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"Registration only gives you permission to exist"

Kyrgyzstan has registered over 60 communities, most of them Protestant, since December 2018. But some Jehovah's Witness communities still cannot get state permission to exist, while Ahmadi Muslims remain banned. Amid physical attacks on and burial denials to non-Muslims, "giving registration does not guarantee that people can exercise their freedom of religion and belief".

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (05.07.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2NIM6Vg> - In an apparent change of policy, Kyrgyzstan has given many religious communities state registration and therefore permission to exist in recent months. These communities include various Christian churches, Baha'i communities, the Falun Gong Chinese spiritual movement, and some but not all Jehovah's Witness communities. However, Ahmadi Muslims are still banned.

However, state registration does not remove many obstacles to exercising freedom of religion and belief. Members of a variety of communities throughout the country, all of whom wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, pointed out to Forum 18 that among the problems they face "communities cannot have public meetings outside their registered addresses unless they receive prior permission for each event from the authorities, and our experience is that the authorities do not normally give permission", and "the authorities have punished people for sharing their beliefs in public places with adults".

"So practically speaking, registration only gives you permission to exist," one person commented. "Registration does not give you the freedoms one should expect" (see below).

Many leaders of registered communities declined to discuss registration and other problems relating to freedom of religion and belief, for fear of state reprisals (see below).

One Protestant thought that the authorities' change of approach may be due to a combination of: a change in staff at the State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA) and official awareness that physical attacks on religious communities and individuals "is not good for the international image of Kyrgyzstan" (see below).

In January-February 2020 the United Nations Human Rights Council will hold its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Kyrgyzstan.

"The authorities are playing a game," a Kyrgyz human rights defender, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 25 June. "They kill two birds with one stone," showing the international community that there is democracy and silencing religious communities, "as many of them have been vocal critics of the authorities' policies in the past" (see below).

"There is an atmosphere of fear in the country," the human rights defender commented. "The fact that I am afraid to give you my name, and that leaders of registered communities would not discuss registration and other problems relating to freedom of religion and belief, demonstrates this."

The human rights defender also pointed to the authorities' failure to resolve the problems of burials and attacks on people exercising their freedom of religion and belief, including by failure to punish perpetrators. "In this context giving registration does not guarantee that people can exercise their freedom of religion and belief" (see below).

A Protestant leader, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, had separately come to the same conclusion as the human rights defender. The Protestant believes that by failing to punish perpetrators of violent physical attacks and of burial problems the authorities "send a message that they quietly agree with attacks and do not want people to exercise their freedom of religion and belief" (see below).

In the most recent such case, when a Protestant Eldos Sattar uuly was attacked leaving him in need of immediate surgery, the authorities dropped the criminal case using the excuse of Sattar uuly's absence. He fled the country because he received threats from his attackers during the police cross-questioning in Bishkek (see below).

One Protestant said that the widespread condemnation of the attacks on Sattar uuly and members of his church on social media may have influenced the residents of Tamchi to stop attacks (see below).

"Registration only gives you permission to exist"

Kyrgyzstan has given many religious communities state registration and therefore permission to exist. The State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA) registered over 60 Christian churches and organisations, most of them Protestant, between the end of 2018 and June 2019, a Protestant leader who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 24 June.

Fr Viktor Reymgen of the Russian Orthodox Church and Fr Remigiusz Kalski of the Catholic Church told Forum 18 on 12 June that all of their Churches have been registered. Farangiz Zeynalova, Chair of the Baha'i Community, told Forum 18 on 18 June that all of their 12 communities have been registered as independent communities.

The Chui-Bishkek Justice Department in the capital Bishkek registered a public association of the Falun Gong Chinese spiritual movement on 26 January 2018, according to Falun Gong sources. The Justice Department refused to confirm or deny this to Forum 18 on 5 July 2019.

A Falun Gong association was registered in July 2004, but - under Chinese pressure - was liquidated by Bishkek's Lenin District Court in February 2005.

The Jehovah's Witnesses Community in Osh was given registration in early 2019 after 10 years of attempting to gain registration. In the course of their attempts, two Jehovah's Witnesses, Nadezhda Sergienko and her daughter Oksana Koryakina, were placed under house arrest for many months after their March 2013 arrest for alleged swindling but in reality apparently because of the Osh community's attempts to gain registration. Judge Sheraly Kamchibekov acquitted the two women of all charges, telling Forum 18 in November 2014 that "it was a fabricated case". After a long legal battle the case was closed in 2016, but hearings in the prosecutions attempt to reopen the case continued into 2017.

