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UZBEKISTAN: Ten year sentence for "honest Christian"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Uzbekistan has sentenced a Baptist to 10 years in jail on drugs charges, which his fellow Baptists insist are fabricated, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Seven weeks after his arrest, Tohar Haydarov was sentenced in Guliston on 9 March for "illegal sale of narcotic or psychotropic substances in large quantities". Fellow Baptists insist that this is to punish him for his religious activity. It is unclear why Haydarov has been given such a harsh sentence. The only known current Christian prisoner of conscience, Pentecostal Pastor Dmitry Shestakov, is serving a four year sentence. Baptists insist that police planted drugs on Haydarov at the time of his arrest, and according to church members he is "a man with a pure conscience and an honest Christian". Forum 18 has spoken to several Baptists in Syrdarya and Tashkent who strongly support Haydarov. The judge and police officers involved have refused to discuss the case with Forum 18, and Haydarov has appealed against his sentence.

Seven weeks after his arrest on drugs charges, 27-year-old Tohar Haydarov was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment on 9 March, Guliston City Criminal Court and local church members have told Forum 18 News Service from Uzbekistan. Members of his Baptist church insist to Forum 18 the case was fabricated to punish him for his religious affiliation. "The case has now been referred to the Regional Court," an official of the City Court, who refused to give his name, told Forum 18 from Guliston on 11 March, "since Haydarov has appealed." He declined to discuss the case further. Haydarov remains in detention and no date has yet been set for his appeal.

Judge Gofur Kholmatov of Guliston City Criminal Court in Syrdarya Region found Haydarov guilty under Criminal Code Article 25 ("preparation of a crime or attempted crime") and Article 273 Part 5 ("illegal sale of narcotic or psychotropic substances in large quantities").

Attempts to reach Judge Kholmatov were unsuccessful. Kholmatov's Assistant (he did not give his name) kept asking Forum 18 to call back several times on 11 March. He finally said the Judge was not available to talk.

Haydarov is a new convert to a Council of Churches Baptist church, whose churches reject state registration in all the former Soviet republics where they operate.

The Baptists are adamant the case has been fabricated, insisting Haydarov is "a man with a pure conscience and an honest Christian". Forum 18 spoke to several Baptists in Syrdarya and Tashkent who strongly support Haydarov. One Baptist from Tashkent told Forum 18 on 11 March that "not only the church" but also Haydarov's neighbours and acquaintances support him. The Baptist said some neighbours even gave the authorities written statements to back him up in this case. One statement church members provided to Forum 18 is dated 21 January (three days after Haydarov's arrest) and is signed by seven people who say they are his neighbours. The statement describes him as a "conscientious, honest and orderly person". "We were very surprised when we learnt he had been arrested."

Why such a harsh sentence?

It is unclear why Haydarov was charged with such a serious offence, and why he has been given such a harsh sentence. The only known current Christian prisoner of conscience, Pentecostal Pastor Dmitry Shestakov, is serving a four year sentence. The three current Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience were also given sentences of between three and a half and four years for "illegal" religious activity. The three are: Abdubannob Ahmedov, Sergei Ivanov, and Olim Turaev (see F18News 6 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1280).

Much longer sentences were given to the at least 47 known Muslim Nursi reader prisoners of conscience jailed in 2009. They have been given sentences of typically between eight and 12 years, the total jail terms given amounting to around 380 years (see F18News 31 August 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1394).

Short sentences of between five and 15 days are known to have been given to 25 Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is and Protestants between February and November 2009. Detentions of people for some hours, for interrogations after raids continue to be very common (see F18News 14 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1394).

In the first cases of short-term detentions in 2010 known to Forum 18, two male Jehovah's Witnesses were handed such terms in separate cases in February. The first was given a 15-day sentence on 3 February in Tashkent for violating Administrative Code Article 240 Part 1 ("violation of the law on religious organisations"). The second was given a 10-day sentence on 12 February in Navoi [Nawoi] for violating Administrative Code Article 240 Part 2 ("attracting believers of one confession to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity"). Local Jehovah's Witnesses asked Forum 18 that the two men's names not be published for fear of further state reprisals.

