

Christians Bullied in Muslim Republics

Totalitarian regimes and cultural Islam are huge obstacles for believers in Central Asian republics

In the new post-Taliban era in Central Asia, where Islam is still the prevalent religion and Russia and the West are now moving to strengthen their ties in the region, persecution of Christians is still occurring despite the Taliban's defeat and progress on other fronts. In the central "stans"—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan—reports from local church leaders are both good and bad.

On a winter evening in Ashgabad, Turkmenistan, 60 people crammed into a two-room apartment for prayer and fellowship. Half an hour into the meeting, the doorbell rang, and 10 policemen stood at the door, insisting on doing a "document check" of everyone in the apartment.

"We tried to make it look like we were just drinking tea, but, of course, that is difficult when you have 60 people in one apartment," pastor Vladimir Shamrai, 26, said a few days after the Nov. 15 incident. About 10 worshipers managed to hide themselves in the apartment. One husband and wife spent three hours under a bed.

The rest of the people were taken to the local police station. They were fined a total of \$2,300 for violating a Soviet-era law on religious organizations. Three foreign missionaries, including Shamrai and his wife, Olga, were deported within days from Turkmenistan, a former Soviet republic that borders Afghanistan and Iran.

"Not even the prostitutes get deported from Turkmenistan," Shamrai said.

Pentecostal and charismatic leaders working in the five Central Asian republics that lie between Afghanistan and Russia are generally optimistic about their work in a region struggling to contain militant Islam. Backing up the experience of the Shamrais, pastors and missionaries have rated Turkmenistan the country that represses Christianity the most.

They blame the lack of religious freedom on the country's president, Saparmurat Niyazov, who has created a Stalinesque cult of personality that includes statues of himself scattered throughout the country and requires oaths of loyalty by schoolchildren.

Despite worries that the war in Afghanistan could spill over into the rest of Central Asia or result in government crackdowns on nontraditional religions, Christian leaders report no evidence the fears are valid.

The largest Spirit-filled missionary organization working in the region is Sweden's Word of Life Church, led by Ulf Ekman. Leonid Malko, the Moscow-based head of Word of Life's missionary activity in Central Asia, frequently travels through the region and was kicked out of Turkmenistan with the Shamrais.

Malko, 37, sees tremendous possibilities for the gospel in the region, especially in countries that are more tolerant and open, such as Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. Now, with the resounding defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan, Malko

said it is time to approach that country—but with caution.

“We don’t want to be Christian extremists, saying: ‘Forward! Forward! If death comes, so be it,’” Malko said. “Of course, we have people who would go to Afghanistan. But we’ve got a responsibility to those who are left behind [after churches are planted],” he added.

In October, Malko helped open a new Bible school in Khujand, Tajikistan, which has a long border with Afghanistan and a people who share much linguistically and culturally with Afghan tribes. In a December telephone interview from Khujand, Gulbahor Kurbanova, 22—the Bible school’s secretary—said Tajiks are still on edge, even after the rout of the Taliban. Many of the Bible school’s 63 students plan to take the gospel to Afghanistan because it is part of the church’s vision.

With 200 members, Khujand’s 10-year-old charismatic church is the largest such religious community in Tajikistan, a Muslim country of 6.5 million people.

In the neighboring countries of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, Spirit-filled churches have spread further and grown much faster than they have in Tajikistan in the 10 years since the Soviet Union dissolved. In Kyrgyzstan’s capital of Bishkek, pastor Vasily Kuzin’s Church of Jesus Christ counts 6,500 regular members attending services in 28 separate locations throughout the mountainous nation of 4.7 million people.

“Those people who consider themselves Kyrgyz are officially Muslims and are not so friendly to Christians,” Kuzin said. “This is especially true in the little villages, where, if a person becomes a Christian, he can lose his work.”

Evangelical Protestants are allowed to operate more freely in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan than in any of the other Central Asian states. Nearly half of Kyrgyzstan's 16.7 million people speak Russian and consider themselves at least nominally Orthodox Christian. Oil rich, Kazakhstan has escaped much of the grinding poverty and cultural isolation that afflict other Central Asian countries.

In the Kazakh cities of Karaganda and Astana in the north and Almaty, the capital, in the south, believers are nervous that the war in Afghanistan might bring waves of refugees and political instability to the region.

"Before the bombing, when they took the missionaries in Afghanistan hostage, we were sure that God would do something," said pastor Pavel Lipunov of Almaty. "And now, sure enough, Afghanistan has been opened. Many people are waiting for the opportunity to preach in Afghanistan."

Lipunov, 30, leads the 30-member River of Life Church, which is a member of the newly formed Kazakhstan Full Gospel Assemblies of God association that unites nine small churches. Almaty alone has 100 separate Pentecostal and charismatic churches, Lipunov said. Nearly all of them meet in homes, apartments or rented spaces.

The situation in neighboring Uzbekistan, a country with a terrible human-rights record, is markedly worse for all Protestants. One young pastor who is a native of the region and agreed to interview only on condition of anonymity said he and other Pentecostal leaders are hopeful that they will benefit from increasingly good relations between Uzbekistan, a country of 24 million that borders Afghanistan, and the United States, which has set up an airbase in the southern part of

the country.

Frank Brown in Central Asia