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TAJIKISTAN: Why was Protestant church ordered closed?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Officials of the government's religious affairs committee have claimed that the Sonmin Grace church in the northern town of Khujand has been ordered closed for violating the law, but have refused to explain their decision to Forum 18 News Service. Yet committee official Madhakim Pustiev admitted: "The activity of the church had annoyed Muslims and some of them asked for the Khujand church to be closed." Preacher Alisher Haidarov said the church is still open at the moment. "The most absurd thing is that we cannot even understand what specific legal violations we are accused of. Our church has existed in Khujand for 11 years and we have never broken any laws," he told Forum 18. The religion committee chairman has called for local authorities to supervise closely the activities of religious organisations.

Although the head of the government's religious affairs committee has refused to tell Forum 18 News Service why a Korean-led Protestant church in the northern town of Khujand has been ordered to close down by the authorities, one of his assistants admitted that pressure from local Muslims had been involved. "The activity of the church had annoyed Muslims and some of them asked for the Khujand church to be closed," Madhakim Pustiev, the committee official responsible for non-Muslim religious communities, told Forum 18 from the capital Dushanbe on 10 May. However, he declined to say which laws the Khujand Sonmin Sunbogim (Grace) church had broken. "I refuse to answer this question by phone. If you want to talk about this, come and see us in Dushanbe."

Reached earlier that day, committee chairman Murodullo Davlatov confirmed that the activity of the Sonmin Grace church had been temporarily halted, but he too refused to explain why, claiming he was too busy. "Ask Pustiev – he is responsible in our committee for the activity of non-Muslim religious associations and he will clarify the situation for you."

Davlatov had told a Dushanbe press conference on 26 April that the activity of the Sonmin Grace church in Khujand had been halted on 14 April because it had violated the law. "Most of its services are being held outside the church," he complained. "Opening sports clubs in the town of Khujand, the Sonmin Grace Church was educating young people in the spirit of religious fanaticism and unquestioning blind obedience to pastors." He said this violated Article 15 of the religion law. "There have also been other cases of violation of the country's law on religion and religious organisations. The activities of this church have been suspended until the situation is resolved."

He also admitted that in this and in other cases hostility from local people has played a part. "The Jehovah's Witnesses organisation had been involved in some extremist activities, to which we have put an end. Organisations like the Evangelical Christian Baptists and the Sonmin Grace Church used to illegally attract people to their churches, and this provoked a negative reaction from local people."

Frank Johansen, the head of the OSCE office in northern Tajikistan, reported that at a press conference at the beginning of May the Khujand city administration announced the closure of several religious associations. "Basically these were religious associations not registered with the Ministry of Justice," he told Forum 18 from Khujand on 10 May (though under Tajik law registration is not compulsory). "However, I have not heard anything about the closure of the Khujand Sonmin Grace church."

Church members are working to try to keep the church open. "For the time being our church is not closed," Alisher Haidarov, a preacher of the Sonmin Grace church, told Forum 18 from Khujand on 11 May. "We are trying to find a compromise with the local authorities and to convince them that we are not doing anything illegal. The most absurd thing is that we cannot even understand what specific legal violations we are accused of. Our church has existed in Khujand for 11 years and we have never broken any laws."

Congregations led by local ethnic Koreans are among the largest Protestant churches in Tajikistan. They are often active missionary churches, and this often upsets some Muslims. In October 2000 two Islamic radicals launched a terrorist attack on the Sonmin Grace church building in Dushanbe, which killed nine people, injured about fifty and devastated the building. Three months later a daughter church was the target of a bomb, but this time no-one was hurt in the explosion.

Baptist pastor Sergei Besarab, who had been actively engaged in missionary activity, was murdered in January 2004 in the town of Isfara, about 100 kilometres (60 miles) east of Khujand. The trial is now underway in Khujand of members of a radical Islamic

group Bayat (an Arabic word meaning oath) who are accused of his murder (see F18News 27 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=330).

At the Dushanbe press conference, Davlatov reported that his committee has registered one Islamic university, 18 madrasahs (Islamic schools), 228 central mosques and 2,880 five-time prayer mosques, as well as about 85 non-Muslim religious communities. He complained that "unfortunately" 26 unregistered mosques were operating in various parts of the country. "For example, two central mosques are functioning in Shohmansur district's Buston neighbourhood, which has a population of only 9,080. The law stipulates that a central mosque can be built in a neighbourhood or settlement with a population of over 15,000."

He also complained about what he called the "vast quantity" of Muslim and non-Muslim religious books entering Tajikistan, bemoaning the fact that there is no control over this. "One does not need to get special permission from our committee to bring them into our country, although this should be required," he told the press conference. "Experts on religion usually check this kind of literature. Six non-Islamic organisations have been granted permission to bring 2,000 copies of books into our country this year." He also claimed that it is "likely" that many Christian books are being "illegally" printed in Tajikistan. He called for local authorities to supervise closely the activities of religious organisations.

For more background see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=190

A printer-friendly map of Tajikistan is available at

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

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