
10 July 2003

UZBEKISTAN: Fined Nukus Adventists again in court

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Their Sabbath meeting raided by the secret police on 8 February and fined 23 US dollars each in April, a group of Adventists in Nukus have been summoned to appear again at the city court on 20 July. Deputy procurator Sultan Ibragimov refused to tell Forum 18 News Service why they were being brought to court again. Religious affairs official Nurula Jamalov admitted to Forum 18 that he had told the procuracy that Adventist leaflets confiscated during the raid "should not be distributed in Uzbekistan" but denied that he had banned the Bible, eight copies of which seized.

Five months after a raid on their small congregation in Nukus, the capital of Karakalpakstan autonomous republic in north-western Uzbekistan, and more than two months after they were fined, a group of Adventists have received another summons to appear at the city court in Nukus on 20 July, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Forum 18 tried to find out from the city procuracy why the Adventists were again being brought to court but, reached on 9 July, Nukus deputy procurator Sultan Ibragimov categorically refused to give Forum 18 any information by telephone.

The February raid on the unregistered Adventist congregation came during a series of raids on other Protestant churches in Karakalpakstan (see F18News 26 March 2003). Only one Protestant church has been able to gain registration in the autonomous republic.

On 8 February – a Saturday, the day Adventists mark their Sabbath - 12 officers of the National Security Service (the former KGB) burst into a private apartment in Nukus where 12 Adventists were meeting and began to search the premises without producing a search warrant. The officials confiscated several hundred leaflets setting out Adventist doctrines, as well as eight Bibles. The officials wrote down the names of all the Adventists present and told them they would shortly be summoned to the city procuracy.

On 15 March the Adventists were called in for questioning at the procuracy. At the same time, the procuracy sent the confiscated literature for "expert analysis" by Nurula Jamalov, religious specialist at Karakalpakstan's cabinet of ministers. According to Forum 18's sources, Jamalov replied to the procuracy that the literature confiscated from the Adventists should not be distributed in Uzbekistan, and that the Bible was also banned.

At the end of April, Nukus city court retrospectively fined each of the Adventists 22,660 sums (171 Norwegian kroner, 20 Euros or 23 US dollars) – four times the minimum monthly wage - under Article 240 of the code of administrative offences, which punishes violation of the law on religious organisations. Although the fines were handed down at the end of April, the court minutes were dated 9 April.

Forum 18's sources believe it is no coincidence that the sentence was drawn up retrospectively because, under Article 271 of the administrative code, any administrative case not considered within two months is automatically closed.

Jamalov, the expert on religious affairs for the Karakalpakstan government, categorically denied that the Bible had been included in the list of banned literature in the report he had compiled. "I did indeed write that the Kazakh-language brochures confiscated from the Adventists, which were published in Turkey, should not be distributed in Uzbekistan," he told Forum 18 from Nukus on 9 July, "but I did not write that the Adventists may not use the Bible. I can show you the expert report." He said he had returned to the police all the literature that had been sent for expert analysis. "I do not know what happened to it then." However, Forum 18 has established that the Bibles have still not been returned to the Adventists.

That Jamalov wrote in the conclusion to his report that Christian literature in the Kazakh language should not be distributed in Uzbekistan is hardly a coincidence. Kazakhs make up around 30 per cent of the population of Karakalpakstan, making them as numerous as the Uzbeks and Karakalpaks. In Uzbekistan there is an unwritten directive: "If you are Uzbek, you must be Muslim; if you are Russian, you must be Orthodox." The authorities are conducting a particularly harsh campaign against religious minorities which they regard as trying to convert Muslims to their faith.

In the Adventist community raided by the law enforcement agencies in Nukus, the overwhelming majority of the congregation are of indigenous ethnicities, who are of Muslim background.

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