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RUSSIA: Tatar FSB says missionary's activity is "extremist"

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

Arguing that Baptist missionary Takhir Talipov's activity is "extremist" and "poses a threat to the stability of the interconfessional and interethnic situation in Tatarstan", the local branch of the FSB (former KGB) recommended his residency application be turned down. The 9 October FSB statement, of which Forum 18 News Service has received a copy, also accuses Talipov's church of acting "illegally", claiming that it is unregistered. Talipov told Forum 18 he must leave Russia before his visa expires on 15 December. His next appeal hearing against the denial of a residence permit is set for 1 December. "It looks like we are returning to the 1930s - decisions concerning people's religious freedom are being determined not by a court or the law, but the FSB," Talipov's legal representative told Forum 18.

An ethnic Tatar missionary is facing expulsion from Russia on the basis of an assessment by the Federal Security Service (FSB, former KGB) of his missionary activity as "extremist," Forum 18 News Service has learnt. A Russian-born resident of Latvia, Takhir Talipov must leave Russia before his present visa expires on 15 December, he told Forum 18 recently from the Tatar capital Kazan, approximately 800 kilometres (500 miles) east of Moscow. A further appeal hearing in his case is set for 1 December.

Having lived with his family in the Russian republic for several years on annual visas, Talipov submitted an application for a residency permit to the passport and visa department of Tatarstan's Interior Ministry in October 2002, he said. On receiving no word several months after the legally allotted six-month period for an official response had elapsed, Talipov filed suit against the department in a Kazan district court. By the time of the hearing, he continued, the Interior Ministry issued its refusal of his application, citing several parts of Russia's law on the legal position of foreign citizens, including the allegation that Talipov "advocates violent change to the constitutional order of the Russian Federation, or by other actions poses a threat to the security of the Russian Federation or its citizens".

"Purely intuitively, I believe my religious activity played a role in the refusal," Talipov remarked when Forum 18 spoke to him on 30 October. But at that stage he had no grounds for his hunch.

On appealing the district court decision in Tatarstan's supreme court on 10 November, however, the text of a local FSB assessment of Talipov's residency permit application was produced as evidence against him, his legal representative Fyodor Dzyuba informed Forum 18 on 27 November. Forum 18 has also received a copy of this document, dated 9 October and addressed to Tatarstan's deputy interior minister.

Citing as grounds for its existence a "temporary instruction" entitled "On the procedure for the consideration by the organs of the FSB of materials concerning the entry to and exit from the Russian Federation by foreign citizens," the assessment alleges that Talipov concealed certain biographical details during a formal FSB interrogation, "in particular, that he disseminated Baptist beliefs as a missionary in Tatarstan in the early 1990s - for which he was "persecuted on several occasions by local Muslim leaders" - and that he "founded the religious group 'Faith of Life', which to this day has no official registration and functions illegally."

The aims of 'Faith of Life' - which is funded by "foreign clerical centres" - are to disseminate Christianity within Tatarstan "from a Baptist standpoint" and so to convert Muslims in the republic to their faith, the document notes, while Talipov and its members view Islam as a "reactionary religion". Consequently, the assessment concludes, the activity of Talipov and individual representatives of his group is "extremist in character and poses a threat to the stability of the interconfessional and interethnic situation in Tatarstan." In view of this, Tatarstan's local FSB recommend that Talipov and his family be denied residency permits.

"It looks like we are returning to the 1930s - decisions concerning people's religious freedom are being determined not by a court or the law, but the FSB," Dzyuba told Forum 18. He points out that "Faith of Life" is actually Faith and Life Baptist Church, legally registered by the Tatar authorities on 6 March 2002, and that Russia's 1997 religion law in any case does not regard the activity of unregistered religious groups as illegal.

Dzyuba also takes issue with the FSB's accusation of extremism. "Since when does 'dissemination of Christianity in the regions of the republic from a Baptist standpoint' - even among Muslims - constitute extremism?" he declares. "Surely it is the constitutional right of every citizen to 'confess individually or in common with others any religion... freely to choose, hold and disseminate

religious and other convictions'?" he added, citing Article 28 of Russia's 1993 constitution.

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at

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

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