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RUSSIA: State persecution wrecked religious life, Kabardino-Balkaria Muslims claim

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

A sustained crackdown on Muslims by the local authorities in the traditionally Muslim North Caucasus republic of Kabardino-Balkaria preceded the bloody uprising three years ago in the capital, Nalchik, Forum 18 News Service has been told. Local Muslims report mosque closures, arbitrary detentions and police brutality. "The police would keep rounding them up, beating them up, then throwing them out again," the mother of two young Muslims killed in the 2005 attack told Forum 18. State representatives have denied to Forum 18 that this was the case, while admitting that, "maybe some police spoke roughly, but it was interrogation, and interrogation isn't dancing." Contrary to the state's claims, local Muslims insist that mosques were not centres for extremist activity.

"How can you write in the Constitution that you give a person the right to profess a religion and then drive them out of mosques in groups of 50?" local lawyer Larisa Dorogova put to Forum 18 News Service in Nalchik on 23 July.

For several years before the failed October 2005 uprising in Nalchik, capital of the southern Russian republic of Kabardino-Balkaria (see F18News 18 August 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1171>), Dorogova and local human rights activist Valeri Khatazhukov repeatedly appealed to the federal and local authorities about brutal state harassment of Muslims, they told Forum 18. "But they didn't take any measures," Khatazhukov remarked to Forum 18 on 24 July. "The courts had every reason to act - but didn't."

State representatives have denied to Forum 18 that any maltreatment took place.

Forum 18 is unaware of state repression towards non-Muslim confessions in Kabardino-Balkaria.

Several open statements sent to Arsen Kanokov - Kabardino-Balkaria's President since September 2005 - from hundreds of local Muslims both before and after the failed 2005 attack catalogue the most glaring incidents:

- On 20 July 2005 Yelena Gasiyeva (who, unusually among women in Kabardino-Balkaria, wears the hijab) was forcefully detained by a police officer while walking to her local Nalchik shop. Refusing to sign unidentified papers, she was struck twice in the kidney area. On protesting and pointing out she was pregnant, the officer struck her in the stomach. On threatening to file a complaint, he replied that she would not live to give birth or to see her relatives if she did.
- In April 2005 eight female students of Kabardino-Balkaria State University were detained for 21 hours by police for reading the Koran together in an empty auditorium after classes. They were forced to remove their headscarves and raise their skirts.
- On 4 October 2004 Rasul Tsakoyev died in hospital four days after being found on the edge of Khasanya, a Nalchik suburb. He managed to tell relatives beforehand that he had been detained by police and tortured for two days.
- In August 2004, "without court order, lawful foundation, claims or searches, and despite the objections and indignation of Muslims," the authorities closed six Nalchik mosques, leaving only one functioning in the city. Subsequently, "if a group of Muslims prays communally at the home of one of them, then daily searches of that home begin."
- On 3 September 2004, 15 men were dragged from a mosque in the town of Baksan, 15 km. (9 miles) north of Nalchik. A police chief demonstratively poured them vodka, saying, "We'll let anyone who drinks this go." When they refused, the 15 were detained, kicked and beaten with truncheons, and had crosses shaved into the backs of their heads.
- Immediately after evening prayer on 14 September 2003, masked police toting machine guns drove 50 worshippers from the mosque in Nalchik's Aleksandrovka District. Detained at police stations for 24 hours, the men were made to stand facing a wall with their hands above their heads while beaten about the body, head and legs. They then had their beards cut off. Kabardino-Balkaria's then Interior Minister Khachim Shogenov joined in the beating, saying "Don't stop! Keep it up!" The arrests were recorded as

resistance to the enforcement of public order, and the 50 were detained for a further ten days.

Seventy-year-old Arsen Tukov used to go to Aleksandrovka mosque with his two sons until its 2004 closure, he told Forum 18 on 23 July. For several months local Muslims brought their mats outside the building for prayer, he said, but the law enforcement agencies began to chase them away. They then moved to a nearby football pitch, but police surrounded it and would not allow them to continue praying. After that, the community found a disused building in the Nalchik suburb of Nartan, said Tukov, where he became imam. "We cleared it up as a mosque and people came from the closed mosques in town." Armed police began to chase worshippers away on Fridays, however.

