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KYRGYZSTAN: Raids and fines on Catholics, Protestants, Hare Krishna devotees

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

A Catholic church has been raided and two nuns fined for reading the Bible at Mass, following which the Catholic Church was threatened with being banned. Two foreigners at a registered Protestant church were also fined. A Hare Krishna wedding rehearsal was also raided, the host fined, and Indian students present had their visas revoked. The Interior Ministry, police "Departments for the Struggle against Extremism and Illegal Migration," the SCRA, and the NSC secret police refuse to explain why they violate legally-binding international human rights obligations.

On 26 March, the State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA), the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police, and Talas police "Department for the Struggle against Extremism and Illegal Migration" raided St Nicholas Catholic Church in Talas, in the north-western Talas Region, after a Sunday evening Mass was celebrated. People leaving the state-registered Church were forced back into the Church by officers, some of whom were carrying weapons.

People were forced by the armed officers to remain in St Nicholas Church for about one and a half hours until two Slovak nuns, Sister Daniela Cincilova and Sister Eva Eliasova, signed a statement that they were "guilty" of alleged "illegal missionary activities" and "spreading their ideology." The SCRA then fined the nuns the maximum fine under Violations Code Article 142, Part 4 ("Carrying out religious activity without registration at the executive state body for religious affairs") of 7,500 Soms each. 7,500 Soms is equivalent to just over two weeks' average wages. The Catholic Church has appealed against the fines (see below).

Two foreign Protestants at a registered Protestant church were fined for "illegal missionary activity" after a raid by state officials, a local Protestant who wishes to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. The raid and fines also took place around the time St Nicholas Church in Talas was raided, and included officials from the police "Department for the Struggle against Extremism and Illegal Migration" (see below).

Three days after the raid on St Nicholas Church, on 29 March, the SCRA wrote to the Catholic Apostolic Administration in Bishkek (which leads the Church in the country) threatening that if more "violations" happen the SCRA will "take action against the Apostolic Administration in Kyrgyzstan for its liquidation" (see below).

SCRA Deputy Director Kanatbek Midin uuly refused to explain to Forum 18 why his fellow-Deputy Director Zamir Kozhombardiev threatened the Catholic Church in writing with possible liquidation (see below).

On 11 June Interior Ministry and police "Department for the Struggle against Extremism and Illegal Migration" officials, as well as SCRA officials, raided the wedding rehearsal of a Hare Krishna couple, human rights defender Erzhan Kayipov told Forum 18 on 25 July. The wedding rehearsal was taking place in the flat of another Hare Krishna devotee. The devotee was fined 7,500 Soms, just over two weeks' average wages, and Indian students present had their student visas cancelled (see below).

The Interior Ministry and police "Departments for the Struggle against Extremism and Illegal Migration," the State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA), and the NSC secret police have all refused to explain to Forum 18 why the regime is violating its legally-binding international human rights obligations (see below).

Catholic Church raided, nuns fined for reading the Bible

On 26 March, the State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA) (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2711), the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police, and Talas police "Department for the Struggle against Extremism and Illegal Migration" raided St Nicholas Catholic Church in Talas, in the north-western Talas Region, after a Sunday evening Mass was celebrated. People leaving the state-registered Church were forced back into the Church by officers, some of whom were carrying weapons, Agenzia Fides reported on 29 March.

The police "Department for the Struggle against Extremism and Illegal Migration" was previously called the "Department for the

Struggle against Extremism and Terrorism."

People were forced by the armed officers to remain in St Nicholas Church for about one and a half hours until two Slovak nuns, Sister Daniela Cincilova and Sister Eva Eliasova, signed a statement that they were "guilty" of alleged "illegal missionary activities" and "spreading their ideology." Both nuns were forced by the armed officers to sign statements admitting "guilt" under Violations Code Article 142 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2711) ("Violating the Religion Law").

The Violations Code allows the police and the SCRA to issue summary fines for violating Article 142.

A short video issued by the NSC secret police on 27 March showed officers raiding the church and questioning parishioners. The video claimed the two Slovak citizens "were preaching their ideology on the territory of Talas".

