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KYRGYZSTAN: Lenten service raided, other raids, warnings of "illegal activity"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 News Service

The Russian Orthodox cathedral in Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek was raided by a range of state agencies during a service in early Lent. The raid appears to have been part of a series of raids and inspections on religious communities between January and April. The campaign resulted in warnings of "illegal" religious activity to at least one individual, a Russian Orthodox catechist, and seven mosques in Bishkek's Sverdlovsk District. "I cannot give you details of our inspections," a Sverdlovsk District official told Forum 18 News Service. Nearly 700 mosques nationwide were identified as carrying out "illegal" activity because they are unregistered. "The authorities are using these inspections to try to bring religious affairs under greater control," a Russian Orthodox Church member told Forum 18. The secret police warned Protestant Churches to reduce their activity and stop handing out religious literature, a Protestant told Forum 18. Another source said the secret police also questioned Protestant leaders on their attitude to Ukraine's political changes.

Kyrgyzstan's authorities raided and inspected religious communities in the capital Bishkek between January and April, including the Russian Orthodox cathedral during a Lenten service. The campaign resulted in warnings of "illegal" religious activity given to at least one individual, a Russian Orthodox catechist, and to seven mosques in the city's Sverdlovsk District, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Though it is not clear whether the campaign extended across the country, officials said some 700 mosques across Kyrgyzstan functioned "illegally" as they do not have state registration.

Meanwhile the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police in February and March warned leaders of various Protestant Churches in Bishkek and elsewhere to reduce their activity, and to stop freely distributing religious literature outside their communities, a Bishkek-based Protestant, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 11 April.

The NSC secret police also recently questioned some Protestant leaders on their views of the political changes in Ukraine, and whether they would join if any anti-government protests take place in Kyrgyzstan, an individual who knows these leaders and who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 10 April.

Forum 18 could gain no response from anyone at the NSC secret police in Bishkek on 17 April.

Why the raids?

The secretary of the Head of the State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA), Orozbek Moldaliyev, told Forum 18 on 17 April that both he and Baktybek Osmanov, Head of its Expertise and Registration Department, were out of Bishkek on a work trip.

Denis Pyshkin of SCRA's Analysis Department, to whom the secretary referred Forum 18, refused to comment on the raid on the Russian Orthodox cathedral, insisting that the SCRA had not been involved. He was unable to say if raids on religious communities had been conducted across Kyrgyzstan or just in Bishkek. He refused to say what would happen to religious communities which do not manage to gain registration.

"The authorities are using these inspections to try to bring religious affairs under greater control," a Russian Orthodox Church member, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 15 April. "Alleged violations by religious communities may also serve as a foundation to adopt new laws to bring the relationship between the religious communities and the state to the position the government desires."

A sweeping re-evaluation of laws and regulations governing religion were launched at a February meeting of the presidential Defence Council, chaired by President Almazbek Atambayev (see F18News 27 February 2014 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1932>).

Mosques' "illegal activity"

"696 mosques carry on illegal activity," Osmanov of the SCRA's Expertise and Registration Department told the Kyrgyz-language paper Asman on 27 March. "Who are the Imams of these mosques, what and how they teach, all this causes concern."

Pyshkin of the SCRA downplayed any concerns over the 696 mosques. He insisted to Forum 18 that all had applied to the state-backed Muslim Board to be accepted into its structure in order to be registered. He refused to say what would happen to those which do not wish to join the Muslim Board or which fail to get registration.

Of the twenty mosques in Bishkek's Sverdlovsk District (out of 38 local mosques) raided between 12 and 15 February the authorities identified that seven do not have registration or permission from the SCRA for religious activity, Vecherny Bishkek news agency quoted an unnamed official from Sverdlovsk District Administration on 18 February. Information on the inspections was also published on the District Administration website.

Conducting the raids were 14 officials from the NSC secret police, the Police 10th Division (responsible for the fight against religious extremism), Emergency Ministry, State Sanitary Epidemiological Inspectorate, the District Police as well Police Inspectors on children's affairs.

Also raided were four madrassas (Islamic religious schools for children) and 14 prayer rooms. It was reported that "some of the mosques' buildings were built illegally," while "sanitary rules were not observed in some mosque buildings".

Forum 18 was unable to contact the unnamed seven unregistered Sverdlovsk District mosques.

Chinara Borbashova, Deputy Head of Sverdlovsk District Administration who oversees the District's religious affairs, refused to comment on why the raids were launched, and what will happen to the unregistered mosques or the other non-Muslim organisations which were raided.

