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UZBEKISTAN: "Those who accepted other religions may not be buried in same cemetery with Muslims"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 News Service

In three known cases so far in 2014, local officials have backed local imams who refused to allow non-Muslims to be buried in state-owned cemeteries where their families wished to bury them, Forum 18 News Service has learned. When Protestant Christian Gayrat Buriyev died on 9 April in a village near Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent, relatives sought the assistance of the local Administration chief. But late in the evening he and the Regional Imam supported the local imam, who blocked the burial and "cursed the relatives", Protestants complained to Forum 18. In two cases in Karakalpakstan, officials forced relatives to bury the deceased in a Russian Orthodox cemetery rather than the main cemetery. Kudaybergen Uteniyazov, Head of Muynak District Administration, insisted to Forum 18: "Those who accepted other religions may not be buried in the same cemetery with Muslims." An official of Uzbekistan's Ombudsperson's Office told Forum 18 that cemeteries "belong to the state", but refused to say if the Office will help seek an end to such burial denials.

When Protestant Christian Gayrat Buriyev died on 9 April in a village near Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent, the local Imam - backed by the head of the district administration - refused to allow him to be buried in the state-owned village cemetery because he was not a Muslim, the imam and officials confirmed to Forum 18 News Service. "The cemetery is state property, but is under the management of the local Mosque, and if the Imam is against the burial then it will not take place," officials told relatives.

In two similar cases in Karakalpakstan Autonomous Republic in northwestern Uzbekistan, officials forced the families of two Protestant women who died in February to bury them in the local Russian Orthodox cemetery after the imam blocked their burial in the state-owned cemetery. "Those who accepted other religions may not be buried in the same cemetery with Muslims," a local official told Forum 18.

Authorities in Karakalpakstan in particular have made burial difficult for deceased non-Muslims, or even for deceased Muslims who have non-Muslim close relatives. They have also used the threat of burial denial to deter individuals from joining non-Muslim faiths (see F18News 16 March 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1268>).

No non-Muslim or non-Russian Orthodox religious communities are allowed to gain state registration in Karakalpakstan (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862>). This means the state authorities have disregarded their attempts to gain their own cemetery.

In Central Asian culture, being buried together with other relatives and with the participation of the local community are important. Families of those refused burial in the local cemetery or without wide community participation are regarded as social outcasts. Ethnic Uzbeks and Karakalpakhs regard Russian Orthodox cemeteries as belonging to a foreign community.

Cemeteries "belong to state"

Jasur (who declined to give his last name), an official of Uzbekistan's human rights Ombudsperson's Office, insisted that cemeteries "belong to the state". He told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 25 April that he was not aware of the recent burial problems but said that members of the communities "should ask the local Administrations if such problems arise". He could not say whether the Ombudsperson's Office will give its support to solve such burial problems. He then declined to talk to Forum 18 further.

(Uzbekistan's Ombudsperson's Office is not accredited with the International Coordinating Committee of National Institutions for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights as compliant with the Paris Principles on the independence of such national human rights bodies from government.)

An official of the Nationalities and Religions Department of the Presidential Administration in Tashkent (who declined to give her name) refused to comment on the burial denials on 25 April or put Forum 18 through to any officials. When Forum 18 asked to whom members of religious communities affected can address their complaints, she put the phone down.

Tashkent Region burial denial

Tashkent Region's Urtachirchik District authorities on 9 April prevented members of a local Protestant Church from burying deceased 68-year old Buriyev's body in one of the cemeteries in the village of Tuyabuguz, some 30 kms (20 miles) from Tashkent, fellow Protestants from Tashkent, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 21 April.

On the day of his death, after collecting the necessary documents for his burial, Buriyev's family tried to bury him in the local cemetery where his relatives were buried. However, local Imam Abdumalik Abdusattarov prevented them from doing so.

"The imam cursed the family for becoming Christians and insulted them with unquotable expressions, branding them unclean and defiled infidels," Protestants complained to Forum 18. When the family asked why they cannot bury the deceased where other relatives are buried, the Imam told them he is "acting based on Islamic Sharia Law". The family "tried to explain to him that Uzbekistan is a secular state and that the cemetery is state property," but the Imam "continued cursing them, and drove them out telling them he will not allow the burial in the cemetery."

Both the District Police and Prosecutor's Office refused to intervene, despite a request from relatives and Church members. That evening, relatives visited Bektemir Ibrahimov, Hokim (Head) of the District Administration, to complain and seek his support for the burial. Ibrahimov instead summoned Imam Abdusattarov and Jamoliddin Turanov, the District Mufti, to discuss the issue. The discussion went on until 11 pm but in the end Ibrahimov and Mufti Turanov supported Imam Abdusattarov's refusal.