The SCRA then fined the nuns the maximum fine under Violations Code Article 142, Part 4 ("Carrying out religious activity without registration at the executive state body for religious affairs") of 75 Financial Indicators (7,500 Soms) each. 7,500 Soms is equivalent to just over two weeks' average wages.

Fr Damian Wojciechowski SJ, Director of the Curia of the Apostolic Administration, told Fides that he thought the raid and fines were the result of ignorance on the part of local officials, as all the nuns had done was to read out passages from the Bible at Mass. Fr Wojciechowski said this is not illegal as Kyrgyz law requires written state permission for foreigners to preach and to lead worship, but the nuns had not done this in the Mass.

The Catholic Church has appealed against the fines, but as of 2 August without success so far.

Neither Talas regional nor city police answered their phones when Forum 18 called them on 2 August.

Colonel Urmatbek Jumabekov, head of the Interior Ministry's "Department for the Struggle against Extremism and Illegal Migration" (which controls police departments with the same name) told Forum 18 on 2 August that he knew of the raid, detention of worshippers, and fines. However, he refused to discuss them as he claimed to be in a meeting and asked Forum 18 to call back in 30 minutes. When Forum 18 called back, Colonel Jumabekov's phone was connected to a fax machine.

An NSC secret police (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2711) officer in the Investigations Division, who refused to give her name, would not explain to Forum 18 on 1 August why armed officers raided a Catholic Church, detained worshippers, and imposed an illegal fine on the nuns. The NSC officer asked Forum 18 to call back in 20 minutes, but repeated calls later were not answered.

SCRA Deputy Director Kanatbek Midin uuly also refused to explain on 26 July why St Nicholas Church was raided by armed officers, worshippers were detained, and two nuns were fined illegally by the SCRA. "We will definitely answer all your questions," he claimed. Forum 18 e-mailed Midin uuly on 28 July, but the SCRA had not answered the questions by the end of the working day on 2 August.

Registered Protestant church raided, foreign Protestants fined

Two foreign Protestants at a registered Protestant church were fined for "illegal missionary activity" after a raid by state officials, a local Protestant who wishes to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 26 July. The raid and fines also took place around the time St Nicholas Church in Talas was raided, and included officials from the police "Department for the Struggle against Extremism and Illegal Migration."

State registration does not remove many obstacles to exercising freedom of religion and belief, a member of a religious community commenting to Forum 18 in 2019 that: "practically speaking, registration only gives you permission to exist (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2711). Registration does not give you the freedoms one should expect."

Colonel Jumabekov of the Interior Ministry's "Department for the Struggle against Extremism and Illegal Migration" told Forum 18 that he knew of the raid and fines. However, he refused to discuss them as he claimed to be in a meeting and asked Forum 18 to call back in 30 minutes. When Forum 18 called back, Colonel Jumabekov's phone was connected to a fax machine.

Catholic Church threatened with liquidation

Three days after the raid on St Nicholas Church, on 29 March, the State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA) (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2711) wrote to the Catholic Apostolic Administration in Bishkek (which leads the Church in the country) threatening that if more "violations" happen the SCRA will "take action against the Apostolic Administration in Kyrgyzstan for its liquidation".

The letter, which Forum 18 has seen, claims that the two nuns violated the Religion Law

(https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2711) by "carrying out missionary activity in Talas Parish without state registration." It was signed by SCRA Deputy Director Zamir Kozhombardiev, one of two Deputy Directors.

Against international human rights law, the regime's laws state that religious communities are illegal and cannot operate unless they have state permission to exist (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2711). Yet as the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) / Council of Europe Venice Commission Guidelines on the Legal Personality of Religious or Belief Communities (<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/9/139046.pdf>) state: "State permission may not be made a condition for the exercise of the freedom of religion or belief. The freedom of religion or belief, whether manifested alone or in community with others, in public or in private, cannot be made subject to prior registration or other similar procedures, since it belongs to human beings and communities as rights holders and does not depend on official authorization."

The Catholic Church told Forum 18 in July that "we hope that we will resolve our issues with the State Commission amicably."