"I cannot give you details of our inspections," Borbashova told Forum 18 on 10 April. She also refused to say how many mosques in the District do not have registration. "I have the information but I cannot tell you." Asked whether those mosques will be given state registration or be closed down, she said she could not talk further and put the phone down.

SCRA to bring suit against Orthodox Church or expel its catechist?

On 27 February SCRA Director Orobek Moldaliyev sent a written warning to Vakhtang Fyodorov, a Sunday school catechist of the Russian Orthodox Church's Bishkek Diocese who is a Russian citizen. The letter - seen by Forum 18 - warned him about his alleged "illegal missionary work over a long period of time in the territory of Kyrgyzstan."

Moldaliyev warned that Fyodorov failed to register as a foreign missionary in violation of Article 12, Part 1 of the Religion Law. This states that a "foreign citizen or missionary who arrives in Kyrgyzstan with the purpose to do religious work shall receive registration from the state religious affairs organ based on the Law of Kyrgyzstan."

Moldaliyev said the warning was being issued under Religion Law Article 27, Part 1, which specifies that warnings are to be issued in cases of violations. Part 2 of the same Article declares: "If the said violations in Part 1 of this Article are not corrected within three months or are repeated within one year, the state religious affairs organ is entitled to bring a suit to court on the liquidation of the organisation. Meanwhile the state organ is entitled to issue a decision to halt the activity of the organisation until the court makes a decision."

"I am only teaching Orthodox believers who are members of the Church," Fyodorov insisted to Forum 18 on 15 April. "I am not involved in converting members of other communities to the Orthodox faith." He said the Church has "tried to explain this to the State Commission so many times" but "they do not want to understand us. They keep telling us that any religious activity in Kyrgyzstan by a foreign citizen is missionary activity."

Fyodorov said he has not been warned about possible deportation. "But I worry that if I leave Kyrgyzstan the authorities might refuse me re-entry to the country."

Raid during Lent Orthodox service

Officials from the NSC secret police, Interior Ministry, Sanitary Epidemiological Inspectorate as well as the Financial Police raided Bishkek's Resurrection Russian Orthodox cathedral on 4 March to check up on the activity of the Church. They arrived during a service on the second day of Lent, during the reading of the Great Canon of St Andrew of Crete, church members complained to Forum 18.

Diocesan press-secretary Yuliya Farbstein declined to comment on the raid. "It appears the situation has normalised, and we don't want to create more tension between us and the authorities," she told Forum 18 on 14 April. No one else from the Diocese was prepared to comment.

Another Orthodox believer, who did not personally witness the raid, was concerned over the timing. "The action was carried out when our Church was holding a service to mark the beginning of Lent, which is disrespectful and disturbed the participants," the individual - who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals - told Forum 18 from Bishkek on 15 April. "I hope that it was a coincidence that they came when the Church was conducting one of its sacred traditions."

The priests "did not give in to pressure from the officials and did not allow them into the Church building, since they showed no warrants for a search and or an inspection of documents", the believer added.

A Russia based news agency New Region nr2.ru, whose reporter Yuri Kopytin came to witness the 4 March raid at the request of Vera Shokolova, the Church's lawyer, described it the following day as "shocking" that officials from the various state agencies "came looking for criminals in the Church". Officials "threatened the priests with a court case and further trouble, which seriously alarmed the believers present at the service." Later the officials "clarified that actually their reason for raiding the Church was a complaint [against the activity of the Church and Bishop Feodosy] written by unnamed persons."

Captain Sultan Suvanaliyev of the City Police's 10th (anti-Extremism) Division, who was present during the raid, "refused to comment" on why it had been launched, Kopytin reported. He claimed that Suvanaliyev's "breath smelled strongly of alcohol." One unnamed NSC secret police officer present explained that "he was there only as an observer".

Responding to complaint?

Another official involved in the raid, Nur Topoyev of the State Tax Inspectorate, showed the reporter Kopytin a letter to the SCRA. "I came here on an order to conduct a tax audit, which was given on the basis of the collective letter signed by Orthodox believers," Topoyev insisted. The collective complaint said that "the Church was turned into a house of merchandise where they sell and buy anything they want. It has no licences or official endorsement to do so."

However, Topoyev refused to show Kopytin the names of those who wrote the complaint, telling him that the "document is only for official use."

