



This article was published by F18News on: 20 June 2008

KYRGYZSTAN: Confidential files, "illegal" worship and expulsions

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Demands by Kyrgyzstan's National Security Service (NSS) secret police to see confidential files on individual students at Bishkek's Protestant United Theological Seminary seem to have been the catalyst for the expulsion in June of its rector, New Zealander Edward Sands. "I have always regarded these as confidential and told them that," Sands told Forum 18 News Service. "But they were very angry." The NSS also objected that two Protestant churches used the seminary buildings for worship without permission. It forced Pastor Alastair Morrice of the International Church to leave Kyrgyzstan a few days before he intended. Bakit Osmanov, the NSS officer who handles religious affairs, refused to talk to Forum 18 about the expulsions or why his agency was demanding to see confidential student files. The Islamic University insists it functions freely, but told Forum 18 it has to inform the Muftiate, the State Agency for Religious Affairs and the district police about who is studying there.

Two foreign Protestants - Edward Sands from New Zealand and Alastair Morrice from Scotland - have been expelled from Kyrgyzstan in the past month at the insistence of the National Security Service (NSS) secret police, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Sands, the Rector of the Protestant interdenominational United Theological Seminary in the capital Bishkek, was accused of violating the Religion Law by having allowed the Protestant International Church of Bishkek (ICB) to hold services in its building without the church being officially registered at their building. Morrice, the Pastor of the English-language ICB, was also accused of violating the Religion Law for not registering the church's use of the seminary building for worship.

"We were always very open with the State Agency for Religious Affairs," Sands told Forum 18 from Germany on 12 June. "The NSS occasionally came to the seminary, and we always gave them information." He said the probable catalyst for the eventual expulsion came in October 2007, when the NSS asked to see the recommendations churches gave for individual students. "I have always regarded these as confidential and told them that," he told Forum 18. "But they were very angry."

Kairbek Manybaev, a Kyrgyz national who now leads the team of three in charge of the seminary, says they were shocked by the forced exit of their rector. "All of us in the Christian community and particularly those at the seminary loved and respected him for his great work," he told Forum 18 from Bishkek on 19 June. "We would love him to return, and continue his work."

Manybaev said it was very difficult for them to fill the void of Sands' absence. "For me and the other local people who have been asked to step up for the work, it is not easy to manage the immense task," he told Forum 18. "Our school is interdenominational, and it demands a lot of sensitivity to the needs and traditions of various churches."

He said it was planned that by 2010 Sands would hand over the job to local Protestant leaders, but these plans were disrupted by his forced exit. "We have some experience as pastors but this work is not easy and we needed more experience to do it," Manybaev told Forum 18.

"In March 2008 we submitted our applications to renew our visas," Sands told Forum 18. "It was then we were warned about the use of the seminary buildings by two churches, the English-language International Church and the Korean Church. The State Agency told us the seminary was not registered as a place for religious worship but for religious teaching." They then applied for permission for the churches to use the premises, he told Forum 18. The State Agency allowed the churches to continue to use the premises while the application was being considered, but the NSS said they were breaking the law.

"This was a power play between the State Agency for Religious Affairs and the NSS," said Sands. "The State Agency was helpful, and it is interesting that the NSS moved when the State Agency chairman was abroad."

Morrice's term as ICB pastor had already come to an end and he and his wife were due to leave in May anyway, but Sands had intended to remain as rector of the seminary. He told Forum 18 he does not yet know if he will be allowed to return.

Sands - who had lived and worked for ten years in Kyrgyzstan, for the last six as rector of the seminary - was told by the Foreign Ministry consular service on 27 May that he had ten days to leave the country. "My visa had 11 days left to run, so they said they would not stamp my passport 'deported'," Sands told Forum 18.

"The NSS summoned me and asked me to bring the certificate from the State Agency for Religious Affairs allowing me to conduct religious activity and the certificate allowing religious worship to take place on seminary property," Sands reported. The NSS claimed he had broken the law by allowing the international church to meet at the seminary. The NSS accompanied him to the consular department, where the official said his visa was being cut to just ten days. His visa had been valid until 7 June, but this meant he had to leave by 6 June, Sands reported.

Bakit Osmanov, the NSS officer who handles religious affairs, refused to talk to Forum 18 about the expulsions. "I am not going to give you an interview," he declared on 18 June from Bishkek. Asked by Forum 18 why the NSS secret police asked Sands for confidential information on students, Osmanov said he did not want to answer the question and put down the phone.

Kanatbek Murzakhhalilov, the Deputy Head of the State Agency for Religious Affairs, told Forum 18 that the Agency would consider renewing the religious work certificates for Sands and Morrice if they applied for it. "We were told that they violated the visa regime," he said. Asked how they could have violated the visa regime as they left the country before their visas expired, Murzakhhalilov said he was not sure what exactly they had violated. "Let them apply for certificates, though we cannot guarantee that they will be able to get visas," he said.

