

Russian Pentecostal Pastor Shot Outside Church

The pastor of the largest Pentecostal church in Russia's predominantly Muslim region of Dagestan died Friday after being shot in the head outside his church.

Artur Suleimanov, 49, himself a convert from Islam, was shot late Thursday by a gunman as the pastor got into a car outside Hosanna House of Prayer in the capital, Makhachkala, according to the religious liberty ministry Barnabas Fund.

The group said Suleimanov died from his wounds in the hospital around an hour later. No one else was injured in the attack. Police have not arrested a suspect in the shooting.

Many see the attack as an attempt to intimidate converts from Islam. "Pastor Suleimanov was a wonderful Christian brother and his shocking death is a devastating loss for the Dagestan church," said a Barnabas Fund leader who worked closely with the church. "He and the Hosanna House of Prayer church were very active in ministry and outreach in particular. We see his murder as an attempt to put further pressure on Christian converts in Dagestan."

Dagestan, which is more than 90 percent Muslim, is plagued by insurgent violence often inspired by Muslim separatists in neighboring Chechenya, BosNewsLife reported. Christians there face regular harassment, and Suleimanov was no exception.

Earlier this year, Dagestan authorities abruptly cancelled a five-year agreement with Hosanna House of Prayer that allowed the church to visit prisoners, Forum 18 reported last month. Three other Pentecostal pastors told the persecution watchdog that public attitudes were infringing on their religious freedom, even preventing some members from attending worship services.

Suleimanov is survived by his wife, Zina, and five children, the youngest of whom is 12 years old. Barnabas Fund asked supporters to pray for their safety, that those behind the attack would be apprehended and that Christians in the region would not be intimidated by the violence.