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UZBEKISTAN: Ramadan restrictions, violent police assault on Protestant

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Police in Uzbekistan have violently physically assaulted Sardorbek Nurmetov, a local Protestant, and charged him with committing an offence after he insisted on making a formal complaint about police brutality. The hospital he went for treatment to colluded with his assailants, local Protestants complained. There are also strict restrictions on Ramadan, including bans on iftar meals and closer than normal state surveillance of everyone attending mosques to pray. Today (2 August) Yelena Urlayeva of the Human Rights Alliance witnessed police secretly filming men arriving for midday prayers at the 'Tura buva' mosque in the capital Tashkent. Two police officers also stood at the entrance to the mosque checking packages and bags. Police told Urlayeva that "mosques are control-accessed enterprises". Doniyor Abdujabbarov, the local policeman who coordinated the police at the mosque adamantly denied to Forum 18 that the police filmed Muslims arriving to pray. Asked again why the police filmed people wanting to pray, he replied, "You need to ask the higher organs about these questions, not me."

Uzbekistan is imposing its usual strict restrictions on Muslims marking the month of Ramadan, Forum 18 has found. For example iftar meals in the only part of the country where these are normal, the capital Tashkent, have been banned in an unwritten order. Nonetheless, some – such as Abdurakhmon Tashanov of the Ezgulik (Goodness) human rights organisation – have been able to have iftar meals in Tashkent restaurants, despite fears of state reprisals. In the southern Kashkadarya Region imams do not now preach in mosques. "When they do, they only quote something from [Uzbek President] Islam Karimov's books", Nodir Akhadov of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan told Forum 18. Also, in the north-western Khorezm Region police have violently physically assaulted Sardorbek Nurmetov, a local Protestant, and charged him with committing an offence after he insisted on making a formal complaint about police brutality.

Police brutality

On 14 June police Captain Shukhrat Masharipov, Chief of the local police Criminal Investigation Department (CID) in Urgench [Urganch] in the north-western Khorezm Region, stopped Nurmetov in the street near Urgench's railway station. He belongs to an unregistered local Protestant church, and who lives in the Region's Khanki District. Captain Masharipov was accompanied by another unknown officer who would not identify himself.

Under the guise of passport control they took Nurmetov to the nearest police station, where they confiscated a memory stick from him containing Christian materials, local Protestants told Forum 18 on 31 July. "Of course they know who Nurmetov is, and it is no accident that he was stopped by the police", a Protestant who knows Nurmetov told Forum 18.

Police officers then brought Nurmetov to Urgench City Police Station. There, Captain Masharipov five times hit Nurmetov with a thick book on the head and then delivered blows to his head and chest, and kicked his legs. As a result of this, Nurmetov became "dizzy, weakened, and felt like vomiting". Captain Masharipov refused to call for an ambulance, despite Nurmetov's requests for this.

In violation of Uzbek law, Nurmetov was kept at Urgench's main police station from 14.30 to 21.00, and not allowed to move, drink water, or go to the toilet, Protestants told Forum 18.

"Masharipov treated Nurmetov brutally and tortured him, which is a severe violation of his rights and the Criminal Code", a Protestant told Forum 18. Violence and torture, or threats of this, by police and other officials are "routine" the United Nations Committee Against Torture has found (see eg. F18News 14 August 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1732).

Home searched

Captain Masharipov and other officers then forcibly put Nurmetov into a police car and took him to his home in Khanka District, about 20 kilometres [13 miles] away from Urgench. With three more policemen from Khanka Police Station, they broke in to Nurmetov's private home where they confiscated Nurmetov's laptop computer, three Christian books and a DVD disk.

Police Captain Masharipov did not answer his office number but refused to talk to Forum 18 on 2 August on his mobile phone, claiming that it is a wrong number.

Hospital collaborates with perpetrators of assault

After the departure of the police, Nurmetov went Khanka District Hospital for treatment for his injuries and to get these formally certified. Doctor Zafar Kalandarov, who received Nurmetov at the hospital, informed the police following which two officers of Khanka Police - one of which took part in the raid on Nurmetov's home – came to the hospital.