However, in 2019 the Osh community was registered not as an independent community but as a branch of their community in the capital Bishkek, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 26 June. "But it was a positive development that we finally received registration."

However, the Jehovah's Witness communities in Naryn, Jalal-Abad, and Batken regions still do not have registration. "This creates certain problems from time to time, and local officials warn us that we cannot conduct exercise our freedom of religion and belief in public."

Jehovah's Witnesses have lodged three complaints with the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee over the registration denials: on 7 September 2012 against the authorities in Osh, Naryn and Jalal-Abad Regions; on 26 March 2013 against the authorities in Batken Region; and on 27 January 2017 against the SCRA over refusal to register four communities in Osh, Batken, Naryn and Jalal-Abad.

Kanybek Niyazbayev, head of the SCRA section responsible for religious organisation registration, claimed to Forum 18 on 3 July that "we will register them [these three communities]. A couple of days ago we had a meeting with and asked them to prepare their documents. If all their documents are in order we will register them."

Ahmadi Muslims still banned

Ahmadi Muslims have been banned as "extremist" and have not met together for worship since July 2011. All other Muslim communities are state-controlled via the Muslim Board.

"We consulted with our world leaders and local leaders, and decided that we should not be publicly active for the time being and not meet for worship as a community," an Ahmadi Muslim, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 in mid-June 2019.

In December 2015 Ahmadi Muslim Yunusjan Abdusalilov was murdered. A human rights defender who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 at the time that "the authorities turn a blind eye to hate speeches on TV, other mass media, and mosques about Ahmadi Muslims and other vulnerable religious groups".

The human rights defender also noted that, in addition to attacks by Muslim Board imams, the Ahmadis were refused state registration. "All of this created a tense situation and hatred against the Ahmadis."

Police told Forum 18 that "there are two sides of the issue, one is the murder, and the other is the unregistered freedom of religion or belief of the Ahmadis". Asked why the authorities are seeking to punish the Ahmadis instead of investigating the murder, police stated that both the murder and the Ahmadi Community's activity are being investigated.

The Ahmadi declined to discuss the authorities' investigation of the murder. But they told Forum 18 that "I heard that former Chief Mufti Chubak azhy Zhalilov [who resigned in July 2012 amid corruption allegations] was warned by the authorities not to give hate speeches, and I have not heard him making public hate speeches recently." The Ahmadi added: "If we see goodwill towards us from the authorities, of course we would love to register again and meet for public worship. At the moment we only pray individually in our private homes."

"Registration only gives you permission to exist"

However, state registration does not remove many obstacles to exercising freedom of religion and belief. Members of a variety of communities throughout the country, all of whom wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, pointed out to Forum 18 on 3 July that "communities cannot have public meetings outside their registered addresses unless they receive prior permission for each event from the authorities, and our experience is that the authorities do not normally give permission".

"Religious literature can be imported only after passing compulsory state censorship," one person told Forum 18, "and the authorities also demand that they censor and give permission for any text we want to give out in open public places. This is a significant obstacle to sharing one's beliefs."

Others commented: "The authorities have punished people for sharing their beliefs in public places with adults, and young people under 18 cannot even share their beliefs with others in their schools."

"So practically speaking, registration only gives you permission to exist", one person commented. "Registration does not give you the freedoms one should expect."

Obstacles

In the years after the 2009 Religion Law came into force, one Jewish Community, up to four Russian Orthodox communities, and about 141 Islamic organisations including mosques, madrassahs, and foundations under the state-controlled Muslim Board, were registered. But no Catholic, Protestant, Jehovah's Witness or Ahmadi Muslim communities were given registration. The Caritas charity organisation, which aims to reflect the values of the Catholic Church, was registered and does not undertake any overtly religious activities.

One of the obstacles is that the Religion Law demands that religious communities must have at least 200 adult permanent resident citizens as founders, who must give their full details to local keneshes [councils] who decide whether to approve them as founders.

Many religious communities of a variety of faiths have pointed out that people are afraid to identify themselves to the authorities as founders, and that many smaller communities do not have 200 founders and so have no possibility of legally existing.

Many keneshes have claimed that they cannot notarise lists of founders because the SCRA did not issued Regulations to implement the Law – but this did not stopped some keneshes from notarising the founders' lists of state-controlled Muslim organisations and Russian Orthodox churches. This claim enabled the SCRA and keneshes to both keep evading responsibility for granting registration applications.

