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UZBEKISTAN: Surveillance, raids, Bible destruction, jailing, torture

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

An Urgench Protestant Pastor under surveillance was followed to a neighbouring region, where a meeting was raided. A Bible was ordered to be destroyed, and one person was tortured. Police replied to complaints about torture: "We do not care, you can complain anywhere".

After following a Protestant Pastor from Urgench and others they had put under surveillance on a visit to the neighbouring Karakalpakstan Region in Uzbekistan, police raided a meeting for a meal they were participating in, searched the house, and confiscated various electronic devices and Christian religious materials including a Bible. A friend of the host who also present during the police raid was summoned to Kungrad Police Station, where they were tortured. Police told Protestants who complained about the torture that "we do not care, you can complain anywhere" (see below).

One Protestant was jailed in absentia for 15 days and four others were given large fines. Judge Gairat Khudoyberganov also ordered literature including the Bible to be destroyed. The authorities refused to answer questions about the surveillance, raid, torture, jailing, fines and literature destruction (see below).

And in the region around the capital Tashkent, Anti-Terrorism Police in Yangiyul District raided the private homes of people in the local state-registered Baptist Church and confiscated literature. Baptists think that some of those raided may be fined (see below).

There were multiple violations of legal procedure in the raids and searches (see below).

Surveillance

Protestants told Forum 18 on 14 October that "we suspect that police, using informants who visit the Church, have put Pastor Ahmadjon Nazarov [in Urgench [Urganch] in Khorezm Region, in the west of Uzbekistan] under close surveillance". People from a variety of religious communities have told Forum 18 of hidden microphones in places of worship, the presence of National Security Service (NSS) agents during meetings for worship, and the recruitment of spies within communities - including among leaders (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>).

On 23 July 25 police armed with automatic weapons raided a Protestant church meeting for worship in Pastor Nazarov's flat. All those present were arrested and taken to Urgench Police Station, where the women were strip searched (see F18 News 7 August <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2304>).

Two weeks later, Khorezm Police followed Pastor Nazarov and others, including a Russian couple visiting from Moscow, when they were visiting fellow-Protestants in Kungrad [Qunghirotin] in the neighbouring north-western Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] Region. Kungrad is about 270 kilometres (about 170 miles) away from Urgench.

One human rights defender from Uzbekistan, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 17 October that "not just Christians but all active religious believers, Muslims, and members of other faiths are all under the close surveillance of the authorities".

Illegal raid

During the visit to Kungrad, on 7 August, Pastor Nazarov and his friends gathered for a meal in a private home. But just before rice pilaf was served at 7 pm, 17 officials (two in ordinary police uniform) from Karakalpakstan's Interior Ministry and Kungrad Police raided the meal. The raid was led by Lieutenant Colonel Umida Kurbanbayeva of Karakalpakstan's Interior Ministry's Criminal Investigation Department (CID).

Police "without showing identification documents and without introducing themselves immediately began to take away the mobile phones of the guests. With shouts and threats they demanded that each guest give their names", Protestants who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 12 October. The legally required search warrant was also not produced by the

officials.

"After ransacking the house the officials confiscated from the host a laptop computer, two mobile phones, and a Bible in Uzbek bought from the registered in Tashkent Bible Society of Uzbekistan". Uzbekistan bans people from reading their own religious books in their private homes, and regularly searches homes for these texts (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>).

Police took everyone present to Kungrad Police Station, where they were not allowed to call their relatives or friends to tell them their whereabouts. They were questioned for five hours, until they were released at 1.30 the following morning, by CID Lieutenant Colonel Kurbanbayeva and other officials. "Because of the psychological pressure Pastor Nazarov who suffers from diabetes and Gennadiy Chen, one of the detainees, both had hypertension. An ambulance was called and both received injections to bring down the high blood pressure", Protestants told Forum 18.

Police steal phone and tablet?

Police also refused the requests of the two Russians to call an official from the Russian Consulate, and took from the couple a mobile phone and a tablet device. Police did not give the Russians the legally required confiscation record, and did not allow them to take a photo of the property the police took. When the Russians returned to Moscow on 10 August they had still not received their private property back from police. Such violations of the rule of law are common in Uzbekistan (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>).

Torture

A friend of the host who also present during the police raid was summoned to Kungrad Police Station, where they were tortured by being beaten severely. They were later medically treated for the physical injuries sustained under torture, but did not want to document evidence of torture for fear of state reprisals. When Protestants told police that they will complain about the torture, Kungrad Police replied: "We do not care, you can complain anywhere".

Torture - described as "routine" in Uzbekistan by the (UN) Committee against Torture - and impunity for torturers is normal. Torture is used against Muslims, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses and people of other faiths exercising their freedom of religion and belief and related human rights. Women are targeted for assault, and in another torture case police told a Jehovah's Witness that complaining makes no difference as "we will remain unpunished" (see F18News 12 October 2017 <http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2325>).

Jailing, fines, Bible destruction, confiscations

On 4 September Judge Gairat Khudoyberganov of Urgench City Administrative Court jailed Khamza Artikov in absentia for 15 days, for allegedly violating the Code of Administrative Offences' Article 195 ("Resisting the orders of police officers"). The Judge also ordered to him pay 336,993 Soms, or just over two months average monthly salary, for the alleged costs of his 15 day short-term jailing.

Elmurod Beyliyev was fined 748,875 Soms, or five times the minimum monthly salary, for the same "offence".

In contrast to Muslims (who are normally jailed for long periods for such "offences") it is common for Christians and members of other smaller vulnerable groups to be given such short-term jail terms for exercising their freedom of religion and belief (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>).

Judge Khudoyberganov also ordered Urgench Police to search for Artikov and arrest him. Protestants told Forum 18 that Artikov is outside the country.