When the officers found that Nurmetov wanted to get his injuries formally certified, they forcibly took him from the hospital with no regard to his health. They told Doctor Kalandarov that they were taking Nurmetov to the police station to investigate what had happened.

At Khanka Police Station the officers tried to pressure and talk Nurmetov into not complaining about them and Captain Masharipov. Despite this, Nurmetov did submit a formal complaint at the police station, demanded that action be taken against Masharipov.

Nurmetov was then released and told to go home, even though he asked police to "take him back to the hospital as he felt ill".

Hospital refuses ambulance

Coming home, Nurmetov asked his wife to call for an ambulance. "When they heard the reasons of the call, doctors from Khanka Hospital refused to send an ambulance. They claimed that none were available", local Protestants stated. Nurmetov had to take a taxi to the hospital.

At the hospital, Doctor Kalandarov "fearing police reprisals refused to write a medical report, but gave Nurmetov a painkiller injection after examining the bruises on his body", the Protestants told Forum 18. He then told Nurmetov to go home and undergo out-patient treatment without formally certifying the injuries.

Victim not perpetrator charged

Urgench City Prosecutor's Office commissioned T. Ataniyazov, who local Protestants described as "an inexperienced probationer instead of a qualified, experienced Prosecutor", to deal with Nurmetov's formal complaint.

Ataniyazov ordered a forensic medical examination of Nurmetov, without, Protestants claimed, "thoroughly investigating Nurmetov's complaint and case files". On 18 June Nurmetov underwent forensic examination, and Ataniyazov sent the results of the examination to Urgench City Police for investigation.

Urgench Police, instead of taking action against Captain Masharipov and others implicated in the crime, opened an administrative case against Nurmetov for illegally storing religious materials in his home.

Nurmetov has also made complaints to Uzbek President and other high state authorities.

Ruslan Bekmetov, the Secretary of Urgench City Court told Forum 18 on 2 August that Judge Makhmud Makhmudov will hear the case on 11 August. Protestants confirmed to Forum 18 that a summons to this effect had been issued to Nurmetov. Asked what part of the Code of Administrative Offences Nurmetov had violated, Bekmetov said that Urgench Police had opened the case but would not give any details.

Asked whether the Court knew about Nurmetov being violently physically assaulted by Urgench Police, Bekmetov replied "No".

Asked whether Judge Makhmudov was available to discuss the case, Bekmetov asked Forum 18 to call back after lunch. When Forum 18 called back, an official who would not give his name stated that the judge was not available and would not connect Forum 18 with other officials.

Urgench City Police on 2 August kept asking Forum 18 to call back several times. One officer on duty, who did not give his name, finally promised "in ten minutes" that he will Forum 18 through to Ikrom Rakhimov, Deputy Chief of Urgench Police. Called back he said that Rakhimov asked for Forum 18's phone number, and that "he is busy and will himself call back."

CID chief already known for freedom of religion or belief violations

Captain Masharipov is already known for violations of freedom of religion or belief, having personally led two raids in January on the home of local Protestant Sharofat Allamova. These led to her being sentenced in April on criminal charges to 18 months' corrective labour, for the "illegal production, storage, import or distribution of religious literature". She has been placed in a

low-paid state job, her salary being further reduced by having to pay 20 per cent of it to the state during her sentence (see F18News 21 May 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1838).

Controls on marking Ramadan

Muslims in Kashkadarya Region in southern Uzbekistan are afraid to "organise group prayers in their private homes even during [the current month of] Ramadan", Nodir Akhadov of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan told Forum 18 from Karshi [Qarshi] in the Region. He said on 31 July that the authorities "through the mahalla [local district] committees and their spies make sure that group prayers do not take place in homes."

Mahalla committees are the lowest level of administration, and restricting freedom of religion or belief is among their many duties (see eg. F18News 27 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936). Many Muslims want to say night prayers together at the end of each day in Ramadan. The authorities have often banned these and iftar meals in restaurants, as well as imposing greater surveillance of mosques, banning night prayers away from mosques (see eg. F18News 16 September 2010 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1489).