"They surrounded the building, filmed us, checked our documents and took our fingerprints." The mosque was closed following the 2005 uprising, a month after which his elder son Mansur was found "as if just killed" among the alleged militants' corpses.

"The police would keep rounding them up, beating them up, then throwing them out again," the mother - who declined to be identified - of two young Muslims killed in the October 2005 uprising told Forum 18 on 23 July. As each Nalchik mosque was closed in 2004, she said, her sons moved to the next. "Then everyone started praying at home."

Asked about detention of mosque-goers, the head of the Kabardino-Balkaria Parliament's recently formed Committee for Youth Affairs and Social Organisations - whose brief includes religious affairs - said he was familiar with the Aleksandrovka situation. "They found a shooting target in the mosque and weapons in a car outside," Boris Pashtov told Forum 18 on 25 July.

Pashtov's colleague, Dzhambulat Gergokov, who heads the Committee's religious affairs section, maintained that one or two were detained, not 50. "That you say 50 - naturally, everyone who goes there was summoned for questioning," qualified Pashtov, who admitted having received complaints about the incident. "Maybe some police spoke rudely, but it was interrogation, and interrogation isn't dancing."

Gergokov claimed to Forum 18 that the 2004 Nalchik closures had not been carried out by force. "It's just that many of those mosques weren't in suitable premises and had no documentation." Asked why the mosques were all closed at roughly the same time, he said they had all opened up at roughly the same time, "and so all their rental contracts ended at once."

Asked about other detentions, such as of female students reading the Koran, Gergokov smiled and accused Forum 18 of "reading particular websites," such as Regnum News Agency (a Russian federal news agency which indeed reported that incident on 19 April 2005) and Caucasian Knot (an independent website on the human rights situation in the Caucasus region founded by Russian human rights organisation Memorial). Claiming these were "one-sided", Pashtov suggested the students "were probably not just reading, but conducting a religious rite - but this is a state educational institution and a secular state. By all means do that in the mosque, at home."

Mufti Anas Pshikhachev similarly claimed to Forum 18 that the Nalchik mosques were not closed by force in 2004, but that "different organisations didn't prolong the rents." Asked about preceding incidents in which Muslims were dragged from mosques, he claimed not to be able to recall any.

In 2003, however, Pshikhachev told the Cherkess-language service of Radio Liberty, "We are outraged by the actions of the police who - in a blatant violation of the law - have closed down several mosques," local human rights activist Valeri Khatazhukov noted in a 9 October 2003 article for the Institute for War and Peace Reporting.

Interviewed in "Attack at Dawn", a 31 October 2005 documentary on the Nalchik uprising by Russia's state Channel 1 TV channel, a camouflage-uniformed Interior Minister Shogenov vowed to continue closing mosques if necessary. "A mosque for artillery shooting - what sort of mosque is that?" he quipped.

"We closed them [mosques] down only once they started functioning as political clubs and centres for training fighters," then Kabardino-Balkaria Public Prosecutor Yuri Ketov told Russia's REN TV news on 16 November 2006.

Local Muslims insisted to Forum 18 that the closed mosques had not been centres for unlawful activity. Confiscated weaponry and allegedly extremist literature in fact on sale in Nalchik bookstores were planted by police, the widow of Anzor Tengizov - whom police shot dead in the street on 27 June 2007 in unclear circumstances - maintained on 23 July.

With the closure of the Nartan mosque, "there were rumours that they'd found a weapons cache," its former imam Arsen Tukov told Forum 18. "People believed it, and we have no media to counter it." (END)

For a personal commentary by Irina Budkina, editor of the <<http://www.samstar.ru>> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, see F18News 26 May 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570>.

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=947>.

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at
<<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>>.

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