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KYRGYZSTAN: Pressure against schoolgirls wearing hijabs

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

A village school in southern Kyrgyzstan and a city Education Department are attempting to stop Muslim schoolgirls wearing the hijab, Forum 18 News Service has found. "It is unacceptable to attend lessons at a secular school wearing the hijab," Rozia Tokhtorieva, headteacher of School No. 26 in the village of Distuk, told Forum 18. "We will find ways to make the schoolgirls remove their headscarves." Not all officials in Jalal-Abad region agree with the ban. "There is no law on a single school uniform in Kyrgyzstan," Chyrmash Dooronov of the regional Education Administration told Forum 18, describing the ban as "hasty and ill-conceived." He also noted instances of parents sometimes infringing their children's legal rights. Commenting on officials' imposition of extra-legal demands, Gulnara Nurieva of the Committee for the Defence of Muslim Women noted that "people in Central Asia still have a Soviet outlook," and "follow orders from above rather than the law".

A local school in the village of Distuk in Nook district of Jalal-Abad region in south-western Kyrgyzstan is attempting to stop Muslim schoolgirls from wearing the hijab, Forum 18 News Service has found. The hijab is a headscarf worn by Muslim women covering the head and neck. The headteacher of School No. 26, Rozia Tokhtorieva, told Forum 18 on 8 April that she is strongly opposed to schoolgirls attending lessons wearing the hijab. "I believe it is unacceptable to attend lessons at a secular school wearing the hijab. We will find ways to make the schoolgirls remove their headscarves."

Aigul Abduvalieva, the mother of one of the girls, told Forum 18 that Tokhtorieva is "constantly putting psychological pressure" on her daughter to stop wearing the hijab. Tokhtorieva herself claimed that there are six pupils who wear the hijab in School No. 26, insisting that they are all children of members of Hizb ut-Tahrir. This is an Islamist party with violently anti-democratic and antisemitic views, strongly opposed to core human rights such as religious freedom; an outline of its aims is given at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170. It is effectively banned in all of Central Asia's states.

In 2003 in Jalal-Abad region, Muslim schoolchildren were forbidden from saying Muslim prayers (see F18News 12 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=51) and near the town of Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan were also barred from wearing hijabs (see F18News 12 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=52). Concern over Hizb ut-Tahrir was also claimed as a reason by officials in those cases. However, on 12 May 2003, Mumurzak Mamayusupov, head of the central state Religious Affairs Committee, told Forum 18 that "This is an initiative of local officials. The schoolgirls have the right to wear the hijab to school."

This latest incident is not an isolated one in Jalal-Abad region. According to a report on the fergana.ru website on 16 March, on 17 January 2006 the Jalal-Abad City Education Department adopted a resolution introducing a single school uniform. The resolution, which was sent to headteachers, recommends that schoolgirls should not be admitted to lessons wearing the hijab. According to fergana.ru, the head of the Department for the Protection of Children's Rights at the city's Education Department, Sharifa Zhorobaeva, claimed that "only religious families are unhappy with this resolution. If today we allow them to go around in headscarves, there is a concern that tomorrow they will ask permission to go around in paranjas". (This is a full-length robe designed to completely hide the outline of a woman's body from strangers).

However, not all officials in Jalal-Abad region agree with the approach of Jalal-Abad city – and headteacher Rozia Tokhtorieva. "There is no law on a single school uniform in Kyrgyzstan," Chyrmash Dooronov, head of the regional Education Administration, told Forum 18 on 7 April. "Therefore the issue of whether schoolgirls can attend lessons wearing the hijab remains an open question. Currently, a school's regulations are drawn up jointly by the school's parents and teachers, and it can contain a section on school uniform. These draft regulations are then approved by the regional Justice Administration. If the school regulations do not forbid the wearing of the hijab, then it is unlawful to force schoolgirls to attend lessons without it. So I believe the city Education Department's resolution was hasty and ill-conceived."

However, ignoring what the law states, Mamasaly Mamatov, deputy head of Jalal-Abad's city Education Department, told Forum 18 on 7 April that "this resolution is lawful because Kyrgyzstan is a secular state. A school is not a mosque and pupils need to understand this. We also advise young schoolgirls against wearing headscarves," But, contradicting his own claim that the resolution was "lawful," Mamatov then admitted that the school could only put "psychological pressure" on the parents of pupils who wore headscarves. "We can only carry out educational work with pupils and their parents. We cannot order schoolchildren to remove their

hijabs," Mamatov told Forum 18.

Commenting on some officials' imposition of extra-legal demands, Gulnara Nurieva, head of the Committee for the Defence of Muslim Women, noted that "people in Central Asia still have a Soviet outlook," she told Forum 18 on 7 April in Jalal-Abad. "They follow orders from above rather than the law. Therefore, for headteachers, a recommendation from the city Education Department is equivalent to an instruction." Nurieva maintained that the same problem affects parents. "In principle they could stand up for their rights. But most people simply don't have enough knowledge of the law. If school directors tell parents that their daughter can't attend lessons wearing the hijab, then generally they follow the instruction without wondering whether it is lawful or not."

Nurieva confirmed that bans on schoolgirls wearing the hijab were in place even before the latest cases, adding that such bans occur throughout southern Kyrgyzstan. "These campaigns have cropped up periodically for the past few years. At times the authorities relax the pressure on Muslim schoolgirls, at times they step it up," she said.

Dooronov of the regional Education Administration – who thinks the hijab ban is "hasty and ill-conceived" – thinks that it is debatable whether it is practical for schoolgirls to wear the hijab. "Often girls just think about their headscarves during lessons, and that stops them listening to what the teacher is saying."

He also noted that there have been cases where parents themselves have denied their children's rights under the law. "There have been several cases where the schoolgirls themselves have been unwilling to wear the hijab, as they have felt embarrassed in front of their contemporaries, but have been made to do so by their parents. Kyrgyzstan has a law on children's rights and once a Kyrgyz citizen has reached the age of 12 they have the right to make their own decision," Dooronov told Forum 18.

The wearing of the hijab by schoolgirls is an issue in other Central Asian states as well. In the mid-1990s police in Uzbekistan used to arrest women who appeared in public wearing the hijab. At the time there were numerous cases of schoolchildren being excluded from schools and universities for wearing the hijab. However, under international pressure, the Uzbek authorities have now largely stopped putting pressure on women who wore headscarves. Now, only isolated cases occur where pressure has been put on schoolgirls wearing headscarves. However, Forum 18 has established that teachers are putting pressure on schoolgirls on their own initiative but that the pupils can as a rule assert their rights. Hare Krishna devotees have also complained to Forum 18 of being unable to wear their religious clothing in public (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan July 2003 religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105).

The most recent April 2005 Uzbekistan survey is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=546, in which Forum 18 notes that pressure on women not to wear headscarves was on the initiative of local officials, unsupported by their superiors.

Similar problems are being faced by schoolgirls in Tajikistan, where also four imams have been removed from mosques in the north of the country (see F18News 7 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=739). The state is proposing what would be, if enacted, the most repressive religion law in Central Asia (see F18News 22 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=749), which has been strongly defended by the head of the state Religious Affairs Committee (see F18News 30 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=753).

Another problem which affects all of Central Asia is intolerance against Christians and other members of minority faiths (see F18News 17 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=729) (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all faiths as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338

For a personal commentary assessing western Europe's "headscarf laws", see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=469

For background information see Forum 18's Kyrgyzstan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=222

A printer-friendly map of Kyrgyzstan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=kyrgyz>

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