Iftar is the meal normally taken by groups of Muslims together at the end of their fast each day during Ramadan. In Uzbekistan, Ramadan this year started on 10 July and is expected to finish on 8 August.

Mosques under state surveillance

The authorities in Karshi continue closely monitoring mosques, Akhadov of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan stated. Police "film everything, who comes in, who goes out, and if they see any new face they immediately find out from the Imams their names, addresses and phone numbers", he told Forum 18.

This is also happening in Tashkent. Yelena Urayeva of the Human Rights Alliance told Forum 18 this Friday (2 August) she "saw several cars with police arriving before the midday prayer time at the 'Tura buva' mosque, where over 700 men met to pray". Two police officers stood at the entrance to the mosque checking packages and bags, and four others were secretly filming the men who came to pray.

When Urayeva took photographs of the police, they stopped her taking further photographs and told her that "mosques are control-accessed enterprises, and all photographing of them is banned."

Doniyor Abdujabbarov, the local policeman who coordinated the police at the mosque adamantly denied to Forum 18 on 2 August that the police filmed Muslims arriving to pray – even though Forum 18 has seen Urayeva's photographs of them doing this. When asked again why the police filmed people wanting to pray, he replied, "You need to ask the higher organs about these questions, not me."

Asked why police told Urayeva that mosques are "access-controlled enterprises," and what that means, he said, "I don't know who said that".

Asked why police control activity inside mosques, he stated that they do this based on an order from the Interior Ministry. Under this, "if more than 100 people gather somewhere police should closely control the area for the sake of public safety".

Increased state surveillance of mosques has been a normal part of Ramadan in Uzbekistan (see eg. F18News 16 September 2010 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1489). And at all times close surveillance of all religious communities by the NSS secret police, using a wide variety of open and covert methods, is a standard part of Uzbekistan's mechanism of repression (see eg. F18News 5 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1014).

Restrictions on Islamic preaching

In Kashkadarya Region, imams do not now preach in mosques. "When they do, they only quote something from [President] Karimov's books", Akhadov of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan told Forum 18. State bans and restrictions on Islamic preaching – especially in Ramadan – have long been in place (see eg. F18News see 20 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1020).

Abdulaziz Mansur, Deputy Grand Mufti of the officially controlled Islamic religious leadership (the Spiritual Administration of Muslims or Muftiate), was asked by Forum 18 why imams do not give their own sermons in mosques. "We provide them with texts prepared by us, which they preach", he replied on 2 August. Asked why, he said that "some of these Imams are young and inexperienced, and may explain things incorrectly".

Asked what would happen if those who heard the sermons had questions, Deputy Grand Mufti Mansur told Forum 18 that "if attendees ask extra questions, if imams know the answer they say it. If not then they send the questions in writing and we help

them."

The Muftiate is under total state control (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1862).

"People were free.."

The authorities' success in enforcing their restrictions on Muslims exercising their freedom of religion or belief varies from year to year and place to place. In the Region around the capital Tashkent, human rights defenders Yelena Uralyeva and Shukhrat Rustamov of the Human Rights Alliance organisation told Forum 18 on 2 August that they "saw people organise iftar meals and attend mosques in large numbers".

But a resident of the eastern Namangan Region, who did not want to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 1 August that in the past "people were free to celebrate Ramadan, and openly have large iftar meals in our mahalla." They added that "now you don't see any atmosphere of festivity because people are afraid to organise iftar meals. Everyone is confined to their homes where they quietly break their fast."

People are fearful, the resident stated, because of "all the actions of the authorities throughout the years directed at punishing religious believers, and direct orders from local administrations that Muslims must not hold big festivities - especially during Islamic holidays."

Akhadov of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan on 31 July told Forum 18 that in Karshi "not many nowadays fast" during Ramadan. This is because "many devout Muslims have left Uzbekistan, and those that are left are afraid to practice their faith because of the pressure from the authorities."

For example, during this current month of Ramadan "some people who dare to practice their faith openly", and who wanted to hold iftar group meals in their homes, were pressured by the authorities not to do so. One example Akhadov gave was of a Muslim who Akhadov knows, and did not want to identify for fear of state reprisals, who had organised an iftar meal for a group of co-residents in their private home. About a week ago they received a phone call from a man who did not give his name, who "threatened the Muslim if he invited people to their home for iftar meals again". The caller, who is thought to be from the National Security Service (NSS) secret police, also used "obscene words."

The Kashkadarya Region administrations refused to discuss the restrictions with Forum 18 on 2 August. Karshi city NSS secret police also refused on 2 August to discuss the issue with Forum 18.

Deputy Grand Mufti Mansur, asked by Forum 18 why the authorities hindered the holding of an iftar meal in a private home, said that "we have not heard about this case, but there may have been other reasons there."

Ban on iftar meals in Tashkent restaurants

Some Tashkent restaurants refused to arrange an iftar meal for Abdurakhmon Tashanov, of the Ezgulik human rights organisation, and his friends. But they still managed to have an iftar meal in one local restaurant, he told Forum 18 on 1 August. He stated that this was because "Tashkent City Administration gave unofficial verbal instructions to restaurants not to arrange for iftar meals for groups of people". He noted that "the owners of the restaurant may know about the ban, but at their own risk arranged the iftar meal". He asked Forum 18 not to name the restaurant, for fear of state reprisals against it.

Tashkent City Administration refused to discuss the restrictions with Forum 18 on 2 August.

Tashanov of Ezgulik told Forum 18 he believes that the authorities do "not want crowds to gather in public for religious purposes", and so verbal instructions were given to restaurants. Despite the unwritten ban some restaurants arranged iftar meals.

Deputy Grand Mufti Mansur told Forum 18 that "we usually advise people to organise iftar meals in their private home and not in restaurants, since unbelievers also come there". Asked why people cannot order a separate room in a restaurant, he said that "it is possible but I do not know why those restaurants will not do it."

One Tashkent restaurant Tashanov had not eaten an iftar meal in told Forum 18 on 31 July that the authorities "did not tell us anything about iftar meals". They said that "people ask us, and we arrange it, what is wrong with that". Two other restaurants in different districts of Tashkent told Forum 18 that they "do not mind" Muslims eating an iftar meal there. But they should sit where other people sit and the restaurant will not arrange a separate table or room for an iftar meal. Asked why, one restaurant stated that "the authorities have banned group iftar meals".

Akhadov of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan told Forum 18 that arranging iftar meals in restaurants is not common outside Tashkent. This observation has been repeatedly made across Uzbekistan (see eg. F18News 16 September 2010)

http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1489).

"Afraid even to pray alone at home"

The authorities also target Muslims exercising their freedom of religion or belief by age as well as commitment to Islam. Akhadov of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan had observed that young men in Kashkadrya Region are "afraid even to pray alone at home". He said that "Muslim men over 60 praying at home are not targeted by the authorities, but young men who are actively praying are targeted".

Young people are similarly particularly discriminated against by not being allowed by the state to go on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca (see eg. F18News 7 November 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1634).

There may have been this year a "seeming loosening of strict control". Tashanov of Ezgulik told Forum 18 that police still guard Tashkent mosques monitoring visitors. "But I saw children in the evenings after iftar meals in some Tashkent mosques", he stated.

Children have in the past been banned from attending night prayers in mosques during Ramadan (see eg. F18News 17 September 2009 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1349).

Akhadov of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan also told Forum 18 that, in contrast to previous years (see eg. F18News 16 September 2010 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1489), the supply of electricity and water was not cut by the authorities in Kashkadarya Region when the daily Ramadan fast is being broken. It is unclear whether this practice is being deliberately continued elsewhere in Uzbekistan. (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=1862.

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/mapping/outline-map/?map=Uzbekistan>.

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If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY