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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

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UZBEKISTAN: Children and parents threatened for attending places of worship

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

Police in south-east Uzbekistan have begun a campaign against children attending places of worship, Forum 18 News Service has learned. The authorities' campaign, which also uses the state-controlled mass media, attacks schools and parents who allow children to attend religious "sects" and mosques. Baptist and Jehovah's Witness children were summoned and threatened by Police and Mahalla Committees. Measures against Muslim children are ostensibly taken to stop them from attending Friday prayers in school time, but Forum 18 has found that the measures are in practice aimed at preventing them from attending mosque at any time. Three school headteachers confirmed to Forum 18 separately that none of their children attend mosque even outside school hours, two of them declaring bluntly to Forum 18: "Children are not permitted to attend mosque." Asked why they cannot do so, one headteacher told Forum 18: "Because they are still children." The campaign takes place as Uzbekistan continues to use a film, "In the Clutches of Ignorance", to encourage intolerance of religious minorities, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Presbyterians and Methodists.

A campaign has been unleashed in the city of Karshi [Qarshi] in Uzbekistan's south-eastern Kashkadarya Region against children attending places of worship and their parents, Forum 18 News Service has learned. The authorities' campaign followed a 25 November article in a local newspaper attacking schools and parents for allowing children to attend mosques and religious "sects". Baptist and Jehovah's Witness children were summoned and threatened by Police, Mahalla Committees and school administrations. Although measures against Muslim children are ostensibly taken to stop them from attending Friday prayers, which fall in school time, Forum 18 has found that such measures are in practice aimed at preventing them from attending mosque even outside school hours.

Three school headteachers in Karshi told Forum 18 separately that none of their children attend mosque even outside school hours, two of them declaring bluntly to Forum 18 on 9 January: "Children are not permitted to attend mosque." Asked why they cannot do so, one headteacher told Forum 18: "Because they are still children."

Police Inspector Ochilov of Karshi Police - who compelled schoolchildren and their parents who attend Jehovah's Witness and Baptist meetings to write statements including detailed information on the organisations - refused to discuss why children and their parents are being pressured. "Ask the Regional Hokimat [administration] about it," he told Forum 18 on 6 January. Neither was Mamatkul Rajapov, responsible for work with religious organisations at Kashkadarya Regional Hokimat, willing to talk to Forum 18 on 6 January.

An independent human rights defender from the capital Tashkent, who wanted to remain unnamed, told Forum 18 that local Police Departments in Kashkadarya Region told parents that they risked losing parental rights unless they stop taking their children to religious meetings. The advocate expressed his concern, saying that it is "clear" that administrative and criminal proceedings against the unregistered churches in Kashkadarya region will follow, and measures will be taken against the parents of those children. "The children will be put in police records for preventive work."

Imam Abdulkadir of Khonakokh mosque in Karshi, who did not give his last name, downplayed the issue, claiming that children are allowed to attend mosques. "But they can do it only after school hours," he told Forum 18 on 9 January. "We have no problems in Uzbekistan in terms of freedom of religion."

Asked whether schoolchildren are allowed to attend mosques, the imam of Karshi's Navo mosque refused to say. "Talk to the government about such issues," he told Forum 18 on 8 January.

The Council of Churches Baptists reported that on 3 December, Police Inspector Ochilov of Karshi Police summoned many children who attend Baptist services, together with their teachers and parents. "Inspector Ochilov warned that the children should neither attend religious meetings nor tell others about God," the Baptists complained to Forum 18 on 2 January. The Baptists also complained that their services in Karshi are often raided by the local authorities, who confiscate their Christian literature and make official records of the meetings.

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The human rights defender from Tashkent confirmed to Forum 18 that during the 3 December meeting – also attended by Botyr Kodyrov, the Deputy Chief of Karshi Police - Inspector Ochilov compelled three schoolchildren – whose names are known to Forum 18 – and their Baptist parents to write statements.

The human rights defender told Forum 18 that not only Baptist children but also those attending Jehovah's Witnesses meetings were also summoned with their parents by Karshi Police. Police inspectors "made" children write statements. The children were "compelled" to include information in their statements on how long they have been attending the "sect", who led them to the "sect", at which address and on which days religious meetings are held, who leads the meetings, how many people attend, which religious books are read, and which fellow believers they personally know.

