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UZBEKISTAN: Banned from meeting fellow-believers

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Gafur Yusupov, who lives in a home for people with disabilities in eastern Uzbekistan, has been banned from attending his Baptist Church, Forum 18 News Service has learned. All his Christian books and audio tapes have also been taken from him, and he has been banned from having any contact with his fellow believers. When Baptists complained, the home told them to talk to the NSS secret police. Asked by what authority the home did this, its director Tahir Gaziev replied: "We have asked the Baptists to show us an official document that says they are allowed to invite people to their meetings. Only after they show us such a document will we allow him [Yusupov] to attend." When Forum 18 asked why Yusupov is not allowed to decide this himself, Gaziev put the phone down. In a separate case, the family of Protestants punished for "illegal" religious activity have been threatened with administrative or criminal charges and 15-days detention if they carry on protesting about the punishment. Asked why the family were threatened, District Police Chief Izzat Yusupov replied: "You are Forum 18 and I am Barack Obama", before he hung up the phone.

Gafur Yusupov, who lives in a home for people with disabilities in the city of Fergana [Farghona] in eastern Uzbekistan, has been banned from attending the Baptist Church of which he is a member, Baptists have complained to Forum 18 News Service. The home's director, Tahir Gaziev, also banned him from having any contact with his fellow believers. All Yusupov's Christian books and audio-tapes were also taken from him, Baptists also complained. Gaziev defended his actions to Forum 18.

The isolation of Yusupov from his fellow-believers comes as the Uzbek authorities continue to harass and raid religious communities of all faiths, imprison and fine individual believers, and confiscate and destroy religious literature. "We will continue to fine you and burn your literature," one police officer in the capital Tashkent told local Baptists.

Some of the fines handed down so far in 2009 for unapproved religious activity have been as much as 100 times the minimum monthly wage (see F18News 8 June 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1307).

The Uzbek authorities have imprisoned many people for practising their faith. A total of 25 followers of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi have so far in 2009 been given almost 200 years in jail, Forum 18 notes. Among other prisoners of conscience still serving sentences are a Pentecostal pastor from Andijan [Andijon] in eastern Uzbekistan, Dmitry Shestakov, who is serving a four year sentence, and three Jehovah's Witnesses: Abdubannob Ahmedov, Sergei Ivanov, and Olim Turaev (see F18News 4 June 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1306).

Banned from meeting his fellow-believers

Yusupov, who has no legs, lives in Sakhovat Uyi (Grace Home) in Fergana. The congregation Yusupov belongs to is part of the Baptist Council of Churches. Their congregations refuse to register with the state, arguing that registration represents unacceptable state interference in their activity. They also point out that Uzbekistan's Constitution guarantees them the right to practice their faith freely.

Over the last few years, church members would take Yusupov to Sunday services in a wheel-chair. Now he is even banned from coming to the gates of the home to talk to church members who try to visit him. When they complained about this, the administration of the home told the Baptists to talk to the National Security Service (NSS) secret police. "Please, ask them. If they allow you to meet, we will not be against it."

Gaziev, Director of Sakhovat Uyi, confirmed that he prohibited Yusupov from attending the Baptist Church. "Gafur was distributing religious literature here [in the home]," he told Forum 18 on 1 June.

Asked whether he had the authority to ban Yusupov from any contact with his religious community, Gaziev responded: "We have asked the Baptists to show us an official document that says they are allowed to invite people to their meetings. Only after they show us such a document will we allow him [Yusupov] to attend." When Forum 18 asked why Yusupov is not allowed to make the decision for himself, Gaziev put the phone down. Called back later, his secretary said Gaziev was not available to talk.

Local Baptists told Forum 18 on 26 June that Yusupov is still not being allowed any contact with his fellow Baptists.

Tashkent Baptist fines

Three Baptists, Lidiya Markelova, Oksana Usmanova and Albina Akhmadieva, were each fined 280,400 Soms (1,205 Norwegian Kroner, 133 Euros or 187 US Dollars) by a Tashkent court on 4 June, local Council of Churches Baptists told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 27 June. The three women were accused of distributing Christian books and leaflets. The court ordered that the Uzbek-language literature confiscated from them be destroyed. Russian-language books and leaflets were ordered to be handed over to the government's Religious Affairs Committee.

The three women were forced to go to the police station on 24 May, after police stopped them from offering Christian literature to passers-by on the street in the city's Hamza District. Local Baptists quote police officer Sabir Isaakov as telling the women: "You are not registered. We have banned you from going out with libraries, yet you still go out and agitate among the people. That's why we will continue to fine you and burn your literature."

While the three women were being held at the local police station, members of their church gathered outside to try to find out what was happening. They sang hymns and gave out Christian literature.

Local Baptists told Forum 18 they are calling for prayer for the fines to be overturned, the confiscated literature to be returned and for "the believers to be able to conduct their mobile Christian library service without obstruction".

In a separate case, on 9 June Judge D. Valiev of Tashkent's Hamza District Criminal Court fined Vladimir Musatov 280,400 Soms (1,205 Norwegian Kroner, 133 Euros or 187 US Dollars) for distributing religious books and leaflets of a "missionary nature", Council of Churches Baptists told Forum 18. At the same trial, fellow Baptist Lidiya Guseva was fined half that amount. Judge Valiev ordered to transfer the confiscated Russian-language literature to the Religious Affairs Committee and to destroy the Uzbek-language literature.

