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RUSSIA: Muslims "fed up" with "not being allowed to read these texts"

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 News Service

After two separate raids on 8 August on the homes of Muslims in Russia's Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk, an "extremism" criminal case has been opened against a 48-year-old Muslim woman who state officials refuse to name. The woman is alleged to be involved in an organisation called "Nurdzhular" which Russian readers of theologian Said Nursi's works deny exists. The same day, another raid lasting 5 hours took place on the home of Yelena Gerasimova. Gerasimova, a professional lawyer, noted numerous procedural violations in the raid, including an invalid search warrant the authorities unlawfully refused to give her. She also told Forum 18 News Service that, for fear of a similar raid, she did not this year host a party to celebrate the Islamic festival of Eid al-Adha on 15 October. "We're fed up with this whole thing - not being allowed to read these texts - but we don't read them", Gerasimova told Forum 18. Other trials of alleged readers of Nursi's works continue, as well as of 16 people in Taganrog allegedly involved in the local Jehovah's Witnesses community. This has been banned as allegedly "extremist".

This year, Yelena Gerasimova did not host a large party at her home in Russia's Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk to celebrate the Islamic festival of Eid al-Adha on 15 October. This was because of her fears that this party - a normal activity for devout Muslims - would be raided by the authorities, as happened to Gerasimova's home on 8 August, she told Forum 18 News Service on 16 October.

The same day Gerasimova's home was raided, another raid took place on the home of a 48-year-old Muslim woman, also in Krasnoyarsk. The same day, the Krasnoyarsk Region police website claimed that Krasnoyarsk Regional FSB security service and Counter-"extremism" Police together uncovered an eight-strong women's "cell" of the "international extremist organisation 'Nurdzhular'". An "extremism" case was opened against the 48-year-old Muslim woman, under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 ("Organisation of an extremist organisation"), the Krasnoyarsk-based Siberian News Agency reported on 16 August.

State officials would not name the 48-year-old Muslim woman, or discuss any restrictions that may have been placed upon her (see below).

"Nurdzhular"?

Gerasimova's husband Aleksei is one of four Krasnoyarsk Muslims tried for involvement in the alleged "extremist" organisation "Nurdzhular", until prosecutors ran out of time and dropped the case in early 2012 (see F18News 5 March 2012 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1675>).

The four were charged because they studied the works of Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi (1876-1960). Muslims who read Nursi's works insist that "Nurdzhular" [a russification of the Turkish for "Nursi followers"] does not exist. Yet sharing Nursi's work may also be prosecuted. As of 18 October, 41 Russian translations of texts by the theologian have been banned by Russian courts and placed on the Federal List of Extremist Materials. A biography of Nursi is also on the Federal List and so also banned from distribution nationwide. Those who possess items listed on it are liable to criminal prosecution (see Forum 18's "extremism" Russia religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724>).

Corresponding court decisions for items on the Federal List offer weak or no explanations for these bans, Forum 18 notes. The few concrete examples of "extremism" given include, for example, Nursi's references to people who do not believe in Islam as "frivolous", "philosophers" and "empty-talkers" (see F18News 5 March 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1811>).

No information

Asked by Forum 18 for information about the "extremism" case against the 48-year-old Krasnoyarsk Muslim woman, the spokesperson at Krasnoyarsk Regional Police read out the title of a report on the case - "Law Enforcement Agents Uncover a Cell of Extremist Organisation 'Nurdzhular'" - on 16 October. Noting that Krasnoyarsk Regional FSB had conducted the operation, however, she directed Forum 18 to that organisation's press secretary, Marina Moiseyeva.

Also reached on 16 October, Moiseyeva was familiar with the case but said she had to seek authorisation before releasing information on it to Forum 18. She told Forum 18 to call back on 18 October if she had not done so earlier. Reached on 18 October, Moiseyeva said that she could not give Forum 18 any information about the case.

Two raids

The raid that resulted in the criminal case against the 48-year-old woman occurred shortly before a separate raid the same day on the Gerasimovs' flat, where Forum 18 spoke to the Gerasimov family on 17 September. Around eight women and 10 children were at the Gerasimovs' on 8 August waiting for others to arrive to celebrate the major end-of-Ramadan festival Eid-ul-Fitr, Yelena Gerasimova recalled.

At approximately 4pm, four law enforcement agents arrived claiming to be local police wanting to check something. "As soon as I opened the door they all pushed in," she told Forum 18. "One showed identification, but I didn't see what was on it - I was in shock."

The women had prepared food for the festival and competitions for the children. "Everyone was hungry and waiting to eat. The children had been looking forward to it all year," continued Gerasimova, "but we didn't get any celebration." The children became hysterical.

A five-hour search of the flat followed, and no one was permitted to leave - not even the children with a few of the adults, or a non-Muslim guest suffering from cancer who began to feel ill.

Procedural violations

As a professional lawyer, Gerasimova noted numerous procedural violations. The law enforcement agents put the women and children in one room; "something could easily have been planted." They did not obtain the permission of the premises' owner, Aleksei Gerasimov's sister, before entering. The search warrant, which they refused to give to Gerasimova, was issued by Central District Court - but the flat is in Soviet District.

The law enforcement agents were clearly looking for banned works by Said Nursi, said Gerasimova. But they took a variety of Islamic literature in Arabic and Turkish - "even though only Russian translations are on the Federal List of Extremist Materials". This included literature earlier confiscated and returned as part of the case against Aleksei Gerasimov, she added.

Russian lawyers have often noted illegalities in the authorities' searches of homes and confiscations of religious literature (see F18News 5 March 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1417>).

Abiding by court rulings

The Gerasimovs - both converts to Islam from a secular, ethnic Russian background - are trying to abide by Russian court rulings. "There is no group of people who read Nursi's books in Krasnoyarsk now," Aleksei Gerasimov, manager of a thriving tourist business and a keen ice-hockey player, told Forum 18 on 17 September. "We're forbidden to do that as a group - so we don't."

"We're fed up with this whole thing - not being allowed to read these texts - but we don't read them," echoed Yelena Gerasimova. "We live in this state [Russia], after all." She insisted the couple no longer has any of the banned Nursi texts; she and her female Muslim friends now read only the Koran.

Just hours before Forum 18 met the Gerasimovs in Krasnoyarsk on 17 September, a popular Russian translation of the Koran was ruled "extremist" by a court in the Black Sea port of Novorossiisk. Russian Muslims are scrambling to challenge the ruling (see F18News 27 September 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1879>).

Crackdown

The crackdown on Nursi readers has spread to various parts of Russia since a Moscow court first ruled 14 Russian translations of the theologian's works "extremist" in 2007, resulting in them being placed on the Federal List. Thirteen Muslims are known to have received a criminal sentence for reading Nursi literature, which law enforcement agents routinely equate with membership of "Nurdzhular". The longest period any of those convicted is known to have spent in prison is nearly eight months (see F18News 6 September 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1872>).

While criminal "extremism" proceedings have yet to result in a prison term in their case, the Jehovah's Witnesses are in a similar position. As of 18 October, 69 Jehovah's Witness texts appear on the Federal List (see F18News 10 July 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1856>).

The latest of these to be added to the List - "What Does the Bible Really Teach?" - is one of several Jehovah's Witness and Nursi

texts to have been banned by district courts in Krasnoyarsk, four time zones east of Moscow. The state's counter-"extremism" campaign against Jehovah's Witnesses and Nursi readers could not have spread so far without backing from some federal officials, Forum 18 notes (see Forum 18's "extremism" Russia religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724>).

The campaign is not uniformly supported at local level, however. On recent visits to Krasnoyarsk Region and neighbouring Khakassia Republic, Forum 18 found non-law enforcement officials taking a quite different view of "extremists" such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Nursi readers from their law enforcement colleagues (see forthcoming F18 article).

Tatarstan trial

Ilnur Khafizov and Fedail Salimzyanov in the Volga Federal District have similarly been charged under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 as alleged organisers of "Nurdzhular". They appeared at Naberezhnyye Chelny City Court (Tatarstan Republic) for the first time on 11 October, Ilnur's mother Raziya Khafizova told Forum 18 on 16 October. Due to the non-appearance of a witness, the hearing was adjourned until 31 October, she said.

The pair were freed from house arrest on 13 August but are not allowed to leave Naberezhnyye Chelny, Khafizova told Forum 18. The case against Nakiya Sharifullina - who faces the same charges and is also under a travel ban - has yet to reach court, she added.

A press spokesperson at Naberezhnyye Chelny City Court confirmed all these details to Forum 18 on 16 October.

Charges against the three were brought after multiple raids on the homes of Nursi readers in Naberezhnyye Chelny on 14 February. Khafizov and Salimzyanov were initially detained for three months (see F18News 20 June 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1849>).

Rehabilitation?

In the Black Sea coastal town of Taganrog, the trial against 16 Jehovah's Witnesses also charged with involvement in an "extremist" organisation under Article 282.2 resumed on 1 October, Jehovah's Witness lawyer Viktor Zhenkov told Forum 18 on 18 October. Hearings began on 13 May and are still examining evidence submitted by the prosecution. This evidence runs to many thousands of pages, and it is unclear when the trial may finish.

The trial at Taganrog Municipal Court follows a regional court ban on the town's Jehovah's Witness organisation as "extremist" in September 2009 (see F18News 2 January 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1786>).

The case reached the two-year legal deadline for prosecutions on 5 August, but is continuing at the request of the 16 accused. "If the case were closed because time ran out, it would look as if that was the only reason - the accusations would remain, they would still be watched," Martynov explained to Forum 18 in Moscow on 10 October. "But they want justice."

Internal government documents have revealed that moves against Jehovah's Witnesses and readers of the works of Muslim theologian Nursi are co-ordinated at a high state level. Both Jehovah's Witnesses and Nursi readers have been targeted in ways that suggest that their believers and communities are closely watched by the police and FSB security service - both within and outside their communities (see F18News 12 August 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1478>). (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's surveys of the general state of religious freedom in Russia at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1722>, and of the dramatic decline in religious freedom related to Russia's Extremism Law at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724>.

A personal commentary by Alexander Verkhovsky, Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis <<http://www.sova-center.ru>>, about the systemic problems of Russian anti-extremism legislation, is at F18News 19 July 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1468>.

A personal commentary by Irina Budkina, Editor of the <<http://www.samstar.ucoz.ru>> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, is at F18News 26 May 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570>.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>>.

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

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