Imam Abdusattarov "cursed the relatives even in Hokim Ibrahimov's presence", Tashkent Protestants complained to Forum 18. Ibrahimov then advised the family to bury Buriyev in the village's Russian Orthodox cemetery. Buriyev's relatives felt they had little choice and buried him there the following day, where a place was allotted them "in the corner far from the other graves".

Sharia law or secular laws?

Ibrahimov, Urtachirchik District Administration's Head, declined to tell Forum 18 on 22 April whether religious affairs in his District are governed by Sharia law or secular laws. Asked why a leader of one religious community is deciding who should and who should not be buried in the cemetery, which is state property, he responded: "I am in a meeting with fifty people and can't answer your questions at the moment." Asked when would be convenient for Forum 18 to call back, he replied: "I cannot answer such questions over the phone, you need to come by my office so we could talk." He then put the phone down.

Imam Abdusattarov vehemently defended his decision to block the burial of Buriyev in the state-owned village cemetery. "He was a sectarian, a Jehovah's Witness, and he read the Injil [Uzbek-language New Testament] and not the Koran," he insisted to Forum 18 on 23 April. "So he couldn't be buried in a Muslim cemetery."

Told that the cemetery is state property, and asked why a person whose relatives were buried in the cemetery cannot also be buried there, and asked whether religious affairs in the District are governed by Sharia law, he replied: "We are a democratic state, and affairs are governed by state laws." Asked why an individual, regardless of their faith, cannot be buried next to their relatives, Abdusattarov repeated his previous insistence "because it is a Muslim cemetery". Asked why he was deciding who should and who should not be buried in the cemetery, he replied, "because it is a democracy."

"Unclean and defiled infidels"

Tashkent Protestants complained to Forum 18 that Imam Abdusattarov has been speaking locally for some time against Buriyev's family "saying that they are Jehovah's Witnesses and infidels, and that no one should associate with them or talk to them." They lamented that the authorities have failed to intervene. "Who will guarantee their safety? This is trampling on human dignity and any kind of human rights," they complained.

Asked why he called the Buriyev family unclean and defiled infidels, Imam Abdusattarov told Forum 18: "Because they left Islam for another religion. And it is not just them. I already preached in our Mosque that anybody who leaves Islam to join Jehovah's Witnesses or another religion is an infidel, and cannot be buried in our cemetery." Asked who can guarantee that someone who heard his message might not harm the Buriyev family, he replied: "I can. It's true that in a Muslim country run by Sharia law such a person can be hanged, but not in Uzbekistan."

Rasul Matkhalikov, Deputy Prosecutor of Urtachirchik District, refused to say whether the Prosecutor's Office would investigate whether Imam Abdusattarov's remarks constituted incitement of religious hatred, a crime under Criminal Code Article 156. "I don't have the competence to talk to you over the phone," he told Forum 18 on 25 April. "Please send your questions in writing." He then put the phone down.

"Muslims go to a Mosque, and Christians should attend the Russian Orthodox Church"

Told that Buriyev and his family belong to a Protestant Church and are not Jehovah's Witnesses, and asked why he misinformed the

public, Imam Abdusattarov insisted: "Muslims go to a mosque, and Christians should go to the Russian Orthodox Church, but the Buriyevs do neither." Asked why other non-Orthodox Christians should attend the Orthodox Church, he replied, "Because it is the Church, and the others are not legal."

Asked who gave him the right to decide what people should or should not believe, and what Church they should attend, the Imam did not answer. He then put his phone down.

Burial denials in Karakalpakstan

Meanwhile in February a local Imam and state authorities in Muynak in Karakalpakstan similarly prevented two families from burying their relatives in a local cemetery. The authorities "pressured the families" to bury the deceased women, who were members of the local Full Gospel Protestant Church, in the Russian Orthodox cemetery as in the case in Tashkent Region, local Protestants who know the families well, and who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 23 April.

Aygul Khamidullayeva died of cancer on 18 February at the age of 50. The other woman, Bibiazhar Zhanabergenova, died on 28 February at the age of 66. Both were residents of Muynak.

Imam prevents burial and warns people not to attend burial

As soon as Khamidullayeva died, "all relatives, neighbours, and acquaintances gathered to bury her," Full Gospel Church members told Forum 18. "Though Khamidullayeva was a Christian, on the advice of some relatives her husband Polat Sadullayev went to invite Aminjon Nabatov, the local Imam, to the burial to say Muslim prayers, thus hoping to receive his approval for the burial," the Protestants said, "because there were rumours that the Imam would not allow them to bury her in the cemetery when she would die." The family wanted to bury her in the cemetery "because her relatives are buried there".