The literature was confiscated from Musatov and Guseva on 31 May, while they were offering it to passers-by on the street, Baptists told Forum 18. The Religious Affairs Committee provided the court with an "expert analysis" on 2 June that the books and leaflets are of a "missionary nature", and therefore their import into and distribution in Uzbekistan is banned.

Judge Valiev (who did not give his first name) refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 25 June. "If they don't like the decision they can file a complaint," he said. Asked whether distributing religious literature is banned in Uzbekistan, he responded, "I will not tell you that. I will not give you any information over the phone." He then put the phone down.

Protestant family harassed in Andijan Region

Andijan Region's Jalakuduk District authorities have threatened family members of Mahmudjon Boynazarov, a member of an unregistered Protestant Church in the town of Kurgantepe, Protestants who asked not to be identified for fear of reprisals from the authorities told Forum 18.

Boynazarov was one of three Protestants sentenced to 15-day jail terms on 3 March after police raided a meal in a private home in the town. Together with Mahmudjon Turdiev and Ravshanjon Bahramov, Boynazarov was found guilty of violating Article 241 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes violating the procedure for teaching religious doctrines (see F18News 18 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1270).

On 19 March Andijan Regional Appeal Court, in the absence of Turdiev and Boynazarov, rejected their appeal and upheld the original court decision. The two then wrote complaints to various authorities, Protestants told Forum 18.

Boynazarov's brothers, sisters and elderly mother have been summoned to the committee of their mahalla (local town district). There they were pressured by District Prosecutor's Office officials to stop complaining against the court decision and the local Police, Protestants told Forum 18.

Izzat Yusupov, Chief of Jalakuduk District Police, also warned Boynazarov's family members that they could face administrative charges, 15-day administrative detention, and even criminal charges if they continued. Official warnings were issued against Mahmudjon himself, three sisters Rahima, Gulchohra and Gulnoro Boynazarov, and his wife Matlube. Boynazarov refused to sign the warning, saying it was unlawful.

In addition, Jalakuduk District Police officers "unlawfully" harassed Boynazarov's 16-year-old son Oybek, who studies at a local college, Protestants complained to Forum 18. In particular, a police crime prevention inspector reportedly instructed the student head of their group to report on Oybek's actions while in the college.

Abduvahid Kadyrov of Jalakuduk District Prosecutor's Office denied that they had anything to do with the Boynazarov family. He told Forum 18 on 1 June that the Boynazarovs had been summoned not to the Prosecutor's Office but to the District Police Office.

District Police Chief Yusupov refused to tell Forum 18 on 1 June why he had threatened the Boynazarov family, claiming that the telephone line was bad. Reached again on 26 June, Forum 18 again introduced itself and asked why the family has been threatened. "You are Forum 18 and I am Barack Obama," he responded and hung up the phone.

Another two Baptists fined in Fergana

On 29 March Artur Alpaev and Vadim Bakeev, members of the Council of Churches Baptist Church of Fergana, were visiting Fergana Region's Oltiaryk District to share their faith with local people and offer them Christian books free of charge. Police Inspector Mahmudov (his first name unknown) stopped them after they managed to talk to a few people. He detained the two men and brought them to the District Police Station, where officers confiscated five booklets from them. Alpaev and Bakeev were released after official records were drawn up.

On 12 April the two were again stopped by the Police in Oltiaryk District when they returned there to invite people to the church for its Easter celebration (marked on 19 April). This time they were taken to the Fergana Regional Police Department, where Anti-terrorist Police questioned them.

On 5 May Alpaev and Bakeev were summoned to Oltiaryk District Court. When the Judge found out that Alpaev had been detained three times for the same "violation", he referred the case to the District Prosecutor's Office for a criminal case to be filed against the two Protestants.

An official of the Oltiaryk District Prosecutor's Office (who did not give his name) told Forum 18 on 25 June that the Prosecutor filed an administrative case against the two some time ago, and the Court "already two weeks ago" gave a fine to both. He said he did not know how big the fines were.

The Oltiaryk Court told Forum 18 on 25 June that Judge Altanov (his first name was not given) tried the case. Asked about the details of the fine, the Court official, who did not give her name, refused to discuss the case further and put the phone down. Forum 18 was not able to reach Judge Altanov on 25 and 26 June.

New raid on Mubarek Baptists

The Council of Churches Baptist congregation in the town of Mubarek in the Kashkadarya Region of southern Uzbekistan, which has only 10 adult members, has again faced a raid. The church was several times harassed by the local authorities in 2008, with fines being handed down for unregistered worship and warnings that children who attended would be imprisoned (see F18News 8 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1169).

Mid-morning on 10 May, during the congregation's Sunday service, the home of Vladimir Khanyukov was raided by eight plain clothes Police officers. The officers claimed that they were conducting a routine passport "check-up". Despite the Baptists' insistence, only one officer, Rustam Nursaidov, showed his identity document.

Without warrants, the officers confiscated three hymn-books, several Christian calendars and leaflets. They also demanded all those present to hand over their hymn-books. In the course of the two-hour raid, the officers filmed those present on video-camera and cell phones, as well as taking photographs of the children. Then they made official records of all the people present. The officers left without telling church members of the contents of the records.

Meanwhile, Greater Grace Protestant Church in the central city of Samarkand [Samarqand] is still unable to meet for worship after it was twice warned by the local Police. "We are afraid to meet in people's homes," one member told Forum 18 on 26 June.

Police and the NSS secret police raided the church on 1 April, as a result of which it lost its place for holding Sunday services and Bible classes (see F18News 8 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1282). (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>.

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