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UZBEKISTAN: Military raids Baptists, Church ordered closed

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

For the first time Uzbekistan's military has raided Tashkent Baptists meeting for worship. Asked why the military were involved, officials said "it is a special operation". Police threatened Baptists they "will come every Sunday and disrupt the Church service every time until we give up and stop our activity".

On 25 November, 20 plain clothes officials rising later to 40 officials raided Baptists meeting for Sunday morning worship in Yashnobod District in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent. For the first known time in such raids, members of the military – the National Guard – took part in the raid. Other agencies participating in the raid included the State Security Service (SSS) secret police, the Justice Ministry, and Yashnobod District Police. When Baptists asked why the SSS secret police and the National Guard were on the raid, the raiders responded: "It is a special operation".

Officials searched every part of the building, which was "ransacked", Baptists complained. Officials confiscated about 7,800 items of literature and DVDs, including all books and songbooks the Church uses for its meetings for worship. When one woman tried to conceal some songbooks used for worship, an official "screamed at her that you are liars, Christians must not hide anything" (see below).

Fourteen of those at the meeting were forcibly put into a bus and taken to Yashnobod Police Station. Officials also photographed and recorded the details of each individual who had attended the meeting for worship, including names, addresses, and workplaces. On 27 November police followed this up by visiting the home of one of those present for a "passport check" and also demanded to see ownership documents of the home. Those taken to the Police Station, including a 14-year boy, were kept outside in the cold while officials tried to force them to sign statements that they had participated in "an unauthorised meeting". When they refused to do this, they were taken into the Police Station, their personal details were recorded, and they were interrogated for nine and a half hours until 9 pm that night (see below).

Officials on the 25 November raid replied to the Baptists: "We as the state cannot adjust to you, you need to adjust to our laws." The officials made no references to the state's binding international obligations to ensure that it respects and facilitates the exercise of freedom of religion and belief, with its interlinked freedoms of expression, association, and assembly (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314).

Baptists told Forum 18 they think that Atamurod Akhmedov, Chief of Yashnobod Police, wanted the raid to happen. They pointed out that he threatened Baptists detained in the Police Station that "unless we officially register the Church, the police will come every Sunday and disrupt the Church service every time until we give up and stop our activity" (see below).

Police, Justice Ministry, Defence Ministry, and National Guard officials have all refused to explain why the military was on the raid (see below).

Very late in the evening of the 25 November raid, police ordered District Fire Service and District Gas Service employees to cut off the heating system in the building the Church meets in – even though temperatures have begun to be sub-zero. A family in the building, Baptists said, "were almost freezing as it is very cold at night" (see below).

"Special operation" raid

On 25 November, 20 plain clothes officials rising later to 40 officials raided Baptists meeting for Sunday morning worship in Yashnobod District in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent. For the first known time in such raids, members of the military – the National Guard – took part in the raid.

The National Guard, founded in 1992 by the then President Islam Karimov, is part of the military and is regarded as equal to the Navy, Army, and Air Force. Among its roles is guarding high-ranking regime officials such as the President.

Other state agencies participating in the raid on the Baptist meeting included the State Security Service (SSS) secret police, the

Justice Ministry, and Yashnobod District Police. The raiding officials illegally did not present their identification documents, only stating which agencies they were from, Baptists who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 25 November. "We only recognised the local police officer Bakhrom Khalyigitov."

When Baptists asked the officials why the SSS secret police and the National Guard were on the raid, the raiders responded: "It is a special operation."

The raided Tashkent congregation is part of the Baptist Council of Churches, which refuses on principle to register with the state. This is their right under Uzbekistan's legally binding international human rights obligations, which do not allow a state to demand that people must have state permission to exercise their human rights (see the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)/Venice Commission Guidelines on the Legal Personality of Religious or Belief Communities ()). Uzbekistan is an OSCE participating State.

The Baptists had been meeting for about an hour, when the officials broke in to the building the Church was meeting in. "They began filming everything and everybody, paying no attention to our objections," Baptists complained to Forum 18 on 27 November. "More officials kept arriving, and after a short while their number reached roughly 40."

The officials filming the meeting at first stood in front of the congregation, with their back to the Pastor who was preaching from the pulpit. The officials then turned round and began filming the Pastor, as well as filming the end of the worship meeting.

Police in Urgench raided a group of Protestants sharing a meal on 23 November, with subsequent threats (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2434).

"We as the state cannot adjust to you"

Church members told the raiding officials that their congregation belongs to the Council of Churches Baptists. "We explained that on principle we do not want state registration, as it will mean state interference in our faith," they told Forum 18. "We told them that we do not want to run our Church as a state organisation."

Raids with violations by the authorities of the law have also taken place against Baptists in state-registered churches (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2361).

In May the authorities made registering religious communities more difficult, and have punished – including with torture - those who have tried to register. "Give us freedom of religion and belief, [and] we will ask for registration", one Protestant commented to Forum 18 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2396).

