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MONGOLIA: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM OASIS?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 News Service

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"Chinghis Khan invited Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and Daoists here back in the thirteenth century," Mongolian member of parliament Sendenjav Dulam pointed out to Forum 18 News Service on 18 October. "Mongolians are very tolerant in the religious sphere

- I've never come across anything like it anywhere else." For the most part, Forum 18 has found agreement that this is the case among religious, government and cultural representatives in the Mongolian capital, Ulaanbaatar.

The British executive director of Joint Christian Services (JCS), a consortium of 15 international Christian missionary agencies aiming to spread the Gospel in Mongolia through relief and development projects, maintained that the country's 1993 religion law "gives a lot of scope for churches." As a measure of this, Bill Manley pointed to the particularly high ratio of foreign missionaries to the 2.7-million population. While there appears to be no official figure, he said that over 70 are employed by JCS and estimated that a further 150 Korean missionaries operate in Ulaanbaatar alone. Mentioning that two "stadium healing crusades" by foreign missionaries passed without obstruction this year in the Mongolian capital, Manley told Forum 18 that he had not heard of any cases of missionaries being denied visas.

In addition, state registration of churches in Mongolia is both "straightforward" and unaccompanied by attempts at bribery, according to Manley: "But that wouldn't happen to foreigners or anywhere near them - we are held in almost too high regard."

More important in

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practice than the law, however, is relationship-building with local officials, he told Forum 18. "I have heard the same official say that there cannot be a church in a place one year and then request it the next because Christians have made such a difference to the local community."

Lower level officials initially said that they "did not need Catholics" either since they already had Buddhism, shamanism and Islam, "but then they saw us doing things and were surprised," Bishop Wenceslao Padilla told Forum 18 on 20 October. When the Mongolian authorities requested diplomatic relations with the Holy See in the early 1990s, "we set the condition that we could send our missionaries," he said. Eleven years on, the Catholic Church Mission in Mongolia - comprising 45 foreign clergy and monastics--runs a host of free social projects, including kindergartens, English classes, outpatients' consultation, a technical school, soup kitchens, two farms and a care center for 120 disabled children. "I'm not interested in converting people - we are trying to help the Mongolians in their social needs," Bishop Wenceslao insisted. While there were approximately 460 locals at Mongolian-English mass in Ulaanbaatar's new Catholic cathedral the previous Sunday, the bishop added, his mission has baptized only 176 Mongolians since 1992, "but we're not counting."

Although they detailed several areas of very serious concern, Mongolian Protestant representatives acknowledged that they enjoy greater religious freedom than in Russia, to say nothing of China. On 16 October Agaa Lkhaasuren--more usually known by his Christian name, Luke - claimed to Forum 18 that presidential meetings with Buddhist abbots--"not even shamans are invited"--informed government policy towards minority confessions. A Christian lawyer at the Rule of Law Institute of Mongolia, Luke

added that he does not consider this policy to be particularly aggressive, however, and described his country's religion law as "generally good."

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Also speaking to Forum 18 on 16 October, president of the Mongolian Evangelical Alliance N. Enkhbayar--more usually known by his Christian name, Joshua--pointed to the absence of lingering socialist-style controls over religion in Mongolia. Today the state "doesn't have the strength" to monitor religious activity or to control the number of foreign missionaries, he maintained, and added that the motivating factor behind the restrictions which are enacted is not ideological, but "arbitrariness." On 17 October, Professor Dojooiin Tsedev of the Mongolian University of Arts and Culture told Forum 18 that--notwithstanding the purges of the 1930s--the influence of militant atheism upon the Mongolian people had been negligible. "There was a popular joke about a college lecturer teaching atheism in the morning and paying a visit to a lama in the afternoon," he remarked. Agreeing that there had been very few convinced atheists in Mongolia in the socialist period, Sendenjav Dulam told Forum 18 that today's politicians "don't concern themselves with the faith of their citizens--everyone has the right to choose their own belief."

Speaking to Forum 18 on 19 October in his capacity as a religious studies lecturer at the Mongolian State University, the religious affairs adviser to Mongolian president Natsag Bagabandi touched upon the subject of Buddhist influence upon government policy. However, while Buddhist representatives usually complained about Christian activity in the country, said Samdan Tsedendamba, "I think that they should acknowledge the fact that there are people who are choosing different religions from theirs and accept them as competitors." On 17 October a Russian Buddhist source pointed out to Forum 18 that Mongolians' apparent tolerance towards unfamiliar faiths might actually be due to

the Buddhist belief in reincarnation. "A person could have been born in other cultures in past lives, which inevitably leaves its mark upon their present psychology--they might become Christian, for

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example," she remarked. "The Buddhist reaction to that would be: 'It is their karma - let them.'"

Unknown in Mongolia prior to 1990, Protestant churches appear to have experienced something of a boom as a result of the country's relatively large degree of religious freedom. On 19 October Forum 18 observed one of three Sunday morning services at Naidvar ("Hope") Church in Ulaanbaatar, founded in 1993 by missionaries from Hong Kong. A team of young Mongolian pastors and a loud, western-style band led a mixed congregation of some 80 locals--some wearing the traditional silk "geel" - through a series of charismatic Mongolian hymns.

