

## **Window on Eurasia: Russian Region Persecutes Armenian Muslims**

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Tartu, May 11 - Officials in Krasnodar kray, a Russian region in the north Caucasus, have refused for the fourth time to register the cultural organization of the Khemshils, a small group of Armenian speakers who practice Sunni Islam and who were among those deported by Stalin to Central Asia at the end of World War II.

That has prompted an organization of their co-ethnics and co-religionists in Armenia itself to appeal to the Russian ambassador in Yerevan to get Moscow to intervene in this case and overrule the regional officials who seem intent on preventing the Khemshils from gaining official registration and thus being able to live a normal life.

As a result, this case, involving an ethnic community that numbers no more than 1600 according to the 2002 Russian Federation census, threatens to spill over into an international one involving not only Moscow and Yerevan but quite possibly the leaders of traditionally Muslim countries among the post-Soviet states.

The current situation has been described by the Regnum news agency whose report was expanded upon by the Islam.Ru website last week (<http://islam.ru/press/rus/2005-05-06/>). The facts of the case appear to be the following:

Since 2000, the Khemshils of Krasnodar have tried four times to register with the authorities. Each time they have been refused with officials explaining that they have made mistakes in their application. In the most recent case where the authorities gave this excuse, their refusal was handed back to the Khemshils on May 3rd but dated May 4th.

The Hamshen organization in Armenia, which unites the Khemshils there, decided to appeal to the Russian ambassador there to have Moscow to help out. But neither they nor the Khemshils in Krasnodar appear to be very optimistic about their chances for success via this channel.

Indeed, they suspect, according to the words of the appeal published by Regnum, that „by such actions, the representatives of the Main Administration of the Federal Registration Service for Krasnodar kray are creating a precedent for the appearance of yet another people who left Russia as political refugees' and thus lack rights that other residents have.

And one indication of the level of their despair is the fact that the Khemshils of Krasnodar kray are even now working with the International Migration Organization to organize their resettlement to the United States just as the IMO is currently working toward for Meskhetian Turks and Kurmandzh-Kurds living in the Kuban region.

Should the Armenian Muslims of Krasnodar in fact emigrate to the United States, that would be only the latest twist in their complicated history. For more background on this

group and its problems, see the report on the status of ethnic minorities in Krasnodar at <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/print/analytics/id/592494.html>.

Armenians who converted to Islam called themselves „Hamshinli' („Hamshentsi'), and those of them living in Central Asia and the Russian Federation, identify themselves as „Emshil' - which according to the rules of Russian phonetics becomes „Khemshil.'

According to the Kars peace treaty of 1921, several villages in Khopsk kray where the Khamshils lived were joined to Adzharia in what is now Georgia. Then in 1944, Stalin deported them along with other groups in the region to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan from which they returned only in the late 1950s.

Since that time, some 1500 Armenian-speaking Sunni Muslims have been living in the Apsheron and Belorechensk districts of Krasnoyarsk kray, perhaps their last stop on the territory of what was once the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union before they move on to the United States.