Severe pressure on religious communities

The Uzbek state authorities have long imposed harsh restrictions on all religious activity. Unregistered religious activity is a criminal offence, as are activities such as sharing one's beliefs, unapproved religious publishing and religious meetings in private homes (see the F18News Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1170).

Some 40 associates of people imprisoned already in Bukhara [Bukhoro] for reading the works of Muslim theologian Said Nursi have themselves been arrested and are awaiting trial. A total of 25 soldiers alleged to be Nursi readers are also reported to have been detained. Among others under arrest awaiting trial is Muslim journalist, Hairulla Hamidov (see F18News 9 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1418).

Police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police frequently raid religious communities and heavy fines are often handed down to punish them for worship services (see F18News 24 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1413).

Arrested after refusing to renounce his faith

On 18 January Haydarov was taken to the local Police station in the 3rd Microdistrict of his home town of Guliston. There he was pressured by officer Sardor to renounce his faith. When Haydarov refused to do so, the Baptists say the Police planted a matchbox with drugs in his coat pocket, and arrested him (see F18News 9 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1406).

The Baptist from Tashkent told Forum 18 that the trial of Haydarov began on 4 March, and that the court phoned a local Baptist in Guliston the same day to come and participate. "Well, she is an elderly woman, and can hardly walk so a group of us from Tashkent immediately decided to go and participate," the Tashkent Baptist recounted. "When we arrived the court had ended the hearing and made a decision to resume the process on 9 March."

On 9 March the Baptists were not allowed into the courtroom until the moment when the Judge asked the Prosecutor to present the final arguments. "We were not even allowed to testify on behalf of Tohar," the Baptist complained. "There were no other witnesses, and even the lawyer we had hired for Tohar was not allowed into the courtroom."

The Baptist argued that the only apparent reason why the church members were invited to the trial is that they were filmed once in the courtroom. "The authorities will probably use the film somewhere to tell the public that the Baptists use drugs under the guise of worshipping God."

Uzbek television frequently shows programmes attacking religious minorities. On 11 February, members of the Baptist Union in Tashkent were accused of turning people into zombies and encouraging people to sell their homes and give the money to the Church. One church member described the programme to Forum 18 as containing "outrageous lies". State-disfavoured Muslims, Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Methodists and Baha'is have been attacked in earlier broadcasts (see F18News 22 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1411).

Father's death

Sari Haydarov, Tohar Haydarov's 72-year-old father, was intending to attend the court session on 9 March to support his son, a Baptist who saw the father after the initial court session on 4 March said. "Sari was not a Christian but he loved his son since Tohar looked after him," the Baptist told Forum 18.

However, Sari Haydarov was found dead the following day in the garage where he lived, which belonged to the family. The death certificate, a copy of which Forum 18 has seen, states that he died on 5 March of electrocution. Asked why Sari Haydarov lived in a garage, the Baptist said that he had left the family flat after arguments with other family members and made a home there.

The Baptist said that no criminal investigation of the death was undertaken. The Police's conclusion was that "he died a natural death by accidentally falling onto an open electric bar heater," the Baptist stated.

Police refuse to discuss case

Regional and city police refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 11 March.

Rakhym Khudoyberdiyev, Chief of Guliston City Police, said that he is aware both of the criminal case against Haydarov and his father's death. "I am not competent to answer you on these cases," he said and referred Forum 18 to Ali Abdullayev, the Deputy Chief of Syrdarya Regional Police. "He has been appointed to answer the press on these cases."

Abdullayev was equally reluctant to talk to Forum 18 and referred it to an officer of the Regional Police, whose last name he did not remember. "Please talk to Tolkun Karimovich, may be he will answer you, I am only dealing with personnel issues," he replied. The phone number he gave went unanswered on 11 March. (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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