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RUSSIA: Sochi Muslims without Mosque, Catholics hope for Chapel

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

In the Black Sea town of Sochi, close to the Georgian border, the authorities have persistently denied the Yasin Muslim community permission to construct a mosque, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The community has been trying to find a suitable site for 10 years but, "whenever I find somewhere, the [city] architectural department says that it's already sold, obstructed by pipes, or something else," Ravza Ramazanova, the organisation's chair, told Forum 18. The community's roughly 70 worshippers currently use three cramped cellar rooms - which Forum 18 has seen - to pray and study. Similarly, local Catholic priest Fr Dariusz Jagodzinski hopes that Sochi's bid to host the Winter Olympics in 2014 will assist plans for the construction of a Catholic chapel in the nearby town of Adler. This, he explained to Forum 18, was how the Catholic church in Sochi was built from 1995-97: "They were hoping to hold the Winter Olympics here in 2002." Forum 18 noted that the Russian Orthodox Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church, Baptists, Pentecostals, Jews and the New Apostolic Church all have prominent houses of worship in the Sochi area.

The authorities in the Black Sea coastal town of Sochi, close to the border with Georgia, have persistently denied the Yasin Muslim community permission to construct a mosque, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Ravza Ramazanova, who chairs the organisation, showed Forum 18 the three cramped cellar rooms where its approximately 70 worshippers are obliged to pray and study. "I'm so tired of writing letters - whole files - it just drags on and on," she told Forum 18 on 11 April, adding that, although she has identified some 20 possible construction sites over the ten years since her organisation was registered, "whenever I find somewhere, the [city] architectural department says that it's already sold, obstructed by pipes, or something else."

In one 2002 reply to Yasin, Krasnodar region's Department for Relations with Social Organisations explained that, in the absence of an area in Sochi populated largely by those "oriented towards the Muslim faith," allocation of land must be accompanied by a survey of public opinion in the area where the mosque would be situated "so as to avoid conflict situations" (see F18News 7 December 2004 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=470>).

In fact, according to Ramazanova, there are positive community relations in Sochi, with members of the local Tree of Friendship nationalities society - "Estonians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, Adygeis, Armenians, Georgians, Greeks" - all supporting her campaign for a mosque. While a prominent public figure - she showed Forum 18 numerous photographs of herself with various local and national politicians, including Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov and parliamentary speaker Boris Gryzlov - Ramazanova said that even an appeal to the local authorities on her behalf by Tatarstan president Mintimer Shaimiyev had failed to yield any result.

Showing Forum 18 a copy of her latest - unanswered - 27 March 2006 letter to Sochi mayor Viktor Kolodyazhny, Ramazanova said that she still retains some hope, however. "The town has got much cleaner since he became mayor two years ago - I think he'll get around to us at some point." The letter reminds Kolodyazhny that he promised, at a 30 November 2005 Tree of Friendship meeting, to review the issue of identifying a construction site for the Muslim community by the end of the same year.

In the meantime, as Ramazanova complained to Forum 18, "all this stops me from working - how are the young supposed to learn their religion, to understand that God sees everything so they shouldn't drink or steal - without a mosque?" She pointed out that there is currently no fitting place for Muslims in the area - Russia's most popular holiday destination - to come for naming or burial rites: "When the father of a Tatar family here on holiday died, they had to come to this cellar!"

The telephone of Sochi administration's press secretary Oksana Velichkina went unanswered on 17 and 18 May, as did that of the city's department dealing with law enforcement agencies, religious and social organisations, Cossacks and international affairs.

Similarly to Ravza Ramazanova, local Catholic priest Fr Dariusz Jagodzinski is hoping that Sochi's bid to host the Winter Olympics in 2014 will assist plans for the construction of a chapel by his 80-strong parish of the Cappadocian Fathers in Adler, a town ten minutes' drive along the coast south of Sochi but coming under its municipal authority. This, he explained to Forum 18 on 11 April, was how the Catholic church of SS Apostles Thaddeus and Simon was built in Sochi from 1995-97: "They were hoping to hold the Winter Olympics here in 2002." Currently, however, the Adler parish is fighting court cases against ten different parties claiming to have been promised the same 700-square-metre plot of land already purchased by the Catholics for 25,000 US Dollars [675,750

Russian Roubles, 153,000 Norwegian Kroner, or 19,550 Euros], said Fr Dariusz, "but we have the official documents."

According to Fr Dariusz, the Adler chapel - while apparently close to Sochi - is sorely needed. He pointed out that some parishioners currently spend all day travelling to and from Sunday Mass, and that even the 100 Rouble [23 Norwegian Kroner, 3 Euros, or 4 US Dollars] single fare to Sochi from nearby towns is too much for a household where the monthly wage is 1,500 Roubles [340 Norwegian Kroner, 43 Euros, or 55 US Dollars].

Forum 18 noted that the Russian Orthodox Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church, Baptists, Pentecostals, Jews and the New Apostolic Church all have prominent houses of worship in the Sochi area.

For more on the problems experienced by religious organisations in securing worship premises, see F18News 7 December 2004 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=470>, 19 August 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=633>, 24 August 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=637> and 30 August 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=639>. (END)

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570>

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=509>

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

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