining legal status. This lack of registration deprives communities of possible social status and so, they think, makes them vulnerable to attack (see Forum 18's Kyrgyzstan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2013).

Burial blocked, daughter made to renounce faith

Satybaldiyeva died of natural causes on 13 October. On 14 October a small group of family and friends took her body for burial to the cemetery in her home village of Sary-Talaa in Ala-Buka District. However, the village Imam and a mob prevented them from doing so.

"We then asked the District authorities and Shumkar Chynaliyev, the District Chief Imam, to come to the village to resolve the issue," Azayeva told Forum 18. However, the Imam's visit did not calm villagers or help ensure the burial could proceed.

Imam Chynaliyev "made me recite the Islamic shahada [profession of faith] in front of the crowd, and say that I made a mistake by becoming a Christian." Azayeva said that she did so "for my mother's sake, and hoped that they would allow us to proceed with the burial". The mob still refused the burial, and "some even shouted that I should be stoned because I became a Christian". She complained that Imam Chynaliyev said nothing in her defence.

Imam Chynaliyev adamantly denied that he asked Azayeva to renounce her Christian faith. "We respect people's faith, whether it is Christian or Muslim," he claimed to Forum 18 on 18 October. "It was she who asked us to help her, and she voluntarily confessed that she made a mistake by becoming Christian."

Asked whether he agrees with those who blocked the burial and shouted that Azayeva should be stoned, Imam Chynaliyev responded: "I don't think it's wrong for a Kyrgyz to become Christian or choose another religion, because we have religious freedom here." Asked why then he did not defend Azayeva in front of the mob, telling them about individuals' right to freedom of religion or belief, he replied: "I cannot convince people."

Asked on 19 October why he watched and did nothing while the mob prevented Satybaldiyeva's family from burying her body in the village cemetery, Myrzagul Jenkulov, head of Sary-Talaa Administration, told Forum 18: "People listen to the Imam. They did not

allow the burial because it is a Muslim cemetery."

Told that many atheists also were buried in the cemetery during Soviet times, and asked why Satybaldiyeva's family was deprived of the right to bury her in the cemetery where many of her relatives are buried, Jenkulov repeated that the village Imam's "word is what the people listen to". Asked whether he cannot fulfill his duties as the head of the Administration, he replied, "I was only recently appointed."

Dug up twice

After being prevented from burying the body in Sary-Talaa village cemetery, Satybaldiyeva's relatives the same day, 14 October, went to the nearby village of Oruktu in Ala-Buka District and buried her there. However, Police soon called Azayeva and summoned her to come and collect her mother's body, since a mob from that village had dug up the body.

While the mob dug up her body, "village, District officials, officers of the police and NSC secret police watched but did not stop them," Azayeva complained to Forum 18.

The following morning, 15 October, relatives took Satybaldiyeva's body "which had already begun decaying and had a strong odour", Azayeva said. They buried her for the second time, this time in the central cemetery of Ala-Buka District. "Muslims and Russian Orthodox believers were buried in the past in that cemetery without clear boundaries between graves," Azayeva said. "We buried her close to the Russian graves."

However, in the afternoon of 17 October, two days after the second burial, Azayeva again received a call from Officer Talai (last name not given), Jalal-Abad Regional representative of the Police 10th Department, which oversees religious extremism cases. "I should immediately come to the cemetery because a crowd has gathered, and they want to dig up the grave again," Azayeva quoted the officer as telling her.

On the advice of her relatives and the Christian community, Azayeva did not attend the exhumation of the body. "I was afraid for my life and also did not want to go through the same humiliation," she said.

On 17 October, a mob of 30 people - in the presence of Police and officials of Ala-Buka District Administration - dug up Satybaldiyeva's body, and officials took it away, Radio Free Europe's Kyrgyz Service reported two days later.