However, in September 2014, the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court ruled in a case brought by Jehovah's Witnesses that a religious organisation is not limited to carrying out its activity only in the place where it has its legal address, and that it is unconstitutional for local keneshes to approve the list of 200 founding members of a religious organisation required for a legal status application. Yet the SCRA and other state authorities refused to implement the ruling.

Why did the authorities change their attitude?

The SCRA appears to have changed its approach to registration in 2018.

"It was not difficult to receive registration as none of the communities had to gain approval of their lists of founders from local keneshes [municipalities], as was demanded

in the past," a Protestant leader who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 24 June. "The SCRA told communities that this is because the Constitutional Chamber in 2014 denied that such approval is necessary."

The Protestant leader added that "SCRA officials also stated that the 200 founders needed can be anyone sympathising with our community, and do not all need to be members. That is why so many communities were able to register."

Other leaders of registered communities declined to discuss registration and other problems relating to freedom of religion and belief, for fear of state reprisals.

"The Law on the Constitutional Chamber states that Chamber decisions enter into force from the day of their adoption," Kanybek Niyazbayev of the SCRA section responsible for religious organisation registration, told Forum 18. "I do not think it was right that officials after the 2014 decision refused registration to some communities, in my personal opinion." He added that "I did not work for the SCRA then, and neither did SCRA Chair Zayirbek Ergeshov".

Asked about religious communities which were refused registration and now want it, Niyazbayev replied: "If there are any such communities let them ask us and we will help them get registration."

One Protestant thought that the authorities' change of approach may be due to a combination of: a change in SCRA staff; and "that the authorities understand that Christian organisations are peaceful, and that they need at least to help us with the registration in the face of other problems like physical attacks and burial problems in villages. This is not good for the international image of Kyrgyzstan."

In January-February 2020 the United Nations Human Rights Council will hold its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Kyrgyzstan.

Shamil Dyushenbayev, of the Zhogorku Kenesh's (parliament) Social Affairs, Education, Science, Culture and Health Committee's staff, told Forum 18 on 3 July that Parliament "will in September begin considering changes to the Religion Law, and we will eliminate the requirement demanding approval of founders' names by local keneshes." The Committee oversees freedom of religion and belief issues.

"On 24 June our Committee met SCRA officials and representatives of religious communities," Dyushenbayev added, though he would not name the religious communities, "and decided that this needs to be eliminated in the light of the Constitutional Chamber decision."

"The authorities are playing a game"

Another Protestant, who also wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, commented that "registration does not mean that all of our problems were solved". They told Forum 18 on 24 June that "although there have been no attacks since February, and no new burial problems, as no-one from our community has recently died, there is no guarantee that attacks and burial problems will not reoccur in future."

A human rights defender, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 25 June that "the authorities are playing a game. They kill two birds with one stone, and show the international community that there is democracy. By giving registration they want to silence these communities, as many of them have been vocal critics of the authorities' policies in the past."

"There is an atmosphere of fear in the country," the human rights defender commented. "The fact that I am afraid to give you my name, and that leaders of registered communities would not discuss registration and other problems relating to freedom of religion and belief, demonstrate this."

"The authorities have not yet taken serious steps to resolve the problems of burials and attacks on people exercising their freedom of religion and belief," the human rights defender said. "They did not imprison those who have attacked Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others or who have committed arson against their community buildings."

The human rights defender also pointed to the investigation of the attack on Eldos Sattar uuly, a Protestant who was severely beaten up and left in need of immediate surgery. "Police dropped the criminal case. Eldos has had to leave the country after death threats by his attackers, and his relatives under pressure from the police and the attackers' families withdrew their complaints." (Also see below.)

The human rights defender pointed out that "the authorities have sufficient evidence of all these crimes and must imprison these attackers, but they will not. If they imprisoned people who commit such crimes this could seriously discourage others in future from committing such crimes."

In January 2018 the registered Baptist Church in the north-eastern town of Kaji-Sai was burnt down. Baptists think this happened because nothing was done to punish the perpetrators of previous threats and attacks. Police claimed to be trying to solve the crime, but also investigated the victims.

