

7 July 2004

UZBEKISTAN: "Illegal" Baptists under more pressure as authorities try to stop Christianity

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

In the latest twist to Uzbek authorities' campaign against Christianity in north-west Uzbekistan, the NSS secret police have interrogated two Baptists, beating one up, and threatening both with imprisonment saying that "we will put you away for years". One secret police officer claimed to Forum 18 News Service that "The Baptists' activity is illegal, and so we simply had a chat with them," and that the Urgench Baptist church is a banned organisation "because its registered status was removed". Another NSS officer, Alisher Khasanov, jeered at Baptist Sharovat Allamova for being a Christian and claimed that "you Protestants rely on Western money, the humanitarian western missions who support you are basically espionage organisations. So you yourselves are agents for foreign intelligence services." Also, the local Khorezm branch of the NSS has questioned Forum 18 about why a Norwegian organisation is interested in a "banned organisation".

Half a year after their church was stripped of its registered status and became "illegal", Baptists are facing renewed pressure in Urgench [Urganch], the central city in Khorezm region of north-western Uzbekistan. A Baptist who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 News Service on 6 July that the secret police, the National Security Service (NSS), interrogated two church members in late June, beating one and threatening both with imprisonment. One secret police officer - who gave his name only as Alisher - admitted to Forum 18 from Urgench on 5 July that Baptists had been summoned to the NSS, but categorically denied that they were beaten or had psychological pressure put on them. "The Baptists' activity is illegal, and so we simply had a chat with them," he claimed. He added that the Urgench Baptist church is a banned organisation "because its registered status was removed".

On 25 June, local Baptist Sharovat Allamova was called in to the Khorezm region NSS headquarters, where the officer who interviewed her, Alisher Khasanov, jeered at her for maintaining her Christian faith. "You Protestants rely on Western money," he told her. "The humanitarian western missions who support you are basically espionage organisations. So you yourselves are agents for foreign intelligence services." He ordered Allamova to say which foreign organisations were in contact with local Baptists, threatening that if she refused he would imprison her under the article of the criminal code that forbids knowingly giving false evidence.

On 26 June, the same Khasanov called in another Baptist, Dilshod Dilbaev, for questioning. Dilbaev was also asked about the Baptists' links with foreigners and about the humanitarian aid they received from abroad. However, Forum 18 has learned that this time Khasanov was more brutal, hitting Dilbaev several times and threatening that if he did not give the required information straightaway they would plant drugs on him. "We will put you away for years," he threatened.

Forum 18's attempt to establish from the Khorezm NSS what had happened yielded an unexpected response. In its telephone call on 5 July, even before Forum 18's correspondent had time to introduce himself an NSS officer asked if he was the journalist Igor Rotar. He said that Khasanov was on leave, but that he was also called Alisher. "There's no need for you to know my surname, but I can answer your questions," he told Forum 18. He questioned why a Norwegian organisation was so interested in a "banned organisation". "We keep track of your visits to Urgench. When do you intend to visit us next?" the NSS officer asked Forum 18's correspondent. "We also know that they intended to complain about us. Please call us next time you come to Urgench."

Forum 18 has learned that a local journalist who helped Forum 18 News Service in Urgench in February was summoned to the NSS in March to be questioned in detail about why a correspondent for a Norwegian organisation was visiting Khorezm region.

Baptists in Urgench began to experience difficulties in February this year, when the justice administration for Khorezm region removed their church's registered status for "the enticement of underage children into religious organisations, and also their religious instruction against their or their parents' will" (see F18News 4 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=267). Uzbekistan's religion law bans the activity of unregistered religious communities. Moreover, the authorities even judge a discussion between several people about religion to constitute "activity" of a religious community.

Article 3 of Uzbekistan's religion law does indeed forbid "the enticement of underage children into religious organisations, and also their religious instruction against their or their parents' will". However, as Oleg Bader, pastor of the Urgench Baptist church, told

Forum 18 in February, work with children was included in the church's statute, which had been registered with the same regional justice administration on 30 December 1999.

Baptists in the Uzbek capital Tashkent, who preferred not to be named, believe that the real reason for the closure of the Urgench church was that the authorities simply do not want Christianity to become widespread in Khorezm region. Currently, there is only one registered Christian community left in Khorezm region - the Korean Protestant church.

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY