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UZBEKISTAN: Medical institute expels Protestant students

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

After pressure earlier in the year on Protestant students in Nukus in the autonomous region of Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston], two students were expelled from the town's medical institute in early September for membership of an "illegal" Protestant church, the Church of Christ. Protestant sources told Forum 18 News Service that the two - Aliya Sherimbetova and Shirin Artykbayeva - were told that a further reason for their expulsion was that their cases had been reported on the internet, an apparent reference to Forum 18's coverage. Six other local Protestant students have been harassed in Nukus this year. It is almost impossible for Christian churches of any denomination to gain official registration in Karakalpakstan and therefore to meet legally for worship.

Two Protestant students have been expelled from their college in the town of Nukus, the capital of the autonomous region of Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] in north-western Uzbekistan, in retaliation for their membership of an "illegal" Protestant church in the town, the Church of Christ. Protestant sources who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18 News Service that second year student Aliya Sherimbetova and third year student Shirin Artykbayeva were expelled in early September from the Nukus branch of Tashkent Medical Institute.

The administration of the Institute also told the two students that they were being expelled because information about their case had been published "on the internet", possibly a reference to Forum 18's coverage of pressure on the two students earlier this year.

Despite repeated attempts, Forum 18 was unable to find out from the Medical Institute why it believed it had been right to expel Sherimbetova and Artykbayeva. Those answering the telephone at the institute on 15 and 16 September said the director, Oral Otaniyazova, was not in her office and the deputy director, Abdurashid Parakhatdinov, was likewise repeatedly not available.

Sherimbetova, Artykbayeva and other Protestant students in Nukus have been subjected to a sustained campaign from the police, the secret police and the prosecutor's office this year. A teacher at the Medical Institute raided the private flat rented by Sherimbetova, Artykbayeva and two other students in April, confiscating Christian literature and forcing them to move to communal lodgings where she said they could be more closely scrutinised. The teacher also told the students that "it would be better for you to work as prostitutes than to read those dreadful books" (see F18 News 27 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=329).

The same month the town prosecutor M. Arzymbetov wrote to Institute director Otaniyazova to inform her that final year student Iklas Aldungarov was taking part in the Church of Christ, which he described as "an illegal religious sect", and urged her to expel him.

In June the secret police, the National Security Service (NSS) wrote to Karakalpak University, also based in Nukus, identifying three of its students as members of a "banned Protestant sect". Teachers warned the students that continued association with other "sect members" would lead to their expulsion. Protestant churches also face threats and pressure in the town (see F18News 9 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=359).

So far significant pressure on Protestant students in Uzbekistan has been seen only in Karakalpakstan, a region where it is almost impossible for Christian churches of any denomination to gain official registration and therefore to meet legally for worship. Uzbekistan's religion law bans unregistered religious activity.

For more background information see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>

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