"There have been no new attacks or threats against our members and no new threats that our Church building will be set on fire again," a Baptist from the Church told Forum 18 on 4 July 2019. "We can carry out our activities without any problems." They added that "of course, the relatives of Kyrgyz converts at times put them to shame for becoming Christians, but lately it has not gone further than that". Although the authorities had told the people responsible for the arson attack to pay financial compensation, "they still have not paid any compensation", the Baptist added.

"By not punishing the perpetrators, the authorities encourage attacks against non-Muslims," the human rights defender told Forum 18. "I think this is done to make people afraid to share or make public their beliefs, particularly in the regions. In this context giving registration does not guarantee that people can exercise their freedom of religion and belief."

A Protestant leader, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, had separately come to the same conclusion as the human rights defender. "I think that the central authorities, by not punishing the perpetrators of violent physical attacks and of burial problems, by not punishing the local authorities for taking no effective action against the perpetrators, and by not taking serious steps to prevent such violations in future, send a message that they quietly agree with attacks and do not want people to exercise their freedom of religion and belief in the regions."

The human rights defender told Forum 18 that "the authorities must also be proactive in creating an atmosphere of good-will towards members of non-Muslim communities".

The Protestant leader also echoed the human rights defender. "The authorities must publicly in all kinds of media and social media condemn violent attacks against Christians and followers of other beliefs. They should have meetings with the public and the local authorities across the country to strongly affirm the equality of Muslims and all other

religious communities and mutual respect, and about freedom of religion and belief for all."

"We do not have such divisions"

Niyazbayev of the SCRA claimed to Forum 18 that "we hold educative talks with the local population in the regions." Asked to give a concrete recent example he could not. "I need to think about that. I cannot say right now when we did this."

Asked about publicly condemning violent attacks in the media and social media and promoting freedom of religion and belief for all, Niyazbayev responded: "We can think about it." He then claimed that "we had in Bishkek a 'subbotnik' [volunteer neighbourhood rubbish clean-up on Saturday] with participation of various religious communities."

"We do not impede them from advertising themselves, all religions and religious communities are equal in Kyrgyzstan," Dyushenbayev of the staff of Parliament's Social Affairs, Education, Science, Culture and Health Committee replied when asked about taking proactive steps against violence and for freedom of religion and belief for all.

When Forum 18 pointed out the many known cases when both local individuals and the authorities have initiated and been complicit in violence, Dyushenbayev claimed: "You are deliberately dividing Kyrgyzstan into Muslim and non-Muslim people. We do not have such divisions. If you have any complaints against the state authorities, please write to us and we will investigate the cases."

Sattar uuly case

Akylbek Sydykov, Chair of Issyk-Kul Court, told Forum 18 on 4 July that Judge Toktogul Jumayev terminated the criminal case about the attack on Sattar uuly on 15 May "because the two sides came to an amicable solution between themselves. The Court can terminate prosecutions in such cases."

Court Chair Sydykov denied the evidence that Sattar uuly was attacked and left in need of surgery because of his faith. "That is not true. The charges against the perpetrators were for hooliganism. It was not because of Sattar uuly's religion." Sydykov then claimed before ending the call: "This is not a phone conversation. Please come and visit us and we will talk."

Kanat Aydakeev, Issyk Kul Regional Police Chief, on 3 July told Forum 18 that "we finished our investigation and referred the case to Issyk-Kul District Court." Asked why the case was dismissed, he claimed: "We did our job and what the Court decides does not concern us." Asked why the Police or other authorities did not object to the Court's decision when much evidence exists of the attack against Sattar uuly, he replied: "Please talk to the Court."

A Protestant, who knows Sattar uuly and members of his church in Tamchi, and who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 27 June: "There have been no new attacks on Christians or their families or friends in recent months."

In one of the attacks that continued on Christians and others into 2019, 10 people violently attacked a Muslim friend of the family in Tamchi "because they are a good friend of Sattar uuly's family and refused to stop being friends with them".

Asked why there have been no further attacks, the Protestant commented: "The authorities did not punish the attackers of Eldos or the other attackers in the village. But

the issue was widely discussed in social media and the attacks were widely condemned by society, including many who identified themselves as Muslims. Many said that the attackers should be seriously punished."

The Protestant added: "People are very active in social media and pay attention to what is being expressed there. This is what I think may have influenced the residents of Tamchi."

Zhanara Askar kyzy, Sattar uuly's defence lawyer, told Forum 18 that "the authorities dropped the criminal case against Eldos Sattar uuly's attackers using the excuse of Sattar uuly's absence. He fled the country because he received threats from his attackers during the police cross-questioning in Bishkek". She said that also Sattar uuly's relatives also wrote to the authorities that they have no complaints against Sattar uuly's attackers.

During a formal police questioning of witnesses to the case – held in a police station in the capital Bishkek because of fears for Sattar uuly's safety – Sattar uuly and Askar kyzy were both verbally attacked by the attackers' lawyer and police investigator, Askar kyzy was physically violently attacked resulting in her needing two days' hospitalisation, and she was threatened again with criminal prosecution. Police also stopped Askar kyzy being taken to hospital by ambulance.

Sattar uuly's family were put under pressure by the attackers' families, and during the formal police questioning the attackers' lawyer former police chief Bakyt Abirov also threatened Sattar uuly that "if any of the three attackers get arrested Sattar uuly and his family will be in real trouble with the villagers".

Asked what the SCRA does in cases of violent physical attacks, Niyazbayev claimed that "we demand that law-enforcement agencies investigate the cases and punish the violators." However, he could not say what the SCRA did in the Sattar uuly case. "I do not remember what exactly we did at the moment," he claimed.

Dyushenbayev of the staff of Parliament's Social Affairs, Education, Science, Culture and Health Committee, evaded the question of why the case was terminated and tried to blame the victim. "Why do not Sattar uuly or his relatives write to higher organs, to us the Parliament, to the Prime Minister?"

When Forum 18 outlined the details of the attacks and threats, Dyushenbayev replied: "Please send us the evidence you have and we will demand that law-enforcement agencies initiate criminal proceedings".

Subsequent calls to Dyushenbayev's phone were not answered.

Fighting against violent extremism?

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Violent attacks continue against Christians and Muslims friendly with Christians after an attack on a Protestant left him needing immediate surgery. His lawyer was violently attacked in a police station and herself needed hospitalisation. "The state does nothing", a local person told Forum 18.

Forum 18 (08.03.2019) - http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2460 - Violent attacks are continuing in 2019 in Issyk-Kul Region against local Christians and Muslims friendly with Christians after an October 2018 attack on a young Protestant, Eldos Sattar uuly, which left him injured and in need of immediate hospitalisation. The authorities brought inadequate charges against Sattar uuly's attackers, who are still walking around free despite being supposedly under house arrest.

"In the most recent case, 10 people violently attacked a Muslim friend of the family", a local person who wishes to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals told Forum 18. The Muslim was attacked "just because they are a good friend of Sattar uuly's family, and refused to stop being friends with them" (see below).

In another violent attack a Protestant was in December 2018 stopped in a local market by a local drunk man who demanded that he give him money. When he refused he was attacked by the drunk and others who shouted "we know you are a Christian and we will punish you". As a result of the attack the Protestant had "a swelling on his head and headaches for a couple of weeks", Forum 18 was told (see below).

None of the victims of the attacks want to complain to the authorities as they are afraid of reprisals against themselves and other local people, Forum 18 was told. "The state does nothing," the local person told Forum 18 (see below).

Complaints by Sattar uuly's lawyer Zhanara Askar kyzy to Issyk-Kul Regional Prosecutor resulted in the police replying that "our investigation did not confirm your claims .. When you make such claims, please present concrete facts." She was also threatened with prosecution under Criminal Code Article 299 ("Incitement of national, racial, or religious hatred") which carries the possible punishment of up to eight years in jail (see below).

During a formal police questioning of witnesses to the case – held in a police station in the capital Bishkek because of fears for Sattar uuly's safety - Sattar uuly and Askar kyzy were both verbally attacked by the attackers' lawyer and police investigator, Askar kyzy was physically violently attacked resulting in her needing two days' hospitalisation, and she was threatened again with criminal prosecution. Police also stopped Askar kyzy being taken to hospital by ambulance (see below).

Officials have denied to Forum 18 that any such incidents took place (see below).

Independent religious expert Galina Kolodzinskaya pointed out that "our authorities have declared that they are fighting against violent extremism. If the authorities do not deal seriously with this and the other cases which are examples of violent extremism", she told Forum 18, "Kyrgyzstan will be in a deplorable situation which threatens national security" (see below).

October 2018 attack

After an October 2018 attack on a young Protestant, Eldos Sattar uuly, leaving him seriously hospitalised, members of many religious communities across Kyrgyzstan [expressed concern at attacks and the impunity the authorities appear to give attackers](#). "Eldos is in hospital, and the attackers are in freedom", his lawyer Zhanara Askar kyzy commented to Forum 18 at the time.

[The attack took place after the three attackers – who have been identified - broke into his uncle Nurbek Esenaly uuly's house in in the village of Tamchi, in Issyk-Kul \[Ysyk-Kol\] District of the north-eastern Issyk-Kul Region. The young men involved had intended to attack Esenaly uuly, but found and attacked Sattar uuly instead having over a period of time trying to violently intimidate him "to renounce his Christian faith and convert to](#)

Islam", a villager told Forum 18. Sattar uuly refused to renounce his Christian faith, and the attack left him unable to speak or move his jaws. His known attackers have not yet been punished, have been allowed free to threaten him in hospital, and it is unclear if they will ever be punished.

Police charged the three attackers under Criminal Code Article 234 ("Hooliganism"), but Sattar uuly's lawyer Askar kyzy told Forum 18 that this charge is inadequate for the crimes, as her client "received serious harm to his health and was left half-conscious and without help at the crime scene". She pointed out that police should also bring charges for breaking into the house, as well as at minimum criminal charges under both Criminal Code Article 299 ("Incitement of national, racial, or religious hatred") and Criminal Code Article 105 ("Deliberate infliction of non-life threatening physical harm").

In November 2018 a court refused to order that the attackers be held in custody, even though police do not appear to be enforcing the house arrest the attackers are supposedly under.

Continuing violent attacks yet "the state does nothing"

People in Tamchi have told Forum 18 that violent attacks on local Christians have continued from December 2018 to February 2019. "In the most recent case, 10 people violently attacked a Muslim friend of the family", a local person who wishes to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals told Forum 18. The Muslim was attacked "just because they are a good friend of Sattar uuly's family, and refused to stop being friends with them".

In another violent attack a Protestant was in December 2018 stopped in a local market by a local drunk man who demanded that he give him money. When he refused he was attacked by the drunk and others who shouted "we know you are a Christian and we will punish you". As a result of the attack the Protestant had "a swelling on his head and headaches for a couple of weeks", Forum 18 was told on 6 March 2019. The Protestant had to leave the village for his safety.

The local person added that in Tamchi and at least two other nearby villages some local people are prepared to destroy the homes of Christians.

Issyk-Kul Police Investigator Eldar Egemberdiyev, who is in charge of the case, refused on 28 February to explain to Forum 18 why the attackers of Sattar uuly are in freedom and not under house arrest, and why police are doing nothing to stop further violent attacks. He then put the phone down.

None of the victims of the attacks want to complain to the authorities as they are afraid of reprisals against themselves and other local people, Forum 18 was told.

"The state does nothing", the local person told Forum 18.

As Galina Kolodzinskaya, an independent religious expert from the capital Bishkek, told Forum 18 in November 2018: "If the authorities do not punish the perpetrators it might give a sign to other aggressive individuals to attack religious minorities, because they will know they can get away with impunity".

Sattar uuly and his uncle Esenaly uuly have had to leave the area for fear of further attacks, local people who did not wish to be named for fear of reprisals told Forum 18 on 28 February.

Although Sattar uuly's attackers [are supposed to be under house arrest](#), another local person told Forum 18 on 5 March 2019 that "the attackers walk around freely, in a good mood, dressed in good clothes". The local person wishes to be anonymous for fear of reprisals.

Even when an attacker is supposedly brought to justice, this is no guarantee that they will face the punishment the law requires. [Kyrgyzstan has a long record of not bringing perpetrators, including state officials, to justice](#).

"Our investigation did not confirm your claims.."

Sattar uuly's lawyer Askar kyzy complained to Issyk-Kul Regional Prosecutor as the "Issyk-Kul District authorities have not in a timely manner held prophylactic talks with the local population to prevent inter-religious conflicts". She also pointed out that "Sattar uuly was beaten for being an adherent of Christian religion, but no measures were taken against the police who minimised the motives and circumstances of the crime". She also reiterated that no effective measures have been taken against the identified attackers.

On 26 October Deputy Regional Prosecutor Kubanychbek Shatenov referred the case to the Issyk-Kul authorities.

On 28 January 2019 Colonel Altair Ismailov, head of Issyk-Kul Regional Police Criminal Investigation Department and also the Issyk-Kul Deputy Police Chief, wrote to the lawyer Askar kyzy in a letter Forum 18 has seen. He reiterated that the attackers have been charged with hooliganism, and claimed that "our investigation did not confirm your claims that law-enforcement agencies are: not investigating the case objectively; hiding the motives of the crime; turning a blind eye to hostile actions by local people; and that there are threats to the life of Sattar uuly. When you make such claims, please present concrete facts."

