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UZBEKISTAN: Officials bully child, "show trial", fines

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

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Baptists also said that the authorities compel the relatives of ethnic Uzbek Christians to try to stop family members from meeting their co-believers.

In one case, an 8-year-old child was taken from school without his parents permission to face hostile questioning by officials (see below).

In Tashkent, after a raid on Baptists a Baptist woman was put on trial and fined without her knowledge, and a memory chip with family photos ordered destroyed. She was illegally denied the possibility to appeal (see below).

And in an attempted TV "show trial" in Urgench, the authorities tried to persuade two Baptists to "repent and ask for forgiveness during the hearing, the judge can lessen the punishment." When the Baptists came into the courtroom they saw TV cameras present. "We understood that they wanted to make a show trial, but we stood firmly and instead witnessed about our faith", Stanislav Kim told Forum 18. He was then fined 100 times the minimum monthly salary (see below).

The authorities have in a small number of cases returned Bibles confiscated from Protestants during raids, but it is unclear whether people will now be able to keep and read Bibles at home. The authorities still insist that all other religious literature can only be kept and read within a building of a state-registered religious community (see below). And the authorities are continuing to jail Muslims who possess religious literature (see F18News 29 March 2018 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2365).

Navoi Baptists, raided, fined, child bullied by officials

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The Baptists also said that the authorities compel the relatives of ethnic Uzbek Christians to try to stop family members from meeting their co-believers.

All exercise of freedom of religion and belief without state permission is illegal, against Uzbekistan's binding international human rights law obligations. However, Council of Churches Baptists refuse on principle to register their congregations with the state, insisting in accordance with international law that registration is not necessary to meet for worship (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314).

On 21 January Navoi Police raided the local Baptist Church's meeting for Sunday worship, and noted the names of the worshippers and their home addresses. This was followed by a series of raids on the homes of the Baptists, as well as on a shop owned by a Baptist. Police also harassed the family members of Baptists and their neighbours between 22 and 26 January.

While raiding Lyudmila Keadze's home on 22 January, police confiscated all her Christian literature. These consisted of two Children's Bibles, several Baptist magazines and books, and a song book. Although police initially wanted to take confiscate her

Bible as well, when she insisted that it is her personal Bible they did not take it. In mid-February a police officer returned the two Children's Bibles to Keadze.

The police officer did not give his name or position, but said that she can keep her Bibles at home. But the other Christian books confiscated from her can only be read within a state-registered church building. The government Committee for Religious Affairs will decide what to do the rest of the books. The government often orders that religious books can only be read within a building it has registered (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314).

On 23 January, police raided the home of Zakirjon Karomov without the legally required search warrant. The searched his home without him being present and on 25 January raided his family's shop, claiming that Bibles are sold there.

On 24 January police locked Nikolay Pivtsev's wife and children in their bathroom while they searched their home without a search warrant and in Pivtsev's absence. Police confiscated the family Bible and computer before leaving.

On 26 January police took Pivtsev's 8-year-old son from the school to the office of the mahalla committee (local district administration), where officials questioned him without informing his parents and in their absence. Police and schoolteachers have told children that if they attend any place of worship – including mosques and churches – they will be punished. Children and young people are not formally banned from attending meetings for worship, but officials frequently pressure parents and communities of all faiths not to allow them to attend (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314).

Mahalla committees, theoretically independent but in practice under state control, are used to maintain controls over anyone trying to exercise freedom of religion and belief (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314).

After Pivtsev's son was allowed home from school, officials summoned him and his mother to the mahalla committee again. The family was threatened with fines or a short-term [up to 21 days] jail sentence if Pivtsev continues to attend the church, Baptists told Forum 18. The authorities have often imposed such jail sentences on people exercising their freedom of religion and belief (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314).

In late February, Baptists told Forum 18, Navoi Regional Administrative Court fined Keadze and Pivtsev twice the minimum monthly salary or 344,480 Soms and an equivalent of a minimum salary or 172,240 Soms respectively.

The latest known fine imposed on Navoi Baptists was given by Navoi Regional Administrative Court on 19 February. Judge Nurali Kurbonov on 19 February fined Nikolay Serin, Artur Alpayev and Ilya Bachurin 50 times the minimum salary each or 8,612,000 Soms each, Alpayev told Forum 18 on 15 March. "We were accused of illegal missionary work", Alpayev stated. All three were fined under Administrative Code Article 240 ("Violation of the Religion Law"), Part 2 ("Attracting believers of one confession to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity").

Judge Kurbonov on 16 March refused to answer when Forum 18 asked him on 16 March why cannot Baptists cannot meet together for worship, and why the authorities put pressure on them and threaten them.

On 20 February Major Komil Yokubov, head of Navoi Police's Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department came to the doors of Alpayev and Serin homes to hand them written warnings, stating that exercising freedom of religion and belief without state permission and sharing beliefs with others is illegal. He threatened that if the Church continues to meet and members continue to share their beliefs with others criminal cases will be opened against church members. The warnings were signed by police Senior Lieutenant F. Utaganov of the local Criminal Investigation Department.

Major Yokubov on 16 March gave his name when Forum 18 called him on his mobile, but then claimed that it was a wrong number when Forum 18 asked about the Baptists. Phoned at his landline number the same day, he put the phone down as soon as he heard Forum 18 introduce itself. He did not answer the subsequent calls.

Tashkent Baptists raided, unfair trial, family photos ordered destroyed

On 22 January the capital Tashkent's Bektemir District Police raided the home of Aleksandr Khokhlov, a member of the local state-registered Baptist Church. Five police officers claiming to be conducting a passport check were on the raid, including local police officer Aziz Sabirov and officers Kodyr Rikhsiboyev and Zafar Khatamov of Bektemir Police's Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department.