Topoyev said that he can only conduct an audit of the Diocese's accounts, adding that the Diocese has had no problems with its reporting to the Tax Inspectorate. "The Church presents its accounts in a timely manner and in full. The sales of icons, candles and other Church items in the territory of the Church, according to the Law, are not subject to tax."

Topoyev insisted to Forum 18 on 17 April that his office - and other state agencies - were merely responding to a complaint. He pointed to a bakery the Church runs. "We don't know who they feed," he claimed.

Similarly, Lieutenant Colonel Ratbek Turusbekov, Deputy Chief of the Police 10th Division, insisted to Forum 18 on 17 April that Suvanaliyev and other officials were there because of the complaint. Told Orthodox Churches are known for selling Church items and are not doing anything illegal by doing so and asked what was the real purpose of the raid, Colonel Turusbekov responded that the police and the Church have "reached an agreement to investigate the case peacefully and objectively." He refused to explain what exactly that means.

Asked how he could explain the behaviour of Police officer Suvanaliyev, who was reportedly drunk during the raid, Colonel Turusbekov refused to respond. He refused to explain to Forum 18 why the NSC secret police was also represented.

Lawyer Shokolova told nr2.ru that she had been able to find out that the complainants had alleged that "Bishop Feodosy was deported from Russia for committing a traffic accident, beating up people and incorrect behaviour." The complainants also claimed that "unregistered foreign citizens" work in the Diocese.

"I saw for the first time when officials came and audaciously demanded that the Bishop write a statement about a traffic accident which did not happen," Shokolova declared. "It turns out that officials didn't even verify any of the accusations in the complaint before coming." She pointed out that Bishop Feodosy had been appointed as Bishop of Bishkek by Russian Patriarch Kirill.

The Diocese was intending to file a suit against the complainants and the officials.

NSC passes complaint to media

Giving its account of the raid on 21 March, 17 days after it took place, was news agency Vecherny Bishkek. Viktoriya Kureneva, the author of the article entitled "Like priest, like flock", claims that "priests did not allow the State inter-agency commission to enter the Church, which visited it not out of idle curiosity but because of a complaint from Orthodox citizens."

The article quotes the complaint as claiming, "The Bishop organises show-programmes and feasts in the Church. He is exclusively busy with commerce, for which he is called a 'businessman in a cassock'. Items made from wax and precious metals, which he

imports illegally from Russia and Uzbekistan, are sold in the Church." Some Church members made an "unethical Church circus," and were "not ashamed about the way they addressed officials".

A Church member, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, admitted to Forum 18 on 14 April that "we were all agitated with the officials' unceremonious actions," and "someone may have expressed their indignation". But the Church member claimed that local press articles covering the raid were government-sponsored and aimed "to cover up the actions of the authorities".

Told that some thought that her article was government-sponsored, Kureneva insisted to Forum 18 on 15 April that it is the "result of my investigation." She initially claimed to have received complaints from the same people who complained to the SCRA and other authorities. "Even the NSC received a complaint," she added. Contradicting her previous statement, she then admitted having received a copy of the complaint from the NSC secret police.

When Forum 18 asked who it could speak with from the NSC, Kureneva responded: "I have their numbers but I do not think they will speak to you." She insisted that Forum 18 speak to the SCRA. "They also have the text of the complaint."

Kureneva also refused to tell Forum 18 who exactly complained. "Some of them are not Church members, some attended the Church at various times, and some are former Church workers who were laid off," was all she would say. "These people would not complain for just nothing."

Reprieve for Hope Church?

Meanwhile, Bishkek authorities hinted to the Hope Baptist Church's pastor Eduard Pak that they may agree to extend their use of the land on which their church is situated during a 7 April inspection. However, it is not clear under what conditions this will be.

The authorities previously asked the Church to vacate the land. Another of Bishkek's Protestant churches had its 1999 purchase of a building annulled through the courts (see F18News 8 April 2014 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1945>).

"The authorities took copies of our documents, and left with a hint that they may agree to extend our rental of the land," Pastor Pak told Forum 18 from Bishkek on 15 April. He said that he did not know why the authorities appear to have changed their mind. (END)

For background information see Forum 18's Kyrgyzstan religious freedom surveys at <<http://www.forum18.org/Analyses.php?region=30>>.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Kyrgyzstan can be found at <<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=30>>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351>.

A printer-friendly map of Kyrgyzstan is available at <<http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Kyrgyzstan>>.

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