Three of the Protestants, Yelena Nazarova, Nilufar Isakova and Madina Yokubova were each fined 14,977,500 Soms, or 100 times the minimum monthly salary, under Administrative Code Articles 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons") and 241 ("Teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately").

Judge Khudoyberganov also ordered the destruction of the Bible and a Christian leaflet confiscated from Pastor Nazarov's wife Yelena. Numerous court verdicts seen by Forum 18 order that such literature - including Muslim books or Christian Bibles - be destroyed, which is often carried out by burning (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>).

The Judge's decision also ordered the confiscation of a mobile phone and a memory chip confiscated from Isakova. No mention was made of the property taken by police from the Russians.

"Wrong number" ?

Urgench Court Chancellery officials (who refused to give their names) refused on 17 October to comment on the punishments or put Forum 18 through to Judge Khudoyberganov.

The deputy head of Kungrad Police, Bakhtiyar Turebekov, on 17 October refused to comment on the raid and police actions. He then referred Forum 18 to Lieutenant Colonel Kurbanbayeva.

Lieutenant Colonel Kurbanbayeva on 17 October answered her phone but claimed to Forum 18 that it is a "wrong number." When told that Forum 18 had confirmed that it was her number she put the phone down. She did not answer further calls to her landline phone the same day, and switched her mobile phone off.

Begzod Kadyrov, chief specialist of the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent, refused on 17 October to comment on the cases, and asked Forum 18 to send the questions in writing. When reminded that he had not answered Forum 18's previous written questions he put the phone down.

Tashkent Region "Anti-Terrorism Police" raids

In the central Tashkent Region around the capital, Yangiyul District Anti-Terrorism Police raided private homes in Yangiyul itself and in Gulbahor on 23 August and 11 October. All the homes raided were of people from the state-registered local Baptist Church: church leader Pastor Fatkhulla Ibrahimov, and church members Kholikhon Nishanova, Marifat Topilova and Guzal Jumabayeva. Anti-Terrorism Police officers participating in all the raids included Umid Kadyrov and Nodiy Abdualiyev.

The raids on 11 October took place on the second-last day of UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Ahmed Shaheed's visit to the country. He stated on 12 October in Tashkent that Uzbekistan required "sustained and transparent commitment to make enjoyment of the right to freedom of religion or belief a reality .. Freedom of religion or belief requires widening the space for the freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression, as well as strengthening the rule of law and guaranteeing the independence of the judiciary" (see <<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22225&LangID=E>>).

On 23 August at 11 am four police, only one in uniform, climbed into the grounds of Pastor Ibrahimov's house and broke into it, Baptists who asked not to name them for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 12 October. The "intruders in the house" claimed they had a search warrant from Yangiyul Prosecutor, but this was not verifiable as they only showed an unclear piece of paper to Pastor Ibrahimov very quickly.

Police then searched the house and confiscated a book by 19th century Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon, three notebooks, a CD with Christian songs in Uzbek and testimonies of Uzbek Christians, 120 Christian leaflets, and five group photographs of Church members. Police then at 1 pm took Pastor Ibrahimov and his wife Nargiza Ibrahimova to Yangiyul District Police Station, where Anti-Terrorism Police officer Kadyrov questioned them.

Pastor Ibrahimov and his wife refused to sign any police reports or write statements, Baptists told Forum 18. The police sent the confiscated materials for "expert analysis" by the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent. Alleged "expert analysis" is often used by the authorities as an excuse to confiscate and destroy religious literature (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>).

As this and many similar "Anti-Terrorism Police" cases illustrate, the regime's definition of "terrorism" includes people exercising their human rights (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>).

Surveillance

Anti-Terrorism Police officer Kadyrov claimed that the couple were detained after statements by Mahsuma and her daughter Mahmuda Mustabekova that they had received an Uzbek-language New Testament and a Christian book as gifts from the Baptists.

The elder Mustabekova works as a guard at a resort in Niyazbash in the District, where Baptists have held various events which the authorities have raided in recent years (see eg. F18News 5 September 2014 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1993>). In August 2017 new members of the Church were baptised in the lake.

Local Baptists, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 12 October that the police had carried out surveillance of the Baptists' activity at the camp. The police had also, the Baptists said, forced both the mother and daughter to write statements against them.

Charges

Baptists told Forum 18 that they think that the police are preparing to charge some Baptists under Administrative Code Articles 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons") and 240 ("Violation of the Religion Law").

More Yangiyul raids

On 23 August Yangiyul Anti-Terrorism Police officers also raided the home of a Baptist in Gulbahor. Two police, one of whom was in uniform, without any search warrant broke into the home of Kholiskhon Nishanova, Baptists stated. The unidentified police claimed that they were searching the house for illegal drugs, which officers claimed they had been told were stored there.

The officers then confiscated various Christian books, Uzbek-language Christian songbooks, notebooks, and leaflets with Bible verses. Police sent the confiscated materials for alleged "expert analysis" by the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent. Baptists think that Nishanova may be fined.

On 11 October Yangiyul Anti-Terrorism Police also raided the homes of two other Baptists, Jumabayeva in Yangiyul and Topilova in Gulbahor. Police confiscated one copy from each home of a Christian book called Love and Marriage.

"We can calmly discuss the cases" ?

Major Yokub Umarov, the head of Yangiyul Anti-Terrorism Police, and his officers Kadyrov and Abduvaliyev on 17 October refused to discuss with Forum 18 the raids. Officer Abduvaliyev claimed that "you need to come to our office where we can calmly discuss the cases". (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating freedom of religion and belief 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=2314>.

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 is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351>.

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at <<http://nationalgeographic.org/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Uzbekistan>>.

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