

1 November 2004

RUSSIA: Southern Muslims complain of fall-out from anti-terrorist moves

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Since the start of the second Chechen conflict, Islamic representatives maintain to Forum 18 News Service that a "negative policy towards all Muslims" in parts of the northern Caucasus has intensified. Imam Magomed Erkenov, who oversees 15 mosques in the southern Karachai-Cherkessia republic, told Forum 18 that since 1999 it has become "much harder" to register new Muslim communities. Officials visit mosques about twice a month to conduct interrogations of worshippers, Erkenov stated, on one occasion accusing a worshipper of being a Wahhabi and arresting him. An imam in a neighbouring mosque, speaking of visits by officials, told Forum 18 that "people are afraid to be seen to be Muslim now." Regional religious affairs official Yevgeni Kratov insisted to Forum 18 that mosque check-ups take place "entirely within the framework of the law" and entail neither searches nor abuses of any kind. "A police officer might drop by and take an interest, especially following a terrorist attack," he explained.

A "negative policy towards all Muslims" pursued by the Russian state in parts of the northern Caucasus has intensified since the start of the second Chechen conflict in 1999, Islamic representatives in the region have recently maintained to Forum 18 News Service.

Outside Chechnya, the first Russian republics in the area to crack down on militant Islam were Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria, which adopted laws against "Wahhabism" and "religious extremism" in 1999 and 2001 respectively. ("Wahhabism" is commonly used as an all-embracing term for militant Islam.) In nearby Karachai-Cherkessia, there has been no formal toughening-up of the law so far. Since 1999, however, it has become "much harder" to register new Muslim communities in the republic, Magomed Erkenov, a village imam who oversees the activities of 15 mosques, told Forum 18 in the republic's north-eastern Malokarachayev district on 29 September.

Officials from the state security services visit mosques approximately twice a month to conduct interrogations of those who attend, Erkenov maintained, on one occasion accusing a worshipper of being a Wahhabi and arresting him because of his beard. On entering the mosque in the neighbouring village of Pervomaiskoye, Forum 18 was told by its imam that the state representatives' visits were having a negative effect upon mosque attendance. "People are afraid to be seen to be Muslim now," he remarked.

Magomed Erkenov stressed to Forum 18 that the state check-ups on mosques are federal rather than local policy, and that the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Karachai-Cherkessia and Stavropol Region has good relations with the republic's authorities. The assistant to the Spiritual Directorate's mufti, Abubekir Kurdzhiyev told Forum 18 on 29 September that these positive relations mean that all the organisation's communities in the republic hold state registration, and that almost all have built mosques over the past decade. (During the Soviet period there was only one small village mosque open in the entire republic.)

Karachai-Cherkessia's sizeable new mosques – the largest of the four viewed by Forum 18 in Malokarachayev district would easily accommodate over a thousand worshippers – were all built without foreign aid, according to Magomed Erkenov. While Islamic organisations from Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia would be prepared to finance such construction, he said, Muslim communities in Karachai-Cherkessia are currently barred from receiving foreign funding. And while he himself studied in Turkey in the 1990s, Erkenov similarly maintained to Forum 18 that it was now impossible to obtain official permission to study Islamic theology abroad. In 1999, he said, the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Karachai-Cherkessia opened an Islamic theological institute in the republic's main city, Cherkessk, where some 80 students are currently enrolled.

Speaking to Forum 18 on 29 October, Karachai-Cherkessia's regional religious affairs official said that there were currently 102 registered and 12 unregistered Muslim organisations in the republic, all of which are affiliated to the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Karachai-Cherkessia and Stavropol Region. Yevgeni Kratov added that the most recent community to be registered, in 2002, was a mosque in Elkush village, Malokarachayev district. On contacting Mufti Ismail Berdiyev on 29 October, Forum 18 was told that there are 130 registered Muslim communities in Karachai-Cherkessia. The apparent discrepancy, the mufti explained, is due to the fact that some small communities attend larger mosques for worship because they do not have an imam-khatib (an imam qualified to preach at Friday prayers).

Regional religious affairs official Yevgeni Kratov insisted to Forum 18 that check-ups on mosques in Karachai-Cherkessia take

place "entirely within the framework of the law" as part of a co-ordinated policy involving regional and federal agencies, and entail neither searches nor abuses of any kind. "A police officer might drop by and take an interest, especially following a terrorist attack," he explained. "Naturally, people may become uneasy if they feel that too close attention is being paid to them." Kratov also maintained that it was not within his competency to comment on the monitoring of foreign funding to local Muslim communities. While Karachai-Cherkessia's authorities do not prohibit students from receiving Islamic education abroad, he added, "we do encourage them to study in our own region."

For more background information see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom

survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=116

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY