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UZBEKISTAN: Two more foreigners deported for religious activity

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

A Baha'i and a Protestant, both living legally in Uzbekistan, were deported in late 2009 to punish them for their religious activity. Russian Protestant Andrei Tsepurkin told Forum 18 News Service that the NSS secret police was behind his expulsion. Deported Baha'i Sepehr Taheri, a British citizen who had lived in the capital Tashkent since 1990, is married to an Uzbek citizen and their children were all born there. A local news website accused him of "propagandising Baha'i religious teaching" and organising "illegal meetings" in private homes. The website's chief editor, Pyotr Yakovlev, defended the media attack and denied to Forum 18 that his publication is a mouthpiece for the state's anti-religious campaign. Daniyol Juraev, director of Gorizont - another news website which has attacked Baha'is, Baptists and other Protestants, and Jehovah's Witnesses - refused to tell Forum 18 why he does not seek and publish responses from religious communities attacked in articles to the often serious allegations against them.

Two foreigners with legal residency in Uzbekistan were stripped of the right to live there and deported in late 2009 to punish them for their religious activity, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Sepehr Taheri, a Baha'i with British citizenship who had lived in the Uzbek capital Tashkent since 1990, is married to an Uzbek citizen and their children were all born there. In the wake of his deportation, a local news website accused Taheri of "propagandising Baha'i religious teaching" and increasing the number of "proselytes" in the country. The website's chief editor defended to Forum 18 its publication of the article, which was written by the same author who attacked the previous Baha'i to be expelled from Uzbekistan. Also deported in late 2009 was Russian Protestant Andrei Tsepurkin, who has now returned to the Russian city of Omsk.

The deportations are part of the Uzbek government's campaign to isolate religious believers in Uzbekistan from their fellow-believers abroad, which also includes visa and entry denials to foreign citizens wishing to visit for religious purposes.

The official who answered the phone at the department that registers religious organisations at the Tashkent City Justice Department refused to discuss the deportations with Forum 18 on 12 February. Nor was any official of the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent prepared to explain why foreign citizens legally resident in Uzbekistan cannot freely practice their faith with their fellow believers.

The Uzbek authorities deal especially harshly with local citizens who conduct religious activities they deem to be illegal. Among many recent cases, Muslim journalist Hairulla Hamidov was arrested in Tashkent on 21 January and is awaiting criminal trial (see F18News 17 February 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1410>).

Isolation campaign also includes entry denials

Forum 18 has learnt that the authorities at Tashkent airport denied entry to two foreign Protestants in November 2009. One was a citizen of another former Soviet republic who has visited Uzbekistan many times with no problems. Not needing a visa, the Protestant first knew of any problem when the border guard entered the personal details on the computer. "No explanation for the entry ban was given," the Protestant told Forum 18 on 15 February. "When I asked why, their only response was: You yourself will know."

The other foreign Protestant denied entry, who was not from a former Soviet republic, had obtained a valid visa. A former legal resident of Uzbekistan, the Protestant was intending to make a short return visit but was denied entry. No reason was given, the Protestant told Forum 18 on 3 February.

The Uzbek authorities also routinely deny visas to foreigners they suspect wish to visit the country to meet local religious communities. Forum 18 knows of one case in 2009 when a foreign Protestant was ready to receive a visa for a short visit from an Uzbek embassy elsewhere in Central Asia. However, just before placing the visa in the passport the consular officer noticed that the passport included a visa to Ukraine at the invitation of a Protestant church. The officer then refused to issue the visa to Uzbekistan.

Baha'i deported

According to a 5 February article by Abduvali Turaev on the Novosti Uzbekistana website, Taheri was working in Tashkent as an

English language teacher. He was found guilty of violating the Code of Administrative Offences and, on 17 November 2009, was deported from Uzbekistan. The author did not say which Article of the Administrative Code Taheri was accused of violating, nor which court handed down the verdict. The Baha'i community confirmed Taheri's deportation to Forum 18 without giving details. No Uzbek official would tell Forum 18 which court had punished Taheri.

The deportation of Taheri is the latest in a series of government moves against the Baha'i community, which has been able to register its groups in Tashkent, Samarkand, Jizak, Bukhara and Navoi.

In April 2009, officials raided a meeting with young people at the Baha'i centre in Samarkand. Although all the young people had written permission from their parents to be present, some Baha'i community members were subsequently fined.

More than ten officers from the police and NSS secret police, together with an official of the City Justice Department and the head of the mahalla (city district) committee raided the Baha'i centre in Tashkent's Khamza District in July 2009. Two Baha'is were found guilty of resisting the police, charges they denied, and sentenced to fifteen days' imprisonment. After that one of the two was expelled to neighbouring Kazakhstan (see F18News 24 September 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1353>).

Russian Protestant deported

Also deported was Russian Protestant Tsepurkin, who had moved to Tashkent with his wife and their two children in January 2009 and had legal residency there. "The NSS secret police was behind all this," he told Forum 18 from Omsk on 4 February. "Their local officers in Tashkent accused me verbally of being a terrorist and subverting the internal policy of the country by being a missionary."

Tsepurkin said he was particularly involved with trying to bring local drug addicts off drugs (he and his wife are former drug users) and had some success. However, in late October he was summoned to the local police for a check-up on his residence documents. He said the head of the passport department, citing demands from the NSS, accused him of conducting "spiritual terrorism" and ordered him to leave the country within 24 hours. He was threatened that they would find a reason to imprison him if he failed to comply.

The officer took Tsepurkin's passport and told him it would be returned at the border. Another officer threatened that if he appealed to the Russian Embassy his problems would not end with his deportation.

Tsepurkin told Forum 18 he was allowed to arrange tickets for his wife and children to fly out of Uzbekistan before he was taken by train to the border with Kazakhstan on 31 October. His passport was returned to him just as he was deported. As seen by Forum 18, it was stamped in Uzbek and English "Was turned out of the country for breach of stay regulations in the Republic of Uzbekistan" and erroneously dated 30 October 2009 (the Kazakh entry stamp at Sary-Agash was correctly dated 31 October). Tsepurkin's residence permit for Tashkent was also stamped as annulled.

Media allegations

In the wake of both Baha'i expulsions, Russian-language media articles by Turaev in the local media appeared later. His article attacking the earlier expelled Baha'i was published by Gorizont.uz agency on 16 September 2009, more than five weeks after his expulsion. The 5 February 2010 article about Taheri appeared in Novosti Uzbekistana more than eleven weeks after his deportation. The delay was not explained.

Turaev's article, "Sower of Alien Ideas", claimed that Taheri had come to live in Uzbekistan in 1990 "for mercenary reasons" (which were not explained) and as a missionary. It claimed he married an Uzbek citizen "to legalise his presence in the country, to conceal his mercenary aims and to avoid being unmasked". The author alleged that "by concealing his real aims" he was able to set up nine Baha'i groups across Uzbekistan.

Turaev claimed Taheri had been arrested in August 2008 while "brainwashing" a local woman "with the aim of forcing her to change her religious views". But "on that occasion he was able to evade responsibility" (the author does not explain how). The author then claims that Taheri organised the participation of more than 200 people from Uzbekistan in an "unapproved" meeting of Baha'is from Central Asia in Almaty in Kazakhstan in December 2008 (he did not explain why the conference was "unapproved"). The author claimed that most of those who went from Uzbekistan did not know they were going to a religious conference.

The author accused Taheri of organising "illegal meetings" in private homes in Tashkent in the first three months of 2009, as well as invitations to foreign Baha'is to visit communities in the country. "It is natural that his activities were recognised as contradicting the laws of Uzbekistan," Turaev declared.

Defending media slanders

Forum 18 was unable to reach Turaev either at Novosti Uzbekistana or at Gorizont. The man who answered the phone at Novosti

Uzbekistana on 15 February told Forum 18 "we don't have anyone by that name here". Pyotr Yakovlev, chief editor at Novosti Uzbekistana, also refused to pass on Turaev's contact details, but denied that Turaev was anything other than a journalist. He refused to explain why he is known to have published only two articles under his own name, both attacking Baha'is.

Yakovlev vigorously denied that his publication was a mouthpiece for the state's anti-religious campaign. "We are a private, not a state-run publication and we are independent," he insisted to Forum 18 from Tashkent on 16 February. Asked why he allowed his publication to attack the Baha'i community, and Taheri in particular, without giving them the opportunity to give their view, he declared: "I am an Uzbek. I am 64 years old and I know the Baha'is. Why shouldn't I publish this material?"

Asked why he had allowed the journalist to make unverified accusations, Yakovlev responded: "Decisions were taken by the court, not by us. You should ask them." He then put the phone down.

In addition to Turaev's September 2009 article attacking the Baha'is, Gorizont has a history of publishing other material attacking religious communities. In summer 2009 it published two articles attacking the Union of Baptists of Uzbekistan for holding children's summer camps. The author made a number of allegations which Baptists categorically denied.

The Gorizont articles appeared not long before the prosecution of three senior Baptist leaders, including Pavel Peichev, head of the Union. The three were given heavy fines (subsequently overturned), ordered to pay large sums in "unpaid" taxes and banned from positions in the Union for three years (see F18News 7 December 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1384>).

Earlier Gorizont articles have attacked other Protestants, as well as Jehovah's Witnesses, while state-sponsored television broadcasts have also attacked religious communities (see F18News 25 June 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1148>).

Independent human rights defenders in Uzbekistan, who wished to remain anonymous, have told Forum 18 that the Gorizont agency is sponsored by the NSS secret police.

Daniyor Juraev, director of Gorizont, told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 16 February that he could not recall these articles attacking religious communities. "I'll have to remind myself of them." But he denied that his agency published anti-religious articles at the request of the NSS or other government agencies. "Such articles contain the views of those who wrote them," he insisted. "I'll find out why such slanderous articles were published and we'll discuss them. If someone should be punished they will be." He refused to identify the ultimate owner of his agency.

Juraev refused to say why the authors failed to seek and publish the responses of religious communities to the often serious charges levelled against them. Told that religious believers in Uzbekistan have repeatedly complained to Forum 18 of what they regard as the state-sponsored media slanders against them, Juraev responded: "I'm not indifferent. If we were guilty of anything, we will apologise."

Earlier deportations

Over many years the Uzbek authorities have expelled foreign citizens who they suspected played an active role in local religious communities. Previous religious deportees have included Jehovah's Witness Irfon Khamidov. He was deported to his native Tajikistan in May 2009 the day after being freed at the end of a two year jail term for teaching religion. During the one night he had at home in Samarkand [Samarqand] after getting out of jail before being deported, he saw his two-year-old son for the first time (see F18News 4 June 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1306>).

After an April 2009 raid by nine officers of Tashkent City National Security Service (NSS) secret police and regular police on Protestants gathered for a meal in a private home, Rodion Sayfutdinov, a Kazakh citizen who lived in Tashkent city with official registration, was detained, taken to the State border with Kazakhstan, and "dumped" in Kazakh territory with no money (see F18News 24 April 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1286>).

In June 2008 the head of Uzbekistan's Jewish community, Chief Rabbi Abe David Gurevich, and his wife Malka were forced to leave the country after the Justice Ministry refused to renew their accreditation (see F18News 14 July 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1158>). (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all 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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351>.

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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