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UZBEKISTAN: Muslim women prisoners "viciously insulted"

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

In an open letter to Interior Minister Zakir Almatov passed to Forum 18 News Service by the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, 22 Muslim women prisoners complain of maltreatment. "We are defenceless women who are barred from being amnestied and viciously insulted for practising our religion." They complain they are punished if they pray, have copies of the Koran confiscated if they are caught reading it, are not allowed to wear the Islamic veil, are cut off from their children and are singled out for punishment. "We call all of you, who're lucky enough to be free, to heed the situation of Muslim prisoners; to listen to the cry of the women imprisoned for their belief in Allah." Officials deny the women's accusations. "I know about the letter, we have investigated it and have concluded that the circumstances cited in it bear no relation to reality," Aziz Ernazarov of the interior ministry press office told Forum 18.

A group of 22 Muslim women imprisoned in the Uzbek capital Tashkent on what they claim are trumped-up charges have written an open letter to Interior Minister Zakir Almatov complaining of maltreatment in prison. "We are defenceless women who are barred from being amnestied and viciously insulted for practising our religion," the women declared in the 22 April letter, passed to Forum 18 News Service by the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan. "We call all of you, who're lucky enough to be free, to heed the situation of Muslim prisoners; to listen to the cry of the women imprisoned for their belief in Allah." Officials have been quick to deny the women's accusations. "I know about the letter, we have investigated it and have concluded that the circumstances cited in it bear no relation to reality," Aziz Ernazarov, director of the interior ministry press office in Tashkent, told Forum 18 on 29 April.

The 22 women - who are serving their sentences in women's prison number 64/7 in Tashkent - were all found guilty under article 159 of the criminal code, which punishes "undermining the constitutional system of the republic". The chairman of the Human Rights Society, Talib Yakubov, believes all these women are prisoners of conscience. "For the majority of these prisoners their only guilt is that they are devout Muslims," he told Forum 18 on 29 April in Tashkent.

The women - who give their names on the letter - complain that they cannot practise their faith. "We prisoners are prohibited to pray to our Creator; here we are subjected to insults if we perform prayers, while the Holy Koran will be seized from us if it is found." They say that in the prison "any oppression, any outrage and any violence" is directed first of all at those sentenced under Article 159. "If we perform prayers or recite the Koran we'll be blamed with the words 'The 159ers do not keep the routine' and a note 'infringer of the routine' will be placed in our file. And this means we cannot be included in the amnesty."

The women - who all work in the prison textile workshop - complain that their children have been taken from them and say they have been denied the right to wear the Islamic veil.

"Punishments and oppressions used against us today absolutely contradict the standards of the international human rights norms," they add. They tell Almatov that they believe it is an "open secret" for him why the prison administration punishes the women if they perform their prayers. "We know very well that all these measures and arrangements are in accordance with orders from higher levels," they declare. "We also believe that our torments and anguish are not for nothing. We believe that one fine day we will prove ourselves in the right."

As well as denying the substance of the accusations, Ernazarov of the interior ministry denied the authenticity of the appeal. "We have talked to the women who supposedly wrote this letter and they deny that they wrote it," he claimed to Forum 18. "We shot a video of this, which we will show very shortly on national television."

But Yakubov insists that the appeal is genuine. "This letter came from a very trustworthy source which we cannot identify for quite understandable reasons," he told Forum 18. "It would be astounding for the Interior Ministry to admit to the circumstances cited in the letter. It is quite possible that threats have been used to force the poor women to renounce their appeal."

One senior official, who asked not to be identified, told Forum 18 that the government is "ready" to amnesty Islamic radicals, in particular members of the Hizb-ut-Tahrir party, an international Islamist party which calls for the unification of Muslims throughout the world under a single caliphate. Many Hizb-ut-Tahrir members, supporters or alleged supporters have been imprisoned in Uzbekistan. Those prepared to sign appeals to President Islam Karimov for clemency have been released in recent years.

The official blamed Islamist activists for the fact that not more of these prisoners have been freed under amnesty. "Someone is carrying out propaganda work among Islamic radicals in prison, urging them not to write a request for a pardon," he told Forum 18. "But the state will never go back on its word, and such propaganda will only do poor service to the Muslims who are in prison."

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