Asked why Police and other officials allowed the mob to exhume Satybaldiyeva's body from among the Russian graves, Officer Talai (who refused to give his last name) on 18 October brushed off Forum 18. "You have more information than me." Asked what happened to Satybaldiyeva's body, he responded: "I don't know what the latest is. I need to talk to my superiors." He then refused to talk further to Forum 18, and put the phone down.

"At 5 pm on 17 October, Ala-Buka Administration officials called and asked me to participate and witness the burial of my mother in a new place, the third site," Azayeva told Forum 18. "I didn't go because I was afraid of what the crowd could do with me and I didn't want to be humiliated again."

Azayeva said she did not know what they did to the body, whether and where exactly it was buried, "since I wasn't there and couldn't witness it".

Where is the body?

Asked on 19 October where officials buried Satybaldiyeva, Bakhtybek Anarkulov, Deputy Head of Jalal-Abad Regional Administration, hesitated at first. But when Forum 18 insisted he claimed that she had been reburied in Kara-Tebe "not far from Sary-Talaa". He said that he has been "overseeing the whole process".

The village of Kara-Tebe is about 20 kms (12 miles) north-east of Satybaldiyeva's home village of Sary-Talaa.

Anarkulov said that that day, 19 October, Regional Administration officials, as well as officials of Ala-Buka District and representatives of the Police and NSC secret police, met to discuss the issue. "Everybody has calmed down now, and the situation is under our control," he claimed to Forum 18. "We buried her with all dignity."

Azayeva told Forum 18 she is not sure whether this is true. "Since 17 October, none of the authorities showed or told us where my mother was buried." She said that on 19 October, her father visited Ala-Buka District Administration, but they refused to tell him what they had done with the body.

Asked why neither he nor other authorities told the family where they claim they buried Satybaldiyeva, Anarkulov responded: "It is a very sensitive and tense situation, we just want to be careful."

The Interior Ministry Press Service gave a very different account of the burial. After consulting with her colleagues, Senior Inspector Anna Zhukova told Forum 18 from Bishkek on 19 October that Satybaldiyeva was buried "just outside Sary-Talaa village in an open field adjacent to the village cemetery". This is the "latest information we received from the local Police," she told Forum 18. Asked why the authorities buried Satybaldiyeva in a field, she could not answer.

Senior Inspector Zhukova referred Forum 18 to Rysbek Duyshubayev, Chief of the Section overseeing religious extremism cases at the Ministry's 10th Department in Bishkek. The officer who answered Duyshubayev's phone the same day told Forum 18 he was not available. Duyshubayev's mobile phone went unanswered on 19 October.

However, Jenkulov, Head of Sary-Taala village administration, denied both this and Anarkulov's report. He told Forum 18 that Satybaldiyeva "might have been buried in Shekaftar village, because that is where she was born". Shekaftar is in Chatkal District of Jalal-Abad Region, some 20 kms (12 miles) west of Sary-Talaa

However, Azayeva told Forum 18 that her mother was indeed born in Chatkal District "but not in Shekaftar".

Will perpetrators be punished?

Asked on 19 October about the denial of burial, repeated exhumations, what happened to Satybaldiyeva's body and whether a case was opened against individuals who twice exhumed the body, Rakhat Sulaimanov, Press Secretary of the NSC secret police in Bishkek, declined to say. He asked Forum 18 to send questions in writing.

Similarly, Zhukova of the Interior Ministry Press Service declined to tell Forum 18 whether a case had been or will be opened against the perpetrators. She referred Forum 18 to Duyshubayev of the Ministry's 10th Department. Yerlan Bakiyev of the 10th Department told Forum 18 on 19 October: "We will not answer you over the phone. You need to send your questions in writing."

Anarkulov of Jalal-Abad Regional Administration claimed to Forum 18 that a case had been opened. Asked who exhumed Satybaldiyeva's body and what punishments will be given to them, he told Forum 18: "This was a group of people." He gave no names. "Everything will be done according to the Law." (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Kyrgyzstan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2013.

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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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