
15 June 2004

UZBEKISTAN: Threats against lawyer's wife and young children

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

It is believed that the Uzbek authorities are behind anonymous night-time telephone calls and continuing threats being made against the wife and young children of Rustam Satdanov, a lawyer forced to flee Uzbekistan and seek political asylum in the USA for his work defending Jehovah's Witnesses. Satdanov received political asylum on 11 May. His wife, Asiya Satdanova, and their young children, who are still in Tashkent, told Forum 18 News Service that they are being anonymously threatened with "serious difficulties" if Satdanov does not return immediately to Uzbekistan. He himself told Forum 18 that if he returns the authorities would, using fabricated criminal charges, punish him for defending religious believers.

Four months after Jehovah's Witness lawyer Rustam Satdanov fled Uzbekistan to escape interrogations and threats from the secret police, his wife Asiya Satdanova told Forum 18 News Service in the capital Tashkent that she has received anonymous night-time telephone calls and threats that if her husband does not return immediately, she and her young children will face serious difficulties. Satdanov, who left Uzbekistan in February and received political asylum in the United States on 11 May, said he had fled his homeland out of fear for his safety. "The Uzbek authorities expressed great displeasure at my activities defending Jehovah's Witnesses," he told Forum 18 from Melbourne in Florida on 11 June.

Satdanov had been summoned to the National Security Service (NSS) secret police, and interrogated in detail about his work defending Jehovah's Witnesses (see F18News 18 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=257). "When NSS officers found out I had reported this interview to journalists, they started openly threatening that they were going to deal with me," Satdanov added. "I understood that sooner or later they would think up some criminal case to bring against me, so rather than tempt fate, I left for the US and asked for political asylum."

Satdanov told Forum 18 he is convinced that those threatening his wife by phone are officers of either the NSS or the police. "I had no enemies in Tashkent and I refuse to believe that any of my acquaintances could make malicious telephone calls. I myself used to work for the law enforcement agencies and so I can easily understand their methods. They are doing this to try and force me to come back to Tashkent, where they will fabricate a criminal case against me."

Other events indirectly confirm Satdanov's suspicions. Asiya Satdanova told Forum 18 on 11 June that police officers came to her house in May on the pretext of checking identity documents and asked her in detail about her husband and his current whereabouts. After the visit neighbours told her the police had not visited other apartments in the block.

After Satdanov's departure for the US, odd rumours about him began to circulate in Tashkent. Several weeks ago a lawyer who preferred not to be named assured Forum 18 that Satdanov was in fact hiding elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, adding that he was "in a very bad way".

For more background, see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>

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