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UZBEKISTAN: Renounce your beliefs or you won't be released

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Two Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience near the end of their jail sentences in Uzbekistan, Olim Turaev and Sergei Ivanov, are due to face new criminal trials "possibly within days". If convicted, they could remain in prison for up to a further five years each, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 News Service. On 7 or 8 February prosecutors completed the cases against them on charges of disobeying orders while in Tashkent Region's Tavaksay Prison, which under the law gives a court 15 days to begin the trials. The two – jailed in 2008 for four and three and a half years respectively - began their sentences in open labour camps. But in 2009 they were both moved to "more punitive general regime prison" in Tavaksay after they asked the authorities to be amnestied. While serving their sentences, the two – along with another Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience - were in summer 2011 "visited by a prison official and told that they would not be released at the end of their terms unless they renounced their faith", Forum 18 was told. Officials have refused to discuss the cases with Forum 18.

Two Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience in Uzbekistan close to completing their sentences, Olim Turaev and Sergei Ivanov, are due to face new criminal trials "possibly within days". If convicted, they could remain in prison for up to a further five years each, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 News Service on 9 February. The cases against them on charges of disobeying orders while in Tashkent Region's Tavaksay Prison were completed on 7 or 8 February, giving Gazalkent City Criminal Court 15 days to begin the separate trials.

Both Ivanov and Turaev - as well as the third current long-term Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience Abdubannob Ahmedov serving a sentence in labour camp in Navoi - had already been threatened with further sentences. "All three were visited by prison officials in summer 2011 and told that they would not be released at the end of their terms unless they renounced their faith," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Meanwhile, three Jehovah's Witnesses completed 15-day prison terms on 9 February in the capital Tashkent to punish them for religious meetings in private homes. Police raided Sunday worship of a Baptist congregation in Chirchik near Tashkent on 5 February in the same district where an official told Forum 18 they had closed an unregistered mosque (see F18News 13 February 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1665).

Imminent trials

The cases against Ivanov and Turaev were initiated by Tavaksay Prison authorities. They accused Ivanov of lying on his bunk one day when he was tired at a time he was not allowed to. They accused Turaev of turning out for a morning inspection without his jacket bearing his prison number. Both were accused of visiting a different barrack within the camp without the necessary accompaniment by guards. Both admit the "violations" but insist they were the result of ignorance. They deny that this constitutes "systematic violation" of prison rules.

Ivanov and Turaev were moved from Tavaksay prison in Tashkent Region to Tashkent City jail at the end of January in preparation for the new trials for alleged systematic violation of prison routine, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Their separate trials are due in Tashkent Region's Gazalkent City Criminal Court under Judge Ikrom Obidov. They are both facing trial under Criminal Code Article 221, Part 2b.

Under Article 221, "Disobedience to the legal orders of the administration of punishment institutions or other obstruction to the administration in performing its functions by a person serving a penalty in institutions of confinement, if the person has been penalised with confinement to a solitary cell or to a prison for violation of penal security regulations within one year" is punishable under Part 2b for "a person convicted for a serious or very serious crime" with imprisonment from three to five years.

Judge Obidov refused to comment on the cases. "I do not have such information," he told Forum 18 on 7 February, and hung up the phone. Called back a few minutes later his Assistant (who did not give his name) told Forum 18: "Look do not call here, they have a lawyer, call him please for comments."

"I will not talk to you over the phone"

Uzbek officials categorically refused to discuss with Forum 18 the trial of the two prisoners of conscience or the administrative arrests and fines.

The Assistant of Artybek Yusupov, Chair of the state Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent, who did not give his name, told Forum 18 on 8 February that he could not comment on the cases, and that Yusupov was busy in a meeting. He referred Forum 18 to Begzot Kadyrov, the Committee's Chief Specialist. Kadyrov in his turn also refused to comment. "I have told you hundreds of times that I will not talk to you over the phone," he said, and put the phone down.

Officials (who did not give their names) at the Presidential Administration in Tashkent who answered the phones of the State Advisor on Nationalities and Religions on 7 February declined to talk to Forum 18 on the issue. One official said that the phone numbers at the Administration have changed, and he could not help Forum 18 since he is "only a technical worker here". Another official who answered the President's Press Service phone said that he is "new in the office and cannot help".

Nargiza Urinova, Assistant to Sayora Rashidova, Uzbekistan's Human Rights Ombudsperson, refused to comment on the cases on 8 February or put Forum 18 through to Rashidova. The Ombudsperson "will only accept written questions," she said, and refused to talk further.

Imprisoned for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief

Turaev, a 38-year-old medical doctor from Samarkand [Samarqand] in central Uzbekistan, who is married with three children, began his four-year labour camp sentence on 25 April 2008. He was sentenced by Samarkand city Criminal Court for holding an unapproved religious meeting and teaching religion without state permission (see F18News 29 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1122). Turaev was due to be released in April 2012.

Ivanov, a 25-year-old unmarried man, was sentenced on 23 July 2008 by a Criminal Court in Fergana [Fargona] in eastern Uzbekistan to three and a half years' imprisonment to punish him for "illegal" religious activity. Also sentenced with him was Ahmedov. The authorities claimed that the literature found on the two "contradict the principles of tolerance, inter-religious accord and the laws of the Republic", and that they broke the law "by their criminal actions expressed in the renewal of the previously-halted activity of the illegal religious organisation of Jehovah's Witnesses and in their active participation in its activity as an illegal religious organisation" (see F18News 29 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1164). Ivanov was due to be released at the end of January 2012.

Turaev and Ivanov began their sentences in open labour camps but in 2009 were both moved to "more punitive general regime prison" in Tavaksay after they asked the authorities to be amnestied. Both were accused of having violated prison rules (see F18News 29 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1369).

Why new charges?

Asked on 8 February why new charges were brought against the two Jehovah's Witnesses, Ikramov (who did not give his first name), Assistant to Abdukarim Shodiev, Head of the Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments in Tashkent, which oversees all the country's prisons, declined to comment. He took down the questions and said he would refer them to Shodiev. Ikramov then asked Forum 18 to call back on 9 February since Shodiev was "out of the office."

Called back next morning, Ikramov said he had not been able to convey Forum 18's questions to Shodiev yet, and asked to call back in the afternoon. Called back later, Ikramov once he heard Forum 18's name put the phone down. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

Will other prisoners of conscience face similar charges?

Jehovah's Witnesses fear that the 34-year-old Ahmedov, the third long-term Jehovah's Witness prisoner, might face similar charges. He was sentenced by the same Criminal Court in Fergana on 23 July 2008 to four years in prison (see F18News 29 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1164).

When Ahmedov requested amnesty in 2009, he too was moved from an open labour camp to a general regime prison in the town of Navoi [Noviy] in central Uzbekistan, where he remains (see F18News 29 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1369). Ahmedov has since then been excluded from the list of all amnesty reviews, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. His prison term should end in July 2012.

Uzbekistan's many other religious prisoners of conscience

As well as the three Jehovah's Witness long-term prisoners, many Muslim and Protestant prisoners of conscience are serving long sentences for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. In March 2010 after an apparently rigged trial, Protestant Tohar

Haydarov was sentenced to 10 years in jail, and attempts to overturn his sentence have failed. Among the very many Muslim prisoners of conscience are dozens jailed for reading the works of Islamic theologian Said Nursi. These Muslim prisoners of conscience have been jailed for between three and nine years (see F18News 21 December 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1524).

Not free after release?

Even after prisoners of conscience are released they can be placed under severe restrictions, known as "administrative supervision", similar to the banning orders that were used by the apartheid regime in South Africa.

These restrictions can include having to for one year report to police in person almost every week, not being able to be outside their home between 21.00 in the evening and 06.00 in the morning, not being able to leave his home town without written police permission, and not being able to visit public places such as restaurants. The term of administrative supervision can be extended, and the punishments for breaking the supervision regime range up to imprisonment for four years (see F18News 3 February 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1535). (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://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Uzbekistan>.

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