

18 March 2004

UZBEKISTAN: Justice department tries to limit church & mosque numbers

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

The Protestant Greater Grace Church in Samarkand has repeatedly had attempts to get state registration, without which under Uzbek law it would be forbidden, turned down, its Pastor Artur Karimov has told Forum 18 News Service. Other Protestant churches in Samarkand have also had difficulties with the authorities. Officials of the regional justice department have told Forum 18 that are trying to ensure that the number of mosques "does not exceed reasonable levels," and to also limit the number of Christian churches under this policy. The officials also said that Muslims became very upset about the spread of Christianity in the region, and stressed their displeasure at the continued activity of Matti Sirvio, a Finnish missionary who founded the Greater Grace Church.

The justice administration of Samarkand (Samarqand) region has repeatedly failed to register the Protestant Greater Grace Church, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Without state registration, all church activities are forbidden – a provision of Uzbek law which is against international law. The church's pastor, Artur Karimov, told Forum 18 on 15 March that the church has been refused registration twice. "Formally, the refusal is explained by claiming that we have drawn up the documents required for registration incorrectly, but in fact the refusal to register is for quite different reasons. Privately, officials have told us frankly that it is against their wishes, firstly because the community is led by a foreigner [Matti Sirvio from Finland is the designated leader of the community], and secondly because there are several Uzbeks and Tajiks in the list of the founding members requesting registration."

Pastor Karimov told Forum 18 that the list of founding members had satisfied the unofficial wishes of the justice administration, and that they had resubmitted the documents for registration at the beginning of December 2003. However, in a telephone conversation with Karimov on 15 March, a member of staff at the justice administration for Samarkand region, Nasyr Berdiyev, said that around 10 days previously a letter had been sent to the founding members of the church stating that the papers submitted for registration would have to be revised. "We find it very odd that we have still not received the letter. One might even think that in fact no-one has sent it to us. In any case, it's already clear that yet again we have not managed to be registered!" Karimov told Forum 18. Karimov claims that it is extremely difficult for the church to operate without being registered. "We have already been warned that if we continue to hold meetings without having been registered, then serious trouble could await us," Karimov told Forum 18.

Other unregistered communities are also experiencing difficulties in Samarkand. The pastor of the Protestant Hope church Shavkat Bakhramov told Forum 18 in Samarkand on 15 March that representatives of the mahalla committee (an administrative body for a city district) had officially warned his church's members that they could not hold religious meetings without having been registered at the justice administration. "Our community consists solely of Uzbeks and Tajiks, and we hold services in Uzbek. We would be happy to be registered but we know from the experience of other churches that the authorities are very unwilling to register Christian communities where people who have been brought up as Muslims make up the majority of the congregation," Bakhramov told Forum 18.

Elsewhere in Uzbekistan, the authorities in Khorezm region decided in February to close the Urgench (Urganch) Baptist Church in north-west Uzbekistan. The ostensible reason for the closure was that the church 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 (see F18News 4 March http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=267).

On 16 March, Forum 18 met Nasyr Berdiyev, head of the department for relations with public and religious organisations at the justice administration for Samarkand region, and Ulmas Akhydov, deputy head of the justice administration for Samarkand region. Speaking of the Greter Grace Church's registration problems, Berdiyev told Forum 18 that "it's true that we have already sent a letter asking the church's members to correct several stylistic errors in their statute."

However, during the discussion with the two officials, Forum 18 had the impression that in fact the problem was not "errors" in the church's statute, but that the justice administration did not want to register the church. "There are more religious associations registered in Samarkand region than anywhere else in Uzbekistan. Thus within the region there are 283 registered mosques and 29 Christian associations. That is a lot, maybe even too many. There is a Protestant church already registered in Super village [on

Samarkand's outskirts] where the Greater Grace church is trying to get registered. Two Protestant churches in one village may be too much. We may see difficulties with Muslims who will be upset that we are refusing to open new mosques, but are opening Christian churches," Berdiyev told Forum 18.

Ilmas Akhydov stressed in his turn that the authorities are trying to ensure that the number of mosques "does not exceed reasonable levels". Akhydov believes that under this policy the authorities must also limit the number of Christian churches. Akhydov also emphasised that the active spread of Christianity in Samarkand region has caused great upset among local Muslims. "Cases have already been recorded where Muslims who have converted to Christianity have been refused burial in family plots. The authorities have had to go to considerable effort to avoid spontaneous outbreaks of anger," Akhydov told Forum 18. Berdiyev also underlined the fact that under the Uzbek religion law missionary activity is forbidden. "The Greater Grace church was founded by a Finnish citizen, the missionary Matti Sirvio. Mr Sirvio has been fined several times for his missionary activity here in Samarkand."

As well as attacking Protestant churches, in what may be a campaign against religious minorities the authorities have also recently been targeting Jehovah's Witnesses (see for example F18News 16 March http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=277).

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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