"Police officers brought two unidentified persons with them as witnesses, and carried out an unauthorised search", Baptists who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 17 March. The police confiscated a notebook with 30 pages of notes from the Bible, and a 16-GB memory chip containing personal and family photographs belonging to Kholkov's step-daughter and fellow-Baptist Alina Chernikova.

Police then "against their will forcibly brought Gulnara Kokhlova (Chernikova's mother) and Chernikova to the office of the local mahalla committee", the Baptists stated. In the mahalla committee the police drew up a report of the confiscation, and released the two women. Police told them that the confiscated materials will be sent to "religious expert" Begzod Kadyrov of the Religious Affairs Committee. This government agency frequently produces "expert analyses" to justify literature confiscations (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314).

Local police officer Sabirov on 19 March told Forum 18 that "I had nothing to do with the passport check or the confiscation. It was the Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department, and I only accompanied them as the local police officer." He then refused to talk more to Forum 18.

Khatamov of Bektemir Police's Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department refused to say why he raided the private home of Khokhlov, and harassed his wife and daughter. "I cannot talk at the moment, I am in a meeting" he claimed. Asked when Forum 18 can call him back he put the phone down. Subsequent calls to him were not answered.

On 7 February the authorities conducted trial without informing those they accused that the trial was happening. (Unjust trials with flagrant breaches of due process are normal - see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314.) Judge S. Mikhliyev, Chair of Tashkent City Bektemir District Administrative Court on 7 February fined Chernikova 20 times the minimum monthly salary or 3,444,800 Soms. She was convicted without the chance to defend herself of violating Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons").

Judge Mikhliyev ordered that the memory chip with Chernikova's personal and family photographs be destroyed. But he ordered the return of her personal notebook with Bible notes.

The first Chernikova knew of the trial was when bailiffs handed her the court decision 36 days later on 12 March. By law courts have a maximum of three days to give defendants a copy of court decisions, and appeals must be made within 10 days of the decision, so Chernikova was denied the chance to appeal.

Calls to Bektemir Court by Forum 18 were not answered.

Urgench Baptists in "show trial"

On 19 November 2017, 14 officials from various agencies, including the local police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department, raided the private home of Stanislav Kim in Urgench [Urganch] in Khorezm Region in north-western Uzbekistan. People meeting for Sunday morning worship were arrested, interrogated for two hours and threatened at a police station. Christian books were confiscated. After Oybek Rahimov admitted under interrogation to reading Christian books their home was also raided and books including their personal Bible were confiscated (see F18News 13 December 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2341).

Kim told Forum 18 on 14 March 2018 that in the 21 December 2017 court case, the authorities "tried to make the hearing a show trial. The police told Oybek Rahimov and myself that if we repent and ask for forgiveness during the hearing, the judge can lessen the punishment." When the Baptists came into the courtroom they saw TV cameras present. "We understood that they wanted to make a show trial, but we stood firmly and instead witnessed about our faith", Kim said.

The authorities have tried on other occasions to stage such TV "show trials" (see F18News 7 August 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2304).

Judge Ulugbek Khasanov fined Kim 100 times the minimum monthly salary or 14,977,500 Soms. He was found guilty of breaking three 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"); 201 Part 2 ("Violation of the procedure for holding religious meetings, street processions, or other religious ceremonies"); 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 Khasanov fined Rahimov 90 times the minimum monthly salary or 13,479,750 Soms for breaking Administrative Code Article 184-2. Judge Jamilya Sultanova, Chair of Khorezm Regional Administrative Court in an appeal case on 26 January 2018 upheld the 21 December 2017 decision to fine Kim and Rahimov. Forum 18 has seen the appeal decision. Judge Sultanova's assistant (who would not give his name) on 16 March claimed to Forum 18 that "she cannot come to the phone", but asked Forum 18 to call back on 19 March. On 19 March no phones in Khorezm Court were answered.

From 1 December 2017 the minimum monthly salary was raised from 149,775 Soms to 172,240 Soms.

On 11 February police again raided the Urgench Baptists' meeting for Sunday worship, and confiscated an Uzbek-language Bible from Rahimov and Russian language New Testaments from two Baptist women. On 7 March Rahimov was told that police would prepare new fines against all three.

"Captain Mukhammad Rakhimov verbally ordered me to come to the Police Station on 13 March", Rahimov told Forum 18 on 15 March. Captain Rakhimov told him that he planned to take all three to court, but this did not happen as the women did not arrive. Captain Rakhimov on 16 March put the phone down when Forum 18 asked about the Baptists. He did not answer the subsequent calls.

Kim told Forum 18 that he and his fellow Baptists will "not pay the fines. We are only exercising our Constitutional rights, and not committing any crimes."

Supreme Court in 9 February decision softens punishments

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 stated about the torture that "we do not care, you can complain anywhere". One Protestant was on 4 September 2017 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 F18News 19 October 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2326).

However, on 9 February 2018 Judge Mumin Astanov of the Supreme Court on appeal lowered the fines given to Yelena Nazarova, Nilufar Isakova and Madina Yokubova from 100 times the minimum monthly salary, or 14,977,500 Soms, to 25 times the minimum monthly salaries or 3,744,375 Soms.

Judge Astanov also cancelled Urgench Court order to destroy Nazarova's Bible, and ordered it returned to her.

Judge Astanov's assistant (who would not give his name) refused to say whether courts will from now on stop ordering the destruction of Bibles and other sacred texts. He asked Forum 18 to call back on 23 March. (END)

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>.

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.

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://www.nationalgeographic.org/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Uzbekistan>.

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