Officials on the 25 November raid replied to the Baptists: "We as the state cannot adjust to you, you need to adjust to our laws." The officials made no references to the state's binding international obligations to ensure that it respects and facilitates the exercise of freedom of religion and belief, with its interlinked freedoms of expression, association, and assembly (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314).

Illegal confiscations

Officials then demanded that Baptists allow a search for literature, but church members refused to do so without the legally required search warrant. A search warrant was eventually produced at about 4 pm, endorsed by Olimzhan Azimov, Prosecutor of Yashnobod District, and Atamurod Akhmedov, Chief of Yashnobod Police. It claimed without providing any evidence that "Baptists are involved in unlawful propaganda".

A Yashnobod District Prosecutor's Office official, who refused to give her name, told Forum 18 on 28 November that Prosecutor Azimov is "busy" and referred it to Deputy Prosecutor Jahongir Khusanov. Every time Forum 18 called, his phone went unanswered, and the original official put her phone down every time Forum 18 called.

Officials searched every part of the building, which was "ransacked", Baptists stated. About 7,800 items of literature and DVDs were confiscated, including all books and songbooks used by the Church for its meetings for worship. When one woman tried to conceal some songbooks used for worship, an official "screamed at her that you are liars, Christians must not hide anything".

The authorities impose censorship on all religious literature published in or imported into the country. Courts often order that seized religious literature be destroyed. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)

Illegally, the raiding officials did not give the Baptists a written police record of the confiscations. Flagrant violations of the law, including leaving torturers unpunished, are common (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2431).

Detained for nine and a half hours

Fourteen of those at the meeting were forcibly put into a bus and taken to Yashnobod Police Station.

At the same time, other officials photographed and recorded the details of each individual who had attended the meeting for worship, including names, addresses, and workplaces. On 27 November police followed this up by visiting the home of one of those present for a "passport check" and also demanded to see ownership documents of the home.

Such "passport checks" are common ways of attempting to intimidate and punish people who exercise their freedom of religion and belief (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2388).

Those taken to the Police Station, including a 14-year boy, were kept outside in the cold while officials tried to force them to sign statements that they had participated in "an unauthorised meeting". When they refused to do this, they were taken into the Police Station, their personal details were recorded, and they were interrogated for nine and a half hours until 9 pm that night.

Why?

Local Police Officer Khalyigitov claimed to Forum 18 on 27 November: "I do not know what the purpose was. Officials from the Ministries and central organs together with Yashnobod District Police led the raid." He then refused to discuss the case further.

Baptists told Forum 18 they think that Atamurod Akhmedov, Chief of Yashnobod Police, wanted the raid to happen. They pointed out that he threatened Baptists detained in the Police Station that "unless we officially register the Church, the police will come every Sunday and disrupt the Church service every time until we give up and stop our activity".

Akhmedov's assistant, who refused to give his name, claimed on 26 November that Akhmedov was "busy and cannot talk to you". The person who answered Akhmedov's own phone on 27 November each time put the phone down as soon as he heard Forum 18's name. Other Yashnobod police officers also put their phones down on 27 November, or switched them to a fax machine, each time they heard Forum 18's name.

Akbar Abrayev, head of the Justice Ministry's Tashkent City Department, claimed on 27 November that he could not answer Forum 18's questions as "I need to raise all the documentation and see the reasons". Asked why Uzbekistan violates its international human rights obligations to allow Baptists and everyone else to exercise their human rights, Abrayev asked Forum 18 to call back on 28 November. That day his phone went unanswered and the Justice Department's reception claimed that he was "busy".

The Defence Ministry and National Guard both refused on 27 November to explain why the National Guard raided people exercising their freedom of religion and belief in line with Uzbekistan's legally-binding international human rights obligations.

A Defence Ministry official who answered the phone of Ministry Press Spokesperson Timur Narziyev, who refused to give his name, refused to answer questions and referred Forum 18 to National Guard Press Spokesperson Davron Jumanazarov.

A National Guard official who answered Jumanazarov's phone, who refused to give his name, claimed Jumanazarov was busy and asked Forum 18 to call back. Every time Forum 18 called back Jumanazarov's phone went unanswered.

Heating cut off in sub-zero conditions

Very late in the evening of the 25 November raid, police ordered District Fire Service and District Gas Service employees to cut off the heating system of the building the Church meets in – even though all utility bills have been paid in advance.

Gas Service employees sealed off the gas pipe leading to the boiler of the heating system, and the Fire Service justified this with the claim that it was a "fire safety check". A family in the building, Baptists said, "were almost freezing as it is very cold at night". Night temperatures in Tashkent in late November were often below freezing point.

Davron Kadyrov, head of Yashnobod District Fire Service, told Forum 18 on 28 November that "our employees went there to check fire safety conditions, District Gas Service employees turned off the gas". Asked who ordered it, he said: "I don't know, you need to ask the Gas Service."

A Yashnobod Gas Service official, who refused to give her name, told Forum 18 on 28 November that the District Gas Service head Aleksey Abdumamenov is "not available to talk". Asked why the Gas Service cut off the heating to a building in freezing conditions, she replied: "Let the residents come to our office and we will explain to them." (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Uzbekistan

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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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