The academic year at the seminary had already finished and does not resume until 1 September, Sands told Forum 18. "Aware of the trouble, we brought forward the graduation ceremony to 3 June to ensure we would still be there for it."

Sands said the seminary had 40 full-time students in the year just finished, although in recent years the number of students had been up to 60. Some students live in the seminary-owned accommodation on site, others come in daily. Some four or five foreigners work fulltime at the seminary, he added.

Forum 18 notes that it seems to be a regular pattern for the police and secret police to demand that heads of religious schools and seminaries inform them about their students. One Protestant pastor, who wanted to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals from the authorities, told Forum 18 on 19 June that they also have Bible classes but do not want to register them formally as a school. Asked for the reason, he responded: "The authorities will first of all put many barriers so our school could not function and also ask us to inform them about our students, which we do not want to do."

Bakit Niyazov from Bishkek's Islamic University insists that his university functions freely and anyone who applies could pass the tests and become a student there. "The State does not regulate our internal matters," he told Forum 18 from Bishkek on 19 June. "Only we have to inform the Muftiate, the State Agency for Religious Affairs, and the District Police who our students are." Asked why they have to do this, he responded: "I guess for security reasons."

Murzakhhalilov told Forum 18 he could not comment on whether the police or NSS had any rights to demand confidential information from religious institutions. "The NSS has its own internal system and policy and I cannot comment on their activity."

Presidential decree 319 of 14 November 1996 requires that all foreign citizens arriving in Kyrgyzstan to do religious work must obtain a certificate of authorisation from the State Agency for Religious Affairs. Otherwise their religious activity will be considered illegal, Murzakhhalilov declared.

Religious communities must inform the State Agency if they are holding meetings in a place other than their legal address, Murzakhhalilov told Forum 18. Also each building used for religious meetings must be registered at the State Agency as a building for public worship. "But the seminary was not registered as a building for public worship but just for education. Therefore the question arose of why the International Church was meeting in a place not registered for public worship." He said that now the seminary has registered its building for public worship.

Both the NSS and the director of migration told Sands that he cannot return to Kyrgyzstan. "But my lawyer has been given some verbal comments that I should be able to and could appeal if I can't," Sands told Forum 18. "The process has been stressful, having to resolve personal affairs, sell off all our property and pack up after so many years, combined with the responsibility to manage the transition in the seminary."

Sands told Forum 18 he feels the atmosphere for religious communities in Kyrgyzstan is becoming more restrictive. "Everyone is feeling greater pressure, with the State Agency for Religious Affairs and NSS visiting churches during services or immediately afterwards," he reported. "They take photos of the congregations with their cell phones and ask questions, and this creates uncertainty and fear."

Asked whether his colleagues from the State Agency took photos of individuals while visiting religious institutions, Murzakhhalilov told Forum 18 that it was possible. "I do not know for a fact, but it is possible that they may have taken photos of interesting events," he said. "But I am sure they would have done it with the consent of those people. Agency officials are supposed to attend those organisations regularly, do monitoring, and hold analysis."

Protestants have long complained of NSS filming of their services against the wishes of church members (see F18News 27

September 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=846>).

The new pastor of the International Church is Daniel Danis, a Romanian citizen who had lived in Bishkek for four years prior to his appointment. He told Forum 18 on 11 June that he has not been obstructed in taking up his post as pastor.

Danis noted that before Morrice was asked to leave, the NSS had summoned him twice for a talk. "The NSS told him to leave allegedly for violating the Religion Law," Danis reported. "Even though the State Agency had allowed our church to meet in the seminary building, the NSS still considered it a serious enough violation to ask him to leave."

Morrice's visa was supposed to expire in the middle of May but at Morrice's insistence the Foreign Ministry extended it for only ten more days so he could arrange the details of his travel and his departure, Danis told Forum 18. "Morrice was told to leave before the end of ten days, and he did so on 26 May."

Danis told Forum 18 that the International Church, founded in 2001, has around 150 members, mostly foreign workers in the country and some Kyrgyz nationals.

Moves have long been underway to pass a more restrictive Religion Law. The Presidential Administration rejected a repressive Decree in February that would have restricted freedom of thought, conscience and belief. However, many of Kyrgyzstan's religious communities remain highly concerned by continuing moves to introduce restrictions into the Religion Law (see F18News 4 March 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1096>).

Social pressure on members of religious minorities from among ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbeks remains strong, especially in villages. Some have been physically attacked and religious minorities complain that the attacks go unpunished. Christians, Baha'is or Jehovah's Witnesses have often been denied burial in rural communities (see F18News 2 June 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1138>). (END)

For background information see Forum 18's Kyrgyzstan religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=222>.

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 survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806>, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815>.

A printer-friendly map of Kyrgyzstan is available at <<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=kyrgyz>>

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