The police moves followed an article "Fallen into Fanaticism" by Safar Ruziboev, published on 25 November in the Uzbek-language Qashqadaryo newspaper, telling how some teachers and secondary school pupils "fell prey" to foreign religious ideas.

Some girls – who are not named - in schools number 3, 14, 26 in Karshi and number 99 in Shahrisabz District of Kashkadarya Region come to school in hijabs (Muslim headscarves), the article claims. Around 50 pupils from schools number 29, 12, 23, 43 are also said to attend mosques Khonakokh, Navo and Kilichbek-kurgancho for juma namaz (early afternoon prayer on Fridays). "Some of these pupils attend the mosques accompanied by their parents, who indoctrinate them," the article complains.

The author then focuses on minority faiths, claiming that in Karshi recently the number of non-Islamic religious "sects" and their followers increased. "The pupils of School Number 15, Tanzilya Arslanova and Albina Buzrukova, were engaged in spreading the ideas of the non-Islamic Jehovah's Witnesses sect. Together with their like-minded fellow pupils they take part in illegal meetings held in the homes of the leaders of this sect. The pupils of the same school, Ulugbek Shomatov, Dildora Khusainova and Shahrizoda Hasanova, the pupil of School 12 Raisa Chernysh, and the student of Karshi medical college Sayera Boymuradova, whose parents are members of the Jehovah's Witnesses sect, take part in illegal gatherings," the article maintains.

"The illegally functioning Christian sect of Baptists" in Kashkadarya is claimed to be "broadening its activity." "Its members employ various methods of work with the schoolchildren in order to involve them in their unlawful activity," the article complains. It claims that Dilafruz Zhabborova, the pupil of School Number 3 in Kasan District, Kamila Tashpulatova, the pupil of Karshi special secondary School Number 1, Stanislav Kuznetsov, the pupil of school number 9, Feruz Khamraev, the pupil of School Number 11, Hilola Balikulova, the pupil of the Special School for those with Impaired Hearing and Seeing, and Shahboz Shukhratov, the pupil of a school in Chirokchi district, "fell under the influence of the illegal religious sect through either parents or acquaintances, and are engaged in propagating it where they live and study."

The article warns that imams, mahalla committees, and the management of schools must undertake "serious work" with parents to "counter" such facts. "Family-Mahalla-School conferences in the secondary schools must be reinforced, to not allow involving and participation of youth in various religious-extremist movements," the author insists. "At the end of the day, it is our common and important task to educate children."

Family-Mahalla-School conferences are held in addition to the usual parent-teacher conferences, schools in Karshi also hold meetings for parents with the participation of mahalla committee representatives once a term. Schools in Uzbekistan usually have four terms a year. One headteacher stated that it is "normal" to work with mahalla representatives.

Mahalla committees are a key part of Uzbekistan's structures of control and oppression (see F18News 27 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936).

On 26 November, the day after publication of the article, the parents of one child were called in for a talk by Ulugbek Sattarovich (last name unknown), the headteacher of school number 1, the Baptists told Forum 18. The headteacher asked them to write statements explaining what was written in the newspaper article and to promise that their children would no longer attend religious meetings. The parents refused.

On 27 November the parents were summoned by the mahalla committee, where officials demanded that the pupil's mother promise in writing that she would not take her children to Christian meetings, which she refused to do, Forum 18 was told. "She was warned that she could be deprived of her parental rights if she did not heed the warning," the Baptists complained.

The human rights defender from Tashkent told Forum 18 that the parents of all the children whose names were mentioned in the article were called in by the management of their schools, instructed to write statements, to stop taking children to the religious meetings. Schools also arranged general assemblies, he reported. "All children were assembled in front of the schools where the article was read out-loud and the children whose names were mentioned in the article were mocked and called Wahhabis," he said.

"Wahhabism" is a form of Sunni Islam, and the term is often incorrectly used in the former Soviet Union to describe religious groups officials do not like.

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The Baptists told Forum 18 that children in those general assemblies were warned to neither talk to religious believers nor attend their meetings. "We regard this as incitement of animosity and hatred on the basis of religious convictions, which is in fact prohibited by Uzbekistan's Religion Law."

After being summoned to schools, the human rights defender said, the same parents were called in by the mahalla committees, and once again instructed to write a statement pledging to stop taking their children to religious meetings. The parents were then summoned by the local police and subjected to the same demand yet again, the advocate told Forum 18. They were "threatened" by the police that they could be "deprived of their parental rights", he reported.

