



## **The EUROPIAN BAPTIST FEDERATION report on Freedom of Religion or Belief in Tajikistan at the OSCE HDIM September 2016**

The European Baptist Federation was founded in 1949 as a regional body of the Baptist World Alliance, founded in 1905, is a fellowship of 232 conventions and unions in 121 countries and territories comprising 40 million members in 177,000 churches. The European Baptist Federation is comprised of about 800,000 members in 12,000 local Churches in Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East. One focus area for the European Baptist Federation and the Baptist World Alliance is Human Rights including Freedom of Religion or Belief for all.

The following report is submitted by Christer Daelander and R. Shane McNary, permanent representatives of the Baptist World Alliance to the United Nations in Geneva. Christer is also the Chairman of the Division of Freedom and Justice at the European Baptist Federation and the EBF Religious Freedom Representative. This report contains information gathered to accurately describe the freedom of religion or belief situation in Tajikistan.

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The European Baptist Federation and the Baptist World Alliance are gravely concerned at how Tajikistan continues to disregard freedom of religion or belief as defined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>1</sup>. Continued enforcement of laws limiting the participation of minors in religious activities and arbitrary actions of the Tajik Religious Council in requiring reregistration of religious bodies creates additional hardships on religious organizations. That these laws continue despite recommendations in Tajikistan's previous Universal Periodic Review is very disappointing<sup>2</sup>. Testimonies of harassment and arbitrary enforcement of Tajik religious laws hinders the free exercise of conscience and full participation in religious observance. Without a firm commitment to ensure unambiguous, equal treatment of all religious groups, the Tajik government fails to live up to its commitments of upholding the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights; further, the Tajik government contributes to the deterioration of mutual respect and cooperation between adherents of different religious groups.

1. Intimidation and fomenting distrust: Religious leaders reported that though they were sympathetic to the Tajik government's desire to avoid radicalization through religious teachings, the unequal way that the laws were enforced may be contributing to conflicts between adherents of different faiths. A minority of Christian church leaders shared that there is no problem for them to register a new church. However, the Tajik government's re-registration process of religious organizations resulted in the closing of many churches. The arbitrary way that local officials respond to registration of churches creates confusion and distrust. The marked increase noted by one religious leader about how the epithet "kafir" has been used with negative connotations by Muslim students against their Christian classmates is one example. This is a marked deterioration with troubling ramifications for the future peaceful coexistence of various faiths in Tajikistan. Minority religious groups face greater intimidation than do Orthodox and Catholic churches. Groups who have a majority of adherents from ethnic Russians face much less interference from the government. One Protestant church leader told of being threatened with beatings by those he described as "the KGB." After he was threatened, he was told to leave the country for his own good. Minority religious group leaders who have been educated outside of Tajikistan face continued suspicion by the authorities. Several leaders mentioned the issue of registration of foreign religious visitors with the authorities – one noting that he faced interrogation precisely because he had arduously attempted to follow the law only to be accused of hosting too many foreigners.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.upr-info.org/followup/assessments/session25/tajikistan/MIA-Tajikistan.pdf>

2. Providing equal protection: In addition to intimidation, pastors and other church leaders report imposition of fines by officials. One leader shared about how portions of Scriptures - a small New Testament in English - had been included in a gift box sent through an international humanitarian group for distribution to children at Christmas. No Tajiks were involved in packing these gift boxes. When the Bible was discovered, the parents notified the authorities. The local coordinator for the distribution was questioned. He and his church were fined though there was no evidence that they were responsible for knowingly importing or distributing the Bible. One leader shared how he was detained for hours by local police because they discovered his personal Bible in his automobile during a routine traffic stop. It was only after being questioned multiple times over several hours that a police supervisor was notified about this inappropriate detention. The supervisor ordered the church leader's immediate release. In late April 2016, a Christian religious leader reported two anonymous calls being made to his church by a caller who identified himself as Muslim. The caller's telephone number was blocked. The caller threatened to bomb the church's facilities within the upcoming few days.
  
3. Recommendations: We call on the Tajik government to immediately and firmly respond to threats against religious minority groups. Repeal laws which infringe upon the freedom of religion and belief for all, particularly minority religious groups. Apply laws related to religious groups, including how to gain legal registration status, clearly and consistently. Train local authorities, including the police and government officials, on the importance of the freedom of religion or belief and on how to consistently apply related laws. Take concrete steps in order to foster greater cooperation and brotherhood among different faith groups. Establish a representative body of religious leaders who could consult with the government on issues of freedom of religion or belief. Encourage interfaith dialogue and understanding through education as well as cultural events. Repeal or modify the law limiting the participation of minors in religious activities. Remove administrative barriers prohibiting the local printing or importation of religious literature such as Scriptures and religious training materials.