Issyk-Kul Deputy Regional Prosecutor Kuanyshbek Muratbekov (who replaced Shatenov on his retirement) refused to answer any of Forum 18's questions on the case and put the phone down.

Lawyer threatened by police for doing duty

Colonel Ismailov also claimed to Askar kyzy by phone that she is "inciting religious conflict and sowing discord among people", and risks prosecution under Criminal Code Article 299 ("Incitement of national, racial, or religious hatred") which carries the possible punishment of up to eight years in jail.

Colonel Ismailov denied to Forum 18 that he threatened Askar kyzy with criminal prosecution, or claimed that she is provoking religious conflict. "I never said such things," he claimed on 6 March.

"That did not happen" ?

Asked why only hooliganism charges are being brought against the attackers, and not the more serious charges their crimes apparently merit, Colonel Ismailov claimed that it was only hooliganism, serious physical harm was not done to Sattar uuly, and he was not attacked because he was a Christian. "That did not happen" the Colonel claimed to Forum 18.

Asked how he can be sure of this as the facts are well documented and [Sattar uuly needed immediate hospitalisation and went through surgery at the National Hospital in Bishkek](#), Colonel Ismailov claimed that "there is nothing like that in the case materials".

When Forum 18 reminded him that the lawyer had pointed out to Issyk-Kul Prosecutor's Office that police had minimised the crime and its circumstances the Colonel replied "we confirmed that this is not true".

Both Issyk-Kul Police Chief Kanat Aydayev and his Deputy Akylbek Bekishov refused to discuss the case or answer question son 28 February.

Attacker's relative offers money if case against attackers dropped

A family member of one of the attackers met Askar kyzy and offered Sattar uuly 20,000 Soms if he would agree to charges against the attackers being dropped. The average monthly salary in Issyk-Kul Region is about 22,000 Soms. Sattar uuly and his lawyer refused this offer as inadequate, pointing out the serious physical and psychological damage the attack caused. The attacker's family member left the meeting claiming that "you are outrageous and have big appetites".

Sattar uuly's family are concerned that the attackers may try to have a criminal case launched against the family for alleged extortion. Sattar uuly's uncle had led negotiations with the attackers over compensation for medical costs resulting from the attack, which were very expensive. "They are ready to produce false testimony for this", a relative stated.

Safer in capital?

Thinking that a meeting between the parties in the case for police to question witnesses would be safer for the victim if held in Bishkek rather than in Issyk-Kul Region, Askar kyzy asked the Interior Ministry to instruct Issyk-Kul Police to hold the meeting in Bishkek. The Interior Ministry agreed to this.

"We thought it was a victory that they agreed to hold the meeting in Bishkek where we thought it would be safer", one of Sattar uuly's family who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 23 February.

Attack in police station

The meeting took place in Bishkek's Lenin District Police Station on 23 February and participants included Sattar uuly and his lawyer Askar kyzy, the attackers and their lawyer Bakyt Abirov (a former district police chief), and Investigator Eldar Egemberdiyev from Issyk-Kul Police, who led the questioning.

During the questioning the lawyer Abirov and the two attackers "freely insulted us and Christianity", Askar kyzy told Forum 18. When she asked Investigator Egemberdiyev to insist that the attackers and their lawyer behave respectfully as the law requires, Egemberdiyev "ignored this and went outside for a smoke".

"At this point lawyer Abirov grabbed me by my coat collar, put me against the wall, shouted unspeakable curse words to me, and threatened that he will put me and my client behind bars unless we withdraw the complaints", Askar kyzy told Forum 18.

Abirov and the attackers also claimed that Sattar uuly "went from door to door making negative remarks about Muslims and inciting religious hatred", Askar kyzy told Forum 18. "This is not true, but they [Abirov and the attackers] are already gathering statements to prepare a criminal case."

Askar kyzy added that Lawyer Abirov "repeated Colonel Ismailov's earlier threat to prosecute me in exactly the same words the Colonel used. Abirov said that the

authorities are ready if he wants this to prosecute Askar kyzy under Criminal Code Article 299 ("Incitement of national, racial, or religious hatred"), Criminal Code Article 234 ("Hooliganism"), and Criminal Code Article 313 (Extortion of Bribes"), all of which carry jail terms.

