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The right to believe, to worship and witness
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UZBEKISTAN: Large raid and almost immediate trial starts against registered church

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

Uzbekistan's police, NSS secret police, Tax Inspectorate, Fire Brigade, and Sanitary-Epidemiological Service raided a Protestant church in the capital Tashkent during its Sunday morning worship service yesterday (16 May), Protestants who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals have told Forum 18 News Service. Eight members of the Church of Christ, a Russian-language registered church, were arrested including Assistant Pastor Artur Avanesyan. The trial of all eight has begun and is due to continue tomorrow (18 May). Church members and relatives were denied access to the initial hearing. During the raid, officials confiscated Christian books, offertory money and computers. Early today (17 May) the police denied that officers had raided the Church of Christ, and that the eight church members were being held. The NSS secret police have also refused to discuss the raid, as well as other recent raids on Protestant churches, such as a Methodist church. Protestants expressed concern to Forum 18 that the authorities might be seeking to close the church.

Uzbekistan's police, National Security Service (NSS) secret police, Tax Inspectorate, Fire Brigade, and Sanitary-Epidemiological Service raided one of the biggest Protestant churches in the capital Tashkent during its Sunday morning worship service yesterday (16 May), Protestants who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals have told Forum 18 News Service. Eight members of the Church of Christ, a Russian-language Full Gospel congregation, were arrested including Assistant Pastor Artur Avanesyan.

The eight were held for 24 hours at Tashkent's Mirzo-Ulugbek District Police Station until being released at 5 pm on 17 May. A District Court trial began shortly afterwards. "Although conditions were not good, they were not maltreated at the police station as we had feared," one Protestant told Forum 18. The trial of all eight has begun and is due to continue tomorrow (18 May). Church members and relatives were denied access to the initial hearing. Only the defendants' lawyer was allowed into the Court.

Pastor Avanesyan is facing the most numerous charges under five Articles of the Code of Administrative Offences, Protestants told Forum 18 as the initial hearing concluded. The Court has refused to publicly disclose what articles Pastor Avanesyan and the other defendants are being charged under. The Prosecution claims to have a letter from a father accusing the church of forcing his children to change their faith.

Officials refuse to discuss raid

During the 16 May raid, which was conducted without a warrant, officials confiscated Christian books, offertory money and computers. "It turns out that they found Christian books during the search! How terrible! Christian books! In a registered Christian church!" one local Protestant told Forum 18 sarcastically. "It seems Christian books should only be found at the [government's] Religious Affairs Committee."

Severe censorship is enforced against all religious literature of any description (see F18News 1 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1153).

Early today (17 May) the duty officer at Mirzo-Ulugbek District Police denied that officers had raided the Church of Christ, and that the eight church members were being held at the police station. "We don't have any Artur Avanesyan here," the officer – who would not give his name – claimed to Forum 18. Calls later in the day were cut off as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself.

A duty officer at the NSS secret police in Tashkent refused to discuss the raid. "What's it got to do with you?" the NSS officer told Forum 18 on 17 May. "It's an internal issue for our country." He then put Forum 18 through to his superior, whom he did not name. However, the superior claimed not to be able to hear Forum 18's questions about this and other raids on religious communities, and then put the phone down.

The NSS press officer, reached the same day, who would not give his name, told Forum 18 categorically: "The National Security Service has never violated the rights of religious believers." Told that believers of a range of faiths have repeatedly informed Forum 18 of the NSS secret police's role in suppressing freedom of religion or belief, the press officer put the phone down.

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The official who answered the telephone on 17 May of Begzod Kodyrov, the official at the state Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent who controls Christian communities, told Forum 18 that he was away on a work trip. The official refused to answer any questions, claiming (as is their usual practice) that he is a student at an institute undergoing a practical assignment at the Committee.

Regular NSS secret police church raiders

Among officers raiding the Church of Christ were Timur Daminov and Rustam Tajihanov, who tell Protestant churches they are raiding that they work for the ordinary police. However, Protestants have told Forum 18 they believe the two work for the NSS secret police.

Daminov and Tajihanov led an August 2009 raid on Sunday worship at Donam Evangelical Christian Saints Church, in Tashkent's Yunusabad District. In the wake of the raid, the pastor and three other church leaders were each sentenced to 15 days' imprisonment (see F18News 26 August 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1341).

The raid on the Church of Christ is the latest in a series of similar raids on Protestant congregations. On 10 April, police raided a Protestant church's youth conference, held in the village of Baraj in Bostanlyk District of Tashkent Region (see F18News 21 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1433).

