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UZBEKISTAN: Authorities close Christian church in Khorezm

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

On 27 February, Forum 18 News Service has learnt that the authorities in Khorezm region decided to close the Urgench Baptist Church. The only other church in the region is the Protestant Korean Church. It was decided to close the church as it had been working with children and would not revise its statute. Statute revision requires church re-registration, which the authorities have denied to other churches making them illegal. The authorities claim that children's work was taking place without parental consent, but parents had given their consent – only to have the NSS secret police pressure them into denying this. Those parents have now asked the church's forgiveness, Forum 18 has been told. Article 3 of Uzbekistan's law on religion forbids "the enticement of underage children into religious organisations, as well as the religious instruction of children against their or their parents' will". Unregistered religious communities are illegal and banned from operating, which provision is against international law.

On 27 February, the administrative commission for Khorezm region in north-western Uzbekistan (the regional centre is the town of Urgench [Urganch]) decided to remove the registered status of the Urgench Evangelical-Christian Baptist Church, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The grounds for this decision were that the church had been working with children and had refused to bring its statute into line with the law on freedom of conscience and religious organisations.

This decision follows a hearing on 27 November 2003 of the administrative commission, when the Baptist church's pastor, Oleg Bader, was fined 22,000 Uzbek sums (153 Norwegian Kroner, 18 Euros or 23 US Dollars) (see F18News 15 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=230). This is roughly equivalent to about two-thirds of average monthly earnings. At that hearing, the commission ordered the church to bring its statute into line with the religion law within two months. Article 3 of Uzbekistan's law on religion forbids "the enticement of underage children into religious organisations, as well as the religious instruction of children against their or their parents' will".

But as Oleg Bader told Forum 18 on 1 March in Urgench, the children's work was actually only taking place with their parents' consent. "It's true that some parents made statements saying that their children had come to summer camp without their permission, but they did this under pressure from the National Security Service (the ex-KGB secret police), and then these same parents came to see us in church and asked our forgiveness," he said. Bader 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!" Bader complained.

Bader also told Forum 18 that if the church did revise its statute then that would mean it would have to be reregistered. "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," he reported. Bader believes that the authorities have been looking for an excuse to remove the church's registered status. It was particularly difficult to operate in the town of Beruni (a town in Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston], 20 kilometres from Urgench), where the church holds services for signing deaf and speech impaired people. "We are simply not allowed to preach in this town. Local deaf and speech impaired people are not allowed to meet together, even in private apartments. One deaf and speech impaired woman, who hosted a believers' meeting in her apartment, was detained in a police cell for 12 hours," Bader told Forum 18.

But the head of the department for relations with public organisations at the justice administration for Khorezm region, Erkin Atayev, insisted to Forum 18 that the commission's decision to remove the Baptists' registered status was entirely legal. "We have declarations from parents saying that their children were attending church without their parents' knowledge," he told Forum 18 in Urgench on 1 March.

"Additionally, the church's statute has been found to contain clauses that contradict our republic's law on religion. Yes, I agree, it was our mistake to register the church's statute with its clause on work with children in 1999, but that doesn't mean there's no need to correct the mistake. We asked the church to revise its statute so that such excesses should not be repeated in future. But Bader refused to do this. Our policy towards the church has been much more lenient than that of other regions. We did not remove the church's registered status immediately but warned its leadership several times. Our colleagues in neighbouring Karakalpakstan have acted much more harshly; the Protestant Peace church lost its registered status as soon as it had organised a children's summer camp," Atayev told Forum 18.

Atayev also stressed that once the Baptist church members lost their registered status they would be unable, under Uzbek law, to hold meetings not only in the church building, but also in private apartments. Apart from the now-closed Baptist church, there is only one Christian association operating on the territory of Khorezm region - the Korean Protestant church.

The Urgench church will probably have the same unhappy experiences as the Protestant Peace church in Nukus - the capital of Karakalpakstan autonomous region 250 km (150 miles) north of Urgench. Since the Peace Church lost its registration, police have raided it four times and each time the church leaders were fined. Since 2000, the Peace church has tried to register three times, but the authorities have refused them each time on various pretexts. Under the religion law the activity of an unregistered religious community is forbidden (see F18News 12 March 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1 and 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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