Of Ulaanbaatar's 37 registered Protestant churches, however, this is the only one with its own building, president of the Mongolian Evangelical Alliance N. Enkhbayar told Forum 18 on 16 October. "It is impossible to build in Ulaanbaatar, even if a church is registered," he explained. This was confirmed by Aгаа Lkhaasuren a Christian lawyer at the Rule of Law Institute of Mongolia. "If a community wants to build a church, they are charged five or six times what a business would be," he told Forum 18 on 16 October. "The authorities can't not allow it, so they obstruct in economic or bureaucratic ways."

Registration also appears to be a problem, particularly for indigenous Mongolian churches. In addition to those in Ulaanbaatar there are approximately 43 registered Protestant churches in Mongolia's 21 aimags (regions)--but a further 120 throughout the country are unregistered. While 67 of Mongolia's approximately 100 indigenous churches make up his Mongolian Evangelical Alliance, he said, only seven have registration:

"Since 1997 the authorities don't register indigenous Mongolian churches." Of Ulaanbaatar's 37 registered churches--many of whom received registration after 1999 according to official statistics obtained by Forum 18 - 20 are Korean, said Joshua, including the one church to be granted

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registration in 2003, "in only two weeks." According to board member of the Union Bible Training Center and pastor Dashdendev Dashzeveg, one church in the Mongolian capital has been trying to obtain registration for the past five years with no response, even though the state authorities are legally obliged to issue a decision within 45 days. "Some Korean churches donate 1000 US dollars to the city fund," he pointed out to Forum 18 on 19 October, "then registration is easy."

Dashzeveg said that he is currently involved in preparing a constitutional court complaint on behalf of the Chinese-founded "Time to Love Christ" Church, whose 2002 registration application was answered by a request for information about its finances, whether it owned a building and how many members it had. On providing these details, the church was denied registration on the grounds that it had neither sufficient funds nor a building, he said, even though these are not requirements of the 1993 religion law. According to Dashzeveg, this is the usual response received by churches unable to obtain registration in Ulaanbaatar. Joshua also told Forum 18 that individual khural (local council) members in both the Mongolian capital and the aimags were in practice "more powerful than the law." They might demand that a church obtain its own building in order to function, he said, pointing to a 2000 decree issued by Ulaanbaatar City Khural banning churches from meeting in private homes and gers (Mongolian nomadic tents or yurts) or a provision in the 1993 religion law under which dissemination of religious beliefs in state institutions is prohibited.

Mongolian Protestant representatives also told Forum 18 that, while no grounds are usually given, local authorities sometimes fine churches for not having state registration, even though it is not compulsory according to the 1993 religion law. A typical fine might be only 5000 tugrik (approximately five US dollars), according to Joshua, "but that is a sixth of a person's weekly wages." While he added that some churches "just pay the fine quietly so we

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don't know how frequent it is," Luke provided details of three recent cases in which police targeted Protestant churches based in gers: "In all three it was because they just didn't have registration at that particular moment." In 2001 police in the northern city of Sukhbaatar (S\hbaatar) reportedly detained a young female ger church leader for 72 hours, in 2002 they made a failed attempt to prosecute a pastor in the nearby city of Darkhan (Darhan) after runaway children visited his church, and in 2003 police in Bulgan (250km north-west of Ulaanbaatar) simply banned a community from gathering, said Luke. The official in charge of recording statistics of registered religious organizations at Ulaanbaatar City Khural, Namsrai Baigalmaa, claimed to Forum 18 on 16 October that registration was compulsory.

Even if a Protestant church is registered, the authorities "ask for money all the time," according to Dashzeveg. A 2002 letter from Ulaanbaatar City Khural circulated to all churches requested donation of 500 US dollars to the city fund, he said, "and some churches gave it." The US embassy complained if American-led churches received similar demands, he added. A further lever which the authorities have over Protestant churches is that many must renew their registration licences annually, said Dashzeveg, even though this is not stipulated in the 1993 religion law.

Mongolia's presidential adviser on religious affairs, Samdan Tsedendamba confirmed to Forum 18 on 19 October that there were many complaints from religious organizations regarding annual registration. However, khurals do have the authority to grant one-year licenses to media, religious and non-governmental organizations, he said: "Their activity is then monitored over three or four years, after which they may receive indefinite registration." Also acknowledging the trend in registration refusals and what he estimated was the "very widespread" practice of issuing fines for non-registration, Tsedendamba stated that some

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khurals had "not acted well." In particular, Mongolia has no legal restriction upon meetings in either private homes or gers, he maintained.

While it would be easy to regulate the situation by including a provision for annual licenses in the religion law, for example, Tsedendamba countered that this "might just aggravate the situation." Rather than amending the law, he argued that disputes between religious organizations and khurals would be better resolved by dialogue at the local level. © Forum 18 News Service. All rights reserved.