However, Imam Nabatov refused to come, telling Sadullayev that his wife was a Christian and read the Injil [Uzbek language New Testament]. He also warned that he would not allow her to be buried in the cemetery.

The family immediately visited Makset Kozhaniyazov, Chief of Muynak District Urban Development Department, which manages the town's cemeteries, to ask him to allot a plot of land for the burial. "He gave an excuse that the cemetery was closed for maintenance works, and that they cannot bury her there at the moment," church members told Forum 18. When the family insisted that they saw others on the same day burying their dead there, Kozhaniyazov "admitted that Imam Nabatov called him, and warned that he should not allot them a plot of land in the cemetery, and that they cannot bury a Christian there."

Family and friends went ahead to try to bury Khamidullayeva in the cemetery, but a group of "unknown individuals" blocked them at the entrance, church members complained to Forum 18. They then had to bring Khamidullayeva's body back to the family home.

"Imam Nabatov went around warning people not to participate in the burial, because [Khamidullayeva] is Christian, and read the Injil," church members told Forum 18. He also called on the people to "boycott Christians and their families, and said that there is no place among the Muslims for locals who became Christians."

Protestants complained that Kozhaniyazov and Imam Nabatov "violated the family's rights, insulted their feelings, and incited hatred among the people against the family, which is a flagrant violation of Criminal Code Article 156." Article 156 punishes "Incitement of ethnic, racial or religious hatred".

Officials force burial in Russian Orthodox cemetery

The "atmosphere of intolerance" created around the family by the Imam, and fear of the authorities, made the family keep the dead body in their home for four days. On 22 February, a "group of local officials broke in their flat demanding" them to take the body for burial in the Russian Orthodox cemetery, Protestants told Forum 18.

"Under pressure the family - accompanied by officials - took the body and had to bury it next to the broken-down wall of the cemetery where a great amount of rubbish was strewn," they complained. "People from the neighborhood throw rubbish there, and also domestic animals freely graze in the cemetery."

Imam Nabatov put his phone down each time Forum 18 called on 24 and 25 April. Phones of Muynak District Prosecutor's office went unanswered on 25 April.

Kozhaniyazov defended his decision. "I do not take decisions who can and who cannot be buried in the cemetery," he told Forum 18 on 24 April. He then claimed that "it was the family's decision" to bury Khamidullayeva in the Russian Orthodox cemetery. When Forum 18 told him that the family had not wanted that, he admitted that "yes at first they did not want that, but we came to an agreement with them she should be buried in a Christian cemetery."

Asked why Khamidullayeva was buried in the corner of the cemetery among rubbish, Kozhaniyazov was quick to reply: "We already cleaned up the rubbish, and will ensure that people stop throwing rubbish there." He also assured Forum 18 that his Department will repair the walls.

Local Protestants confirmed to Forum 18 that the authorities cleaned up the rubbish, but worried that more might be dumped there.

Second Muynak burial denial

Similarly, after Bibiazhar Zhanabergenova, another member of Muynak's Full Gospel Church, died on 28 February, her family was also refused the right to bury her in the local cemetery where her relatives are buried, Muynak Protestants told Forum 18. Then on the day she died, the family had to bury her in the Orthodox cemetery on the instructions of the local authorities.

Will Protestants be given plot of land for burials?

Protestants familiar with the recent burial denials, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, also expressed concern to Forum 18 that such denials may continue. In the past they asked the District authorities to allot them a plot of land for burials, but received no response. "Unfortunately all the registered Protestant Churches [in Karakalpakstan] lost their registration, and they exist under the constant threat of punishment from the authorities," one Protestant lamented to Forum 18. "Therefore we cannot even ask the authorities now officially for a plot of land."

Reached by Forum 18 on 24 April, Kudaybergen Uteniyazov, Head of Muynak District Administration, insisted: "Those who accepted other religions may not be buried in the same cemetery with Muslims."

Told that the cemetery is not the property of any religious community, he said: "It's not me who decides these issues but local residents and the Mahalla Committee [local residential administration]."

Told that local Protestants do not wish to bury their dead in the Orthodox cemetery and wish to have their own plot of land for burials, and asked whether the District authorities will provide it, Uteniyazov responded: "I cannot decide that on my own, we need to think about it." (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338>.

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1862>.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Uzbekistan can be found at <<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>>.

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 Uzbekistan is available at <<http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Uzbekistan>>.

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