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UZBEKISTAN: Authorities drag feet over Pentecostal registration

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Pentecostal pastor Bakhtier Tuichiev's registration application for his church in Andijan – lodged four months ago - has stalled. "Officially, no-one has refused me," he told Forum 18. "It is simply that every day I am told to come back tomorrow. I am sure the authorities are quite deliberately dragging their feet." However, an official of the city administration denied there was any deliberate obstruction. "We have been holding a sports competition, and have not had the time to devote to this issue," Izatullo Khojayev told Forum 18. "I have already told Tuichiev that we will deal with his application very soon." Police have warned the pastor that if the church continues to operate without registration, he will be brought to court.

For the past four months, the administration in Andijan, a city in the Uzbek section of the Fergana valley near the border with Kyrgyzstan, has failed to give Pentecostal pastor Bakhtier Tuichiev the letter of recommendation required for the regional justice department to consider registering the church. "Officially, no-one has refused me," Tuichiev told Forum 18 News Service from Andijan on 28 May. "It is simply that every day I am told to come back tomorrow. I am sure the authorities are quite deliberately dragging their feet."

However, an official of the Andijan city hakimiat (administration) denied that there was any deliberate obstruction. "We are certainly not trying to drag out the registration of the church that Tuichiev leads," Izatullo Khojayev, a specialist for work with public organisations, told Forum 18 from Andijan on 29 May. "We have been holding a sports competition, and have not had the time to devote to this issue. I have already told Tuichiev that we will deal with his application very soon."

Tuichiev told Forum 18 he had been summoned by the regional police in January and April this year and warned that if the church continued to operate without registration, he would be brought to court under the code of administrative offences. He maintains that police officers keep watch on the church entrance at each service.

Pastor Tuichiev, whose congregation belongs to the Full Gospel Church, has been trying to gain registration for the past few years (see F18News 14 March 2003). In February 2002 he received the authorisation required for the church to operate from the mahalla committee (the mahalla is a district of a city), and submitted registration documents to the city hakimiat. However, the hakimiat did not want to register the church. In March 2002 a meeting of mahalla residents established that it was "inexpedient for a Christian church to operate".

Last September, a group of people who claimed to be BBC and CNN journalists visited Tuichiev, but the pastor believes they were in fact officers of the National Security Service (the former KGB).

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