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UZBEKISTAN: Are human rights activists agents-provocateurs?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Edgar Turulbekov, a Muslim human rights activist, has been jailed for organising a demonstration in front of a court in support of imam Rustam Klichev, sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment, and other Muslim prisoners. Another Muslim human rights activist, Tulkin Karayev, has told Forum 18 News Service that he too fears arrest. Local police chief Colonel Safar Sarmonov told Forum 18 that Turulbekov and Karayev are "blackmailers". "I do not believe these people are human rights activists," Sarmonov said, telling Forum 18 that "they are simply agents-provocateurs who push people into illegal activities instead of helping them." Members of Uzbekistan's minority faiths - such as Protestants or Jehovah's Witnesses - have generally not engaged in street demonstrations when their fellow-believers have been detained, beaten or imprisoned. However, lawyers who have defended their rights in court have faced harassment.

Edgar Turulbekov, head of the Kashkadarya branch of the Organisation for Human Rights, was sentenced on 5 November to 15 days' administrative arrest, local human rights activist Tulkin Karayev told Forum 18 News Service that same day in Karshi (Qarshi), the administrative centre of Kashkadarya region in southern Uzbekistan. The authorities accused Turulbekov of organising pickets in front of the Kashkadarya regional court and in the capital Tashkent in support of local imam Rustam Klichev, sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment in October, and other Muslim prisoners. Karayev – himself a devout Muslim who prays five times a day - added that he feared he too might be arrested.

The head of the city police department, Colonel Safar Sarmonov, called Turulbekov and Karayev "blackmailers who are provoking people into staging spontaneous demonstrations during difficult times for the country". "I do not believe these people are human rights activists," Sarmonov told Forum 18 on 6 November in Karshi. "They are simply agents-provocateurs who push people into illegal activities instead of helping them." He warned that if Karayev does not stop his "provocative activity", he would hold him to account "in accordance with the law".

Karayev detailed the harassment he has faced. "My home telephone is being tapped and my home is under constant surveillance by the law enforcement agencies," he complained. He said he had been taken to the police station twice on 5 November. "There I faced detailed questioning about why I defend Muslim prisoners and was threatened with 'unpleasantness'."

Forum 18's correspondent's own experience supports the veracity of Karayev's report. All local residents who visited Karayev on 5 and 6 November were immediately detained by the police as they left his home. They were also asked whether a foreign correspondent was present in Karayev's house.

Interestingly, police arrested 17-year-old Begzot Rakhmonov at 8 am on 5 November and detained him until 5 pm. In particular, the police asked him whether Forum 18's correspondent was at Karayev's house. Given that Forum 18's correspondent did not arrive in Karshi until 6pm on 5 November, but had told Karayev about his imminent visit by telephone the day before, it is reasonable to conclude that the human rights activist's telephone is being tapped.

Other evidence also appears to support Karayev's claim that his home is under surveillance. On 6 November, Forum 18 saw a car without number plates near Karayev's home. In the car was a man who had told Forum 18 earlier at the city police department that he was a volunteer with the law enforcement agencies.

During his interview with Forum 18, Sarmonov categorically denied that Karayev's home was under surveillance and that his telephone was tapped. Asked by Forum 18 how the police had discovered its correspondent's plans to visit Karshi before he had even arrived in the city, Sarmonov responded that in Uzbekistan all movements by foreigners around the country are recorded. However, Sarmonov found it difficult to explain how the "recording" mechanism operated.

Karayev and Turulbekov have frequently reported to foreign journalists about the persecution of Muslims in Kashkadarya region and about the demonstrations by relatives of Muslim prisoners in front of the Kashkadarya regional court and the United Nations building in the capital Tashkent (see F18News 3 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=444).

Klichev - imam of Karshi's central Navo mosque – was sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment under criminal code articles 155

(terrorism), 156 (inciting national, racial and religious hatred), 159 (undermining the constitutional basis of the republic of Uzbekistan), 242 (forming criminal groups), 244-1 (composing and distributing documents that present a public threat) and 242-1 (establishing, leading or participating in religious, separatist or fundamentalist organisations). Also sentenced under the same articles to lengthy terms of imprisonment were 16 members of the same mosque.

The case continues at Kashkadarya regional court against 16 devout Muslims from Shakhrisabz, a town 90 kilometres (55 miles) south of Samarkand and 120 kilometres (75 miles) east of Karshi. Karayev told Forum 18 on 28 October that the only "crime" of the accused in both cases consisted only in being devout Muslims and meeting to read the Koran.

Members of Uzbekistan's minority faiths that have faced harassment – such as Protestants or Jehovah's Witnesses - have generally not engaged in street demonstrations when their fellow-believers have been detained, beaten or imprisoned. However, a number of lawyers who have defended their rights in court have faced harassment.

After Jehovah's Witness lawyer Rustam Satdanov fled Uzbekistan for the United States earlier this year after secret police interrogation about his work defending fellow Jehovah's Witnesses, his wife and young children received anonymous telephone threats at their home in Tashkent (see F18News 15 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=341). The threats have ceased for the moment. Tashkent-based lawyer Nail Gabdullin had his licence to practice stripped from him in March in retaliation for his work defending Protestants (see F18News 26 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=288). However, he was later able to regain his licence.

For more background information see Forum 18's Uzbekistan 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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