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UZBEKISTAN: Tortured Pentecostal still in jail

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Pentecostal Kural Bekjanov is still being held at a police station in the capital Tashkent with no progress on the investigation into whether he was connected to the murder of a US citizen in the city. "We are convinced of his innocence, and our suspicion is that his religious beliefs are the reason for his ordeal," Iskander Najafov, a lawyer for the Full Gospel Church, told Forum 18 News Service. But Shukhrat Ismailov of the government's religious affairs committee denied this, telling Forum 18 church members' claims were "pure speculation". Since his arrest on 14 June, Bekjanov has been tortured by police and cell mates trying to force him to abandon his Christian faith. Meanwhile two Jehovah's Witnesses in Karshi who have already been fined for "illegal" religious activity now face criminal charges with penalties of up to three years' imprisonment.

One month after his arrest, 19-year-old Pentecostal Kural Bekjanov remains in detention at the police station in the Mirobad district of the capital Tashkent, Protestant sources have told Forum 18 News Service. Bekjanov, a