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KYRGYZSTAN: Chinese pressure achieves Falun Gong deregistration

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

On 25 February, only seven months after it gained registration as a public association, a court in the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek revoked the registration of the Falun Gong Centre in the country under pressure from the Chinese embassy, which claimed the spiritual movement "encroaches on human rights and overall poses a threat to society". Judge Jaukhar Baizulayeva, who heard the case, ruled that the group conducts "religious activity that is against public and state interests", though no evidence for this was presented in court. Falun Gong leader's in Kyrgyzstan, Marita Shaikhmetova, complained to Forum 18 News Service that the judge was "prejudiced" against the community before the hearing had even begun and was hostile throughout, shouting at Falun Gong witnesses. The judge declined to talk to Forum 18.

In the wake of the court ruling revoking the registration of the Falun Gong Centre of Spiritual and Physical Perfection under pressure from the Chinese embassy in the capital Bishkek, the Falun Gong leader in Kyrgyzstan, Marita Shaikhmetova, complained that the judge who heard the case was "prejudiced" against the community before the hearing had even begun and was hostile throughout. "At the legal hearing, judge Jaukhar Baizulayeva met us with a Russian-language booklet about Falun Gong in her hand that had been published in China," Shaikhmetova told Forum 18 News Service in Bishkek on 10 March. "She told us we ought to read this booklet, instead of greeting us as she should have done." She said the judge shouted at the Falun Gong members and complained that they were not familiar with classic literary authors.

Judge Baizulayeva categorically refused to discuss the case. "I don't want to talk to any journalist," she told Forum 18 in Bishkek on 11 March. "You're not involved in the legal case and I'm not going to answer any of your questions. If Falun Gong is unhappy, let them appeal against my ruling in the city court."

On 25 February the court of Bishkek's Lenin district revoked order no. 1853, issued by the Bishkek justice administration on 8 July 2004, which had conferred state registration on the public association the Falun Gong Centre of Spiritual and Physical Perfection. The case was brought by the same justice administration at the urging of the Chinese embassy. In its communication earlier this year, the embassy noted that Falun Gong's activity in China had been declared illegal in 1999 and cited in support of revocation of the group's legal status the agreement on cooperation in the battle against terrorism and separatism signed in 2002 by the Kyrgyz and Chinese governments and ratified by Kyrgyzstan in 2004.

The court agreed to revoke the movement's registration despite the total lack of evidence that the organisation has any involvement in extremism, terrorism or separatism, and without heeding international documents presented in court in the organisation's defence.

The court ruling, drawn up by Judge Baizulayeva, quotes the Chinese embassy's claim that Falun Gong is an "illegal religious sect" which "encroaches on human rights and overall poses a threat to society" and also refers to the joint agreement on combating terrorism. "The court finds that the communication from the Chinese embassy is an official document and there are no grounds for the court to cast doubt on the facts laid out in that document," the ruling declared.

The ruling cites in evidence that the movement conducts "religious activity that is against public and state interests" and the fact that during questioning in court two witnesses, Tursunaliev and Shamyrganova, gave testimony that was unlike the testimony of anyone in other cases. "In particular, they could not explain to the court precisely what they do in this public association, other than the fact that they do gymnastics and learn to acquire patience and goodness, and teach others to do so," the ruling declared. "At the same time they explained that they read literature related to this teaching, but could not name one author of classic fictional literature."

Shaikhmetova believes that, despite this case, the Kyrgyz authorities are well-disposed towards the Falun Gong movement, but are afraid of China. "Before the court hearing, Emil Oruzbaev, the deputy justice minister who is responsible for registering public associations, invited us to come to see him," she told Forum 18. "He told us frankly that they were unable to do anything once the Chinese embassy had sent its communication."

Falun Gong is a widely-known practice that combines elements of Buddhism and the ancient Chinese exercise known as qigong.

The Falun Gong movement's known origin dates back to the late 1980s as a state-sponsored group in China that promotes personal mental and physical health through exercises developed by the group's founder. The movement experienced tremendous growth thanks to what practitioners say is the effectiveness of the exercises.

According to Falun Gong practitioners and official figures, the size of the movement eventually grew to 100 million, higher than membership of the Chinese communist party. In 1999, thousands of Falun Gong practitioners appeared unannounced outside the communist party leadership compound in Beijing. The surprised communist leaders, particularly the former Chinese president Jiang Zemin, quickly denounced the movement and its founder, eventually banning the group as an "evil cult". The decision was followed by large-scale state repression of the movement and Falun Gong practitioners within China. The persecution of those who practice Falun Gong has now spread beyond China's borders.

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

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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