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UZBEKISTAN: Eight years' imprisonment for "illegal" religious activity?

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Following a harsh crackdown on Jehovah's Witnesses in Samarkand in February - which saw raids, beatings and a sexual assault - criminal charges have now been launched against 34-year-old Olim Turaev, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 News Service. He has been accused of organising an "illegal" religious community (the Samarkand Jehovah's Witnesses have no legal status) and "illegal" religious education. He faces up to eight years' imprisonment if convicted. Prosecutors refused to discuss the case with Forum 18. Eleven other Jehovah's Witnesses were fined, one of whom, Akmaral Rahmanberdiyeva, spent 12 days in custody. Meanwhile, two imams of a mosque in Namangan have been sacked for "illegally" teaching religion to teenagers. Other imams were warned over the same "offence" and the regional head of the Muslim Board was sacked.

Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 News Service of their growing concern about a criminal case which has been launched in the central city of Samarkand against the 34-year-old Olim Turaev, though he has not yet been arrested. Prosecutors have accused him of "illegally" organising a religious community and "illegally" teaching his faith. If convicted, he could face a maximum of eight years' imprisonment. Also as part of a campaign against Samarkand's Jehovah's Witnesses, Akmaral Rahmanberdiyeva spent 12 days in custody in February before being given a massive fine, while ten others were fined. Elsewhere, a local newspaper reported in early March that two imams in the city of Namangan in the Fergana Valley of eastern Uzbekistan were sacked and others warned for teaching Islam to teenagers. The paper added that the local head of the state-backed Muslim Board or Muftiate was also sacked.

Under Uzbekistan's harsh Religion Law – and in defiance of its international human rights commitments – all religious activity requires state permission.

The moves against the Jehovah's Witnesses in Samarkand and the imams in Namangan come as an increasing number of religious communities – including Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists and Charismatics – are facing raids, threats and fines (see F18News 10 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1112). The country's Chief Rabbi Abe David Gurevich faces the possible revocation of his accreditation with the Justice Ministry and thus his right to remain in Uzbekistan (see F18News 11 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1113).

Forum 18 was unable to find out from the government's Religious Affairs Committee why pressure is mounting on so many different faiths. Reached on 9 April, an official who would not give his name declined to discuss this with Forum 18 and said no-one else was present, but said his colleague Begzot Kadyrov would be in the office later. When Forum 18 called back, all the Committee's telephones went unanswered.

Two of the three religious minority prisoners of conscience currently serving criminal sentences are Jehovah's Witnesses. Irfon Khamidov is serving a two-year prison sentence, and another Jehovah's Witness, Dilafruz Arziyeva, is serving a two-year corrective labour sentence, where 20 per cent of her wages are deducted and handed to the state. The other religious minority prisoner – Pentecostal Pastor Dmitry Shestakov from Andijan [Andijon] – is serving a four-year labour camp sentence (see F18News 16 January 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1071).

On 27 March, an official indictment was issued against Turaev, the Jehovah's Witness, under two Articles of the Criminal Code: Article 216, which punishes "illegal organisation of a public or religious organisation" with a sentence of up to five years' imprisonment; and Article 229-2, which punishes "illegal teaching of religious beliefs" with a sentence of up to three years' imprisonment. Turaev denies the accusations.

The indictment - which Forum 18 has seen – was drawn up by H. Shamsiev, an investigator, and approved by B. Kazakov, head of the Samarkand Regional Investigation Department of the Interior Ministry.

It notes that Turaev had been fined 125,000 Sums (486 Norwegian Kroner, 61 Euros or 97 US Dollars) under the Code of Administrative Offences in February 2007 for teaching religion "without appropriate permission from a central organ of a religious

organisation" and without state approval. It said he had "failed to draw the necessary conclusion" and had continued to teach. It added that 18 items of "illegal" religious literature had been confiscated from him. The indictment repeatedly describes the Jehovah's Witnesses as "banned" in Samarkand Region.

Because Turaev has already been punished under the Code of Administrative Offences for "illegal" teaching of religion, any further "offences" fall under the Criminal Code.

Reached on 9 April, Shamsiev refused to answer Forum 18's questions by telephone. "Send your questions in writing," he declared. Kazakov's telephone went unanswered.

Turaev's Samarkand home had been raided on 7 February at the start of the latest campaign against local Jehovah's Witnesses, which appears to have begun with a letter to the police from the head of the mahalla (neighbourhood) committee where Turaev lives.