Narzullo Ravshanov, the Editor-in-Chief of Qashqadaryo, was not available to talk to Forum 18. His secretary referred Forum 18 on 9 January to another newspaper employee Abdurrazak Muradov. However, Muradov said he was familiar with the article but declined to make comments. He also declined to give the contact details of Ruziboev, the author of the article.

One of the headteachers, who preferred to remain unnamed, insisted to Forum 18 that the newspaper published "misinformation" about their school by accusing some of its pupils of attending mosques. "We asked the newspaper to give a rebuttal," she complained, "but they have not done so yet."

Sibira Muazzinova, the headteacher of School Number 29, told Forum 18 that no pupil from their school attended mosques during school hours. "We called an urgent meeting in the school with children and parents immediately after the article was published," she told Forum 18 from Karshi on 9 January. She said they did not identify anyone attending mosques. "The author probably confused children from our school with those of another one nearby," she said.

Children go to schools in Karshi in two shifts, one Karshi headteacher explained to Forum 18. The morning shift ends at 1:20 p.m. and exactly 10 minutes later, at 1:30 p.m., the afternoon shift begins. The Friday afternoon juma namaz starts at 1 p.m., as Imam Abdulkadir noted, and so children from the morning shift wanting to attend would have to miss some classes. Children from the afternoon shift might have some possibility to attend juma namaz without having to miss classes, but only if they could reach the school before classes start.

Imam Abdulkadir told Forum18 that he was invited to some of the schools mentioned in the article, soon after it was published, to explain to parents and children that children should not be attending mosques during school hours. "We want children to know about religion but we also want them to be good at their lessons in the school," he told Forum 18.

"The author of the article sounds like he is against schoolchildren following Islam," the imam commented. "He probably does not also know Uzbekistan's Constitution, which grants people freedom of conscience." The imam explained that the author mistakenly calls the Uzbek national headwear worn by some schoolgirls the hijab. "The hijab is a totally different kind of religious apparel," he maintained.

Headteacher Muazzinova told Forum 18 that the issue of children attending religious services was raised at their next Family-Mahalla-School conference. "We explained to children and parents that children cannot attend mosques on Fridays for juma namaz since it interferes with school hours."

Nodir Akhadov, a local human rights defender, said he had not read the article but that the media campaign did not appear to him unusual. "The authorities in Karshi oppose all who teach doctrines other than the Uzbek government's doctrines propagated by Uzbek television channels and newspapers," he told Forum 18 on 8 January from Karshi. "The government sees opponents in the representatives of minority faiths and independent Muslim believers." Akhadov said he believed the government "fears" these religious organisations could attract many adherents, and so "lose them from their sphere of influence".

Another headteacher told Forum 18 that they had been told the author of the article was a National Security Service (NSS) secret police officer, but refused to reveal where they had the information from. Akhadov also said he did not recognise the author of the article. "I would not be surprised if the NSS secret police gave the information to the newspaper and told them to publish it."

The NSS secret police maintains a close watch on all religious communities, and actively recruits agents within them (see F18News 5 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1014).

Meanwhile, sources in Tashkent told Forum 18 that the film "In the Clutches of Ignorance" - which attacked a number of religious minorities, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Presbyterians and Methodists - was re-shown to students in state-run educational institutions in Tashkent and a number of other locations in late 2008.

"In one college they gathered all the students, saying they had to see it," one Tashkent resident told Forum 18. "Every student had to sign a statement to say they had seen it and are now informed." The resident said one student told the dean of the college that he did not understand Uzbek, the language the film was being shown in. The dean replied: "I don't care - you must go to see it." Mahalla committees also showed the film in recent months to local residents.

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The film was shown on television first in Uzbek in May and then in Russian in June (see F18News 25 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1148).

Members of religious minorities in Uzbekistan note that media attacks often go in parallel with increased persecution and more social intolerance experienced by members of minorities. Protestants were also attacked in December 2006 by an earlier prime-time national television attack on Protestant churches, screened in two parts two nights running, The programme coincided with raids and fines on Protestant communities (see F18News 19 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=890). The programmes were – like the most recent TV film - repeated later, while newspaper attacks on religious minorities have continued intermittently. (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=1170.

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.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY

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