Following that raid, three church members – Denis Shirkov, Janna Kim (the owner of the property where they were meeting) and Ravil Gaifullin – were found guilty on 27 April of violating Article 202 of the Code of Administrative Offences ("creating the conditions for conducting unapproved gatherings, meetings, street processions and demonstrations"). According to the verdict seen by Forum 18, Judge Ikrom Obidov of Bostanlyk District Court fined each of them ten times the minimum monthly wage, 376,800 Soms (1,410 Norwegian Kroner, 183 Euros or 225 US Dollars at the inflated official rate).

On 12 April, police, tax inspectors and local officials raided Eternal Life Protestant Church in Tashkent's Yakkasarai District (see F18News 21 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1433).

Forum 18 has learnt that on 14 April, a Methodist congregation in Tashkent was also raided by police, accompanied by the Tax Inspectorate and the Fire Brigade. Daminov and Tajihanov took part in that raid also, Protestants told Forum 18.

Raids part of wider harassment

The raids on Protestant churches come amid a continuing crackdown on religious activity across Uzbekistan. Many religious believers of a variety of faiths have been given long prison sentences over recent years to punish them for their religious activity, including Muslims, Protestant Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Baptist prisoner of conscience Tohar Haydarov was given a ten-year jail term on drugs charges in Guliston in March. Church members insisted to Forum 18 that the charges were fabricated to punish him for his faith. The trial of Muslim journalist Hairulla Hamidov and 18 others began in Yangiyul near Tashkent on 29 April. More readers of the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi were arrested in late April in Fergana [Farghona] Region of eastern Uzbekistan and are expected to be put on trial (see F18News 10 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1442).

Five-hour raid

Officers of Tashkent's Mirzo-Ulugbek District Police and the NSS secret police in uniform and in civilian clothes arrived at the centrally-located Church of Christ at about 11 am, an hour after the morning service had begun, Protestants told Forum 18. The officers began filming those present, including children at a separate children's service in the church building, despite protests by church members. Outside the church building, the police wrote down the registration numbers of all the cars. However, officers did not stop the worship service.

Once the service was over, officers blocked the exits, trying to get the names and identity details of as many of the several hundred church members present as possible. They pressured as many church members as they could into writing statements.

Around 1 pm, officers summoned officials of the Fire Service, Tax Inspectorate and Sanitary-Epidemiological Service to the church building. "They were instructed to find some violations," one Protestant told Forum 18.

Officers searched the entire church building for over five hours. "They searched every room, every cupboard, every desk and every box," one Protestant told Forum 18. "They even emptied the offertory box and took the money." Officers were especially interested to find US Dollars in the box.

Six computers were confiscated and "many" Christian books, all in Russian. The officer who signed the confiscation record was E. Hairullaev of the Anti-Terrorism Police. The books have now been sent for an "expert analysis".

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Among documents seized were some 390 permission forms signed by parents to allow their children to attend the church. Religious communities are required by law to have such written permission from parents. However, Protestants expressed concern that officials now know the names and addresses of all the parents who attend the church with their children.

In mid-afternoon, police took eight church members, including Assistant Pastor Avanesyan, and several others to the Mirzo-Ulugbek Police Station. Several were taken for refusing to write statements demanded by the police while two others were taken for trying to film the raid on a mobile phone.

As the church's leaders were in detention, the church cancelled its scheduled Sunday evening service, Protestants complained. "The church had no choice – it was forced to do this."

Are authorities seeking to close church?

Protestants expressed concern to Forum 18 that the authorities might be looking for an excuse to close the church. They point out that it has had state registration since August 1999. They say the Tashkent Justice Department conducted a routine check-up (as it does for all registered religious communities) in early March and found only a minor "violation". The church had not been sending records of its council meetings to the Justice Department. Although this is not required in law, church members have complied with this.

Protestants insisted to Forum 18 that the church has filed the regular quarterly reports to the Justice Department and the Religious Affairs Committee as required.

No one at the Tashkent Justice Department was prepared to talk to Forum 18 on 17 May.

A recent high-profile court case, which has been used by the authorities to incite intolerance of freedom of religion and belief, was also used to remove the country's registered Baptist leadership. Baptists have repeatedly insisted that the charges made by the authorities were false (see F18News 22 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1411).

As part of the routine fines of people for having "illegal" religious literature, one such case has featured an alleged "expert analysis" stating that the New Testament is a book banned for import into and distribution in Uzbekistan (see F18News 18 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1445). (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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