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MOLDOVA: Muslims vow to defy "illegal" worship ban

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Police banned a Muslim community in the capital Chisinau from meeting for worship after raiding the place where they meet after Friday prayers on 5 March. They detained several Muslims and three Syrian citizens were expelled from the country. "The situation is getting worse, with the police arriving at least every other week," community leader Talgat Masaev told Forum 18 News Service. He and a colleague have been repeatedly fined for leading a community which does not have state registration, although the fines so far have been overturned. Forum 18 has been unable to find out from officials why police raid the Muslim community and have refused it registration for the past four years. "They have the right to meet without registration, provided they do not break the law," human rights activist Stefan Uritu insisted.

The leader of a Muslim community in the capital Chisinau that has been repeatedly raided by the police and ordered to halt its unregistered religious worship has vowed that it will continue to hold prayers. "The situation is getting worse, with the police arriving at least every other week," Talgat Masaev told Forum 18 News Service from Chisinau on 11 March. "But we intend to go ahead with Friday prayers tomorrow, Inshallah!" Last Friday (5 March) five police officers arrived after prayers had finished and banned further meetings, claiming that gathering for worship without state registration is illegal. Forum 18 was unable to find out from officials of the Interior Ministry or the State Service for the Affairs of Cults why police repeatedly raid the Muslim meeting place, why officials believe meeting for worship without registration is illegal and why the State Service has refused to register this Muslim community.

Masaev said the Muslims meet for worship in the offices of a local charity and some 50 were present for prayers last Friday. He complained that during the raid the police had been rude to the Muslims and had offended them by walking in the prayer room in their shoes despite being politely asked to take them off. The police held several community members briefly, while three Syrian citizens were taken to court and expelled from Moldova. Two others were briefly detained for resisting the police, a charge Masaev rejected as a "falsification".

He said a cameraman accompanied the police and filmed without the Muslims' permission. The film was shown in a report of the raid on the private Pro TV channel on 10 March.

An official of the State Service told Forum 18 on 11 March that its chairman, Sergei Yatsko, had already left for the day and no-one else could comment on the raids on the Muslims or why the State Service had repeatedly refused to register the Muslim community. Forum 18 was unable to gain an explanation from any interior ministry officials. Vasile Sterbet, head of the ministry's international relations department, told Forum 18 on 11 March that he did not have information about the case, although he insisted that "everyone in Moldova has the right to worship". No-one was available in the ministry's department for social order or the press centre.

Iurie Spinu, a department head at the Interior Ministry, told Pro TV that religious communities must have registration in order to function. "Under Article 200 of the Code of Administrative Offences, if such organisations are not registered, administrative fines are applied. All police actions are being carried out in accordance with provisions of the above article."

Masaev reported that both he and fellow Muslim leader Rustam Akhsanov had been repeatedly tried under Article 200, though both had so far been able to appeal successfully against the fines imposed. Masaev told Forum 18 he is awaiting the result of his appeal against the most recent fine of 20 times the minimum monthly wage, imposed by the court of Chisinau's central district on 17 February.

"Any person has the right to pray to and preach about whichever God they believe in," Stefan Uritu, chairman of the Moldovan Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, told Forum 18 from Chisinau on 11 March. "They have the right to meet without registration, provided they do not break the law." Asked why he believes the police threatened them and banned them from meeting for worship if the law does not require registration, he declared: "The police often regard themselves as above the constitution and above the law."

Uritu maintained that Article 200 of the administrative code does not meet international human rights standards and should be

abolished. "The police have used it against the Muslims as an argument to allow them to obstruct their activity," he told Forum 18.

A spokesperson for the Chisinau office of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe told Forum 18 on 11 March that it is following the Muslims' case and is seeking more information about reports of the latest raid.

The Muslim community first applied for state registration in 2000, but the State Service returned the application without considering it. Despite taking the case through the Moldovan courts the Muslim community failed to gain registration and has now lodged a case with the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. "We want registration so that they will leave us alone," Masaev insisted.

The Muslims seem to have little sympathy from Mikhail Sidorov, head of the parliamentary commission on human rights and national minorities. He told Forum 18 on 11 March that religious communities have to act according to the law and that if they have any complaints about the State Service or the police they should challenge the decisions through the courts. "The Muslims have not complained to us," he declared.

Another Muslim community led by Mufti Alber Babaev and subject to the Russian-based Muslim Central Spiritual Administration has likewise failed to get registration so far. "Moldova is the only state in the European CIS where Islam is not officially recognised as a faith," Babaev told Forum 18 from Chisinau on 11 March. "But I believe the state will resolve this within the next few months, as it wants to join the European Union and the government is sensible."

He said up to 300 Muslims regularly gather for Friday prayers at a rented facility in Chisinau, with up to 2,000 on major festivals. He said they have had no problems with the police or fines. He said there are about another ten communities of his jurisdiction in Moldova.

Uritu speculated that the authorities might be waiting to register Babaev's group until they have crushed Masaev's group. "It is similar to the dispute within the Orthodox Church between the Russian and the Romanian Churches, where the government supported the pro-Russian Church," he declared. "Babaev is pro-Russian, while Masaev is more oriented towards what I regard to be 'pure Islam'." The Bessarabian Metropolitanate of the Romanian Orthodox Church only obtained registration in Moldova after the European Court of Human Rights fined the government for arbitrarily denying it registration.

A printer-friendly map of Moldova is available at

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

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