Abirov also swore at Sattar uuly, and grabbed Askar kyzy's phone from her to delete a recording she was making of the meeting.

Police and attackers' lawyer stop defence lawyer hospitalisation for heart condition

"I felt sick and dizzy" after these physical and verbal attacks, Askar kyzy said. "Because of the stress my blood pressure rose and I called my husband." She also called an ambulance but police would not allow the medical team into the Police Station. "Investigator Egemberdiyev with the lawyer Abirov prevented me from getting into the ambulance to be taken to hospital."

Investigator Egemberdiyev prevented Sattar uuly and Askar kyzy from leaving at various points during the meeting, at one point "threatening to put on handcuffs". The two were only allowed to leave at 7 pm in the evening. The meeting, which had started at 10 am, was expected to last only about an hour.

As Askar kyzy and Sattar uuly left the Police Station, "Abirov continued shouting threats after us, and said that some villagers are against the Christians and they are getting local people to write complaints against us", Askar kyzy told Forum 18. Abirov also threatened Sattar uuly that "if any of the three attackers get arrested Sattar uuly and his family will be in real trouble with the villagers".

After leaving the Police Station "my husband took me to a hospital where I was treated for an attack of coronary heart disease for two days," Askar kyzy told Forum 18. Coronary heart disease is a very common cause of death. She was discharged from the hospital on 25 February.

One of Sattar uuly's family told Forum 18 that doctors had told Sattar uuly to avoid stressful situations. "He came out of the meeting exhausted, as if he had been attacked again."

"No such incident took place"

Investigator Egemberdiyev denied that anything wrong had happened during the questioning. "No such incident took place", he claimed. He then referred Forum 18 to Issyk-Kul Regional Police before putting the phone down.

Issyk-Kul Regional Police Colonel Ismailov claimed to Forum 18 about the attacks during the questioning that "if Sattar uuly and his lawyer Askar kyzy file a complaint we will investigate it."

"Nothing like that happened. It is all lies."

The attackers' lawyer Abirov also denied that anything wrong had happened during the questioning. "Nothing like that happened. It is all lies", he claimed to Forum 18 on 6 March. He also claimed that "before Askar kyzy came into the picture, the two sides were about to agree that the victim [Sattar uuly] would be compensated without taking the case to court. But after she got involved, she began provoking people into a conflict between religions." Asked what exact actions or statements he is claiming that Askar kyzy made to do this, he could not name anything specific but claimed that "we wanted

this issue to resolved quietly without making it public and without going to court. But because of her we could not do it."

Asked why he threatened a lawyer with criminal prosecution for making a crime public and taking it to court, Abirov would not answer Forum 18.

Asked what compensation for expensive medical costs should be paid to Sattar uuly and his family, he began swearing at Forum 18 and put the phone down. He did not answer subsequent calls to his phone.

Common police behaviour

A human rights defender told Forum 18 that in Kyrgyzstan, if police take the side of violent attackers, they often threaten victims with criminal charges if they do not co-operate with their attackers.

[Police did this after a series of violent attacks on Baptists in Issyk-Kul Region, ordering Baptists to meet their attackers and "write statements that they forgave each other and will have peace between themselves in future". The Baptists found the atmosphere of the meeting very intimidating and coercive. They are convinced that these attacks and the police response contributed to a church being burned down. Violent attacks, including against people trying to bury their dead, have continued.](#)

"I do not know the details of the case"

Suyunbek Munaytabasov, Chief Investigator of the Interior Ministry's Investigations Department, arranged that the meeting be held in Bishkek's Lenin District Police Station. Asked by Forum 18 on 28 February what the authorities are doing about the violent attacks by police and attackers' lawyer Abirov in the Police Station, Munaytbason claimed: "I have been appointed to this position a month ago, and I do not know the details of the case. Let Askar kyzy write a complaint to us and we will investigate it."

Fighting against violent extremism?

Defence lawyer Askar kyzy told Forum 18 that the case and the authorities behaviour "sets a dangerous precedent, and the authorities need to take serious measures."

Independent religious expert Kolodzinskaya pointed out that "our authorities have declared that they are fighting against violent extremism", she told Forum 18 on 28 February from Geneva. "If the authorities do not deal seriously with this and the other cases which took place in Issyk-Kul, which are examples of violent extremism, Kyrgyzstan will be in a deplorable situation which threatens national security".