SCRA Deputy Director Midin uuly insisted to Forum 18 that neither the SCRA nor other regime agencies have threatened to close down the Catholic Church. "That is not true, where did you get this information," he told Forum 18 while laughing. However, he refused to explain why his fellow-Deputy Director Kozhombardiev threatened the Catholic Church in writing with possible liquidation. "We will definitely answer all your questions," Midin uuly claimed. Forum 18 e-mailed the SCRA on 28 July, but the SCRA had not answered the questions by the end of the working day on 2 August.

Hare Krishna wedding rehearsal raided, devotee fined, students' visas cancelled

On 11 June Interior Ministry and police "Department for the Struggle against Extremism and Illegal Migration" officials, as well as State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA) (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2711) officials, raided the wedding rehearsal of a Hare Krishna couple, human rights defender Erzhan Kayipov told Forum 18 on 25 July. The wedding rehearsal was taking place in the flat of another Hare Krishna devotee.

The Interior Ministry "Department for the Struggle against Extremism and Illegal Migration" was previously the "Department for the Struggle against Extremism and Terrorism."

After the raid, the Hare Krishna devotee whose flat the wedding rehearsal was taking place in was fined the maximum fine under Violations Code Article 142, Part 4 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2711) ("Carrying out religious activity without registration at the executive state body for religious affairs") of 75 Financial Indicators (7,500 Soms). This is equivalent to just over two weeks' average wages.

Some Indian students studying at local universities were present at the invitation of the Hare Krishna community, to teach the community appropriate wedding dances and help devotees choose suitable costumes. The students' student visas were cancelled, so they can be deported at any time. The Indian Embassy has asked Kyrgyzstan's Foreign Ministry to assist the students, but on 2 August the Embassy told Forum 18 that no reply has been received from the Foreign Ministry.

The wedding itself took place on 25 June without any more harassment from the regime.

Police "Department for the Struggle against Extremism and Illegal Migration" and SCRA officials told the Hare Krishna community that both the Indian students and the homeowner had broken the Religion Law as the Hare Krishna community is unregistered. This means that any exercise by the community of freedom of religion or belief is illegal (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2711).

Human rights defender Kayipov commented that this demonstrates that the Religion Law violates both constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion or belief and the regime's legally binding obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2711). "In practice this means that there are no constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion or belief," he pointed out.

The Hare Krishna community in Bishkek has been trying for years to gain state registration, and in 2009 was told of a "secret instruction" to block its registration attempts (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1302). The community was in 2008 ordered by the secret police not to meet (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1336). The Hare Krishna community met the SCRA on 24 July 2023 and was told that it must fulfil the Religion Law's requirements for 200 adult founders and other necessary documents (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2711), which the community is trying to do.

However, "many members are afraid to give their signatures, names and other details to state agencies as they fear state reprisals (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2850)," human rights defender Kayipov told Forum 18. Similarly, many smaller churches have not sought state registration, Protestants say, as they are "afraid of state reprisals for themselves as communities as well as their members (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2850)." Jehovah's Witness communities have also repeatedly been denied state registration, against two UN Human Rights Committee decisions. State officials have claimed – wrongly – that Human Rights Committee views "are for consideration but not for implementation"

(https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2850). Such denials have "a chilling effect," Jehovah's Witnesses note.

SCRA Deputy Director Midin uuly refused to explain why the wedding rehearsal was raided, a devotee fined, and why the Indian students were stripped of their student visas. "We will definitely answer all your questions," he claimed. Forum 18 e-mailed the SCRA on 28 July, but the SCRA had not answered the questions by the end of the working day on 2 August.

Colonel Jumabekov of the Interior Ministry's "Department for the Struggle against Extremism and Illegal Migration" told Forum 18 that he knew of the raid and fines. However, he refused to discuss them as he claimed to be in a meeting and asked Forum 18 to call back in 30 minutes. When Forum 18 called back Colonel Jumabekov's phone was connected to a fax machine. (END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Kyrgyzstan (<https://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?country=30>)

For background information, see Forum 18's Kyrgyzstan religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2711)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (https://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351)

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