Mahalla committees are the lowest level of state authority, corresponding to a city district, and are a key instrument in Uzbekistan's restrictions on its citizens' freedom of thought, conscience and belief (see F18News 1 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=698).

During the extensive police raids on meetings and homes in Samarkand in February, many Jehovah's Witnesses were threatened, with some being beaten. One young female Jehovah's Witness was stripped and touched inappropriately by an intoxicated police officer. One Jehovah's Witness student was expelled from the Academic Lyceum in punishment (see F18News 17 March 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1101).

On 29 February the first of the Jehovah's Witnesses interrogated during the raids was fined under the Code of Administrative Offences. Yana Karimova was fined 93,150 Sums (361 Norwegian Kroner, 46 Euros or 72 US Dollars) under Articles 184-2 ("illegal production, import, distribution or storage of religious literature") and 240-1 ("illegal religious activity").

The same day Rahmanberdiyeva, who had been visiting her friend Karimova from Tashkent Region, was freed from prison after 12 days' custody. She was fined 931,500 Sums (3,611 Norwegian Kroner, 455 Euros or 718 US Dollars) under the same two Articles. This represents nearly two years' average wages for the city.

Four more victims of the raids were fined on 3, 4 and 14 March under Article 184-2. Suhrob Karimov was fined 186,300 Sums (722 Norwegian Kroner, 91 Euros or 144 US Dollars), while Larisa Chen, Shahnoza Asadova and Muhabat Adylova were each fined 372,600 Sums (1,445 Norwegian Kroner, 182 Euros or 287 US Dollars) in separate cases. A further five victims were also fined under the same Article.

Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 that no major harassment from the authorities took place as they celebrated their main festival of the year, the Memorial of Christ's Death, which this year fell on 22 March. "This is not because the authorities were kind to us, but mainly because of the extreme caution of the Witnesses throughout the country," one Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18 on 8 April.

In Chirchik [Chirchiq], a town close to the capital Tashkent where the Jehovah's Witnesses have what is now their only legally registered community and Kingdom Hall, the Memorial was attended by officials from the Justice Department, the town's Deputy Mayor, the Deputy Chief of the police as well as other police officers. Kadyrov from the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent was also present. "The Memorial, which was conducted in the Kingdom Hall, proceeded successfully," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

However, police did intervene in other places. In the central town of Zarafshon, police officers arrested Pavel Slivkin who conducted the Memorial and kept him in the police station until he was released at 1 a.m. In Gagarin, a town in central Uzbekistan close to Jizzakh, police officers visited the place where the Memorial was being conducted.

In the southern town of Karshi [Qarshi], police visited four places where Jehovah's Witnesses had gathered for the Memorial in groups of up to 14 persons, including children. "The police officers demanded that those in attendance should make written statements explaining that they had come to attend a celebration," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "All those in attendance refused to make any statements and the police officers threatened them. In two of the places the police found personal libraries, which means that charges of administrative violations will most likely be instigated against the householders."

In previous years, Jehovah's Witnesses have suffered from coordinated raids on the day they celebrate the Memorial of Christ's Death, particularly in 2005. They have also faced constant denials of registration and attempts to strip their last registered congregation of its legal status (see F18News 21 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1009).

Meanwhile, the Namangan Haqiqati newspaper reported on 8 March that two local imams were fined under the Code of Administrative Offences for teaching religion to teenagers without approval from the government. It named the two as Kamolhon Sulaymonov, the imam of the Imom Buhori mosque in the town of Namangan, and the mosque's deputy imam, Tohoon Sattorov.

Sulaymonov had taught religion to twelve teenagers, the paper said.

At a subsequent meeting for regional, town and district representatives of the Muslim Board, held at Namangan's Mahdumi Eshon mosque, the two imams were sacked. Also sacked, the paper said, was Abdulhai Tursunov, the regional representative of the Muslim Board. Other imams who have committed similar wrongdoing were cautioned at the meeting that such activity was "inappropriate" and "dangerous".

No officials were prepared to explain to Forum 18 why the two imams were fined and sacked for teaching their faith and others warned. As soon as Forum 18 had introduced itself on 9 April, Azamat Abdurahmanov, religious affairs official at the Namangan Regional Hokimat (administration), put the phone down.

As regional representative of the Muslim Board, Tursunov had last September held a meeting to pass on instructions from above for imams not to preach during night prayers in Ramadan (see F18News 20 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1020).

The Muslim community is the religious community under the tightest government control in Uzbekistan, with such control exercised through the Muslim Board. (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all faiths as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338.

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=777.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Uzbekistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

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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