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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

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UZBEKISTAN: Authorities trying to close Baptist church

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

An Uzbek official, who fined Baptist pastor Oleg Bader for running children's camps and a children's club attached to his church, has described the fine to Forum 18 News Service as "completely within the law". The church is being forced to change and re-register its statute by 27 January, even though children's work was included in the original statute. The pastor's lawyer has been denied access to the cases documents, and the justice department has refused to tell Forum 18 why this is so. It is feared that, like another church further north, re-registration may be denied and the church declared illegal. Sources have told Forum 18 that the authorities want to close the church because they do not want Christianity to spread in Khorezm region.

The justice department official who chaired the administrative commission that fined Baptist pastor Oleg Bader late last year in the town of Urgench (Urganch) in Khorezm region of north-western Uzbekistan has strongly defended the punishment. "The commission's ruling was completely within the law," Amanbai Alayarov, deputy head of the justice administration, told Forum 18 News Service from Urgench on 13 January. He claimed that the church had conducted religious work among children without their parents' permission, a charge the church denies. The church must now amend and re-register its statute by 27 January amid fears that re-registration might be denied and the church's activity thereby declared illegal.

At a hearing of the administrative commission for Khorezm region on 27 November, Pastor Bader was fined 22,000 Uzbek sums (153 Norwegian Kroner, 18 Euros or 23 US Dollars), a Protestant who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18 on 13 January. The commission ruled that the church had broken several articles of Uzbekistan's law on religion: 3 (which requires parental consent for work with children), 9 (which bans religious teaching without state approval), 14 (which restricts religious activity outside registered religious buildings) and 17 (which restricts charitable work to central religious organisations). The commission ordered the church to bring its statute into line with the religion law within two months.

The main accusation against the church was that it has been promoting itself among children. It ran children's summer camps in 2002 and 2003, while a children's club attached to the church was set up in 2003. The commission's ruling repeated the claim that the children had been enticed into the church's activities without their parents' permission.

Article 3 of Uzbekistan's religion law does indeed forbid the "enticement of underage children into religious organisations, as well as the religious instruction of children against their or their parents' will". However, Forum 18's source insisted that work with children took place only with the consent of their parents. Forum 18's source also stressed that work with children was included in the church's statute, which had been registered with the same regional justice administration on 30 December 1999. "First the justice administration registers the church statute, and then four years later orders that it be revised!" Forum 18's source exclaimed.

Forum 18's source believes the authorities simply want to close the church, because they do not want Christianity to become widespread in Khorezm region. "If the church is forced to revise its statute, that means it will have to be re-registered," the source declared. "But in practice - and this has already happened to other churches - the authorities will delay re-registration on various pretexts, and the Urgench church will be left operating illegally." In support of this hypothesis, the source said that although Bader had hired a lawyer, Alayarov had not allowed him access to information about the case.

But Alayarov insisted that the church was in the wrong. "We have statements from parents saying that their children were attending church without their parents' knowledge," he claimed to Forum 18 from Urgench on 13 January. "Moreover, contradictions have emerged between the church's statute and our republic's law on religion. Therefore we have asked the church to revise its statute, so that in future such excesses are not repeated." Alayarov declined to answer Forum 18's question as to why Bader's lawyer had not been allowed to see details of the case.

There is a distinct possibility that the Urgench church might suffer the same fate as the Protestant Peace church in Nukus (the capital of Karakalpakstan, an autonomous republic within Uzbekistan), 250 kilometres (150 miles) north of Urgench. In August 2000 the authorities ordered the Peace church to re-register on the grounds that the church was working with children. "The reason they gave for removing our registered status was that we had organised a summer camp for children from poor families," Pastor Khym-Mun Kim told Forum 18. Since it lost its registered status the police have raided the Peace church four times and on each occasion the church leaders were fined.

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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," Pastor Kim told Forum 18 last year. "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 (see F18News 3 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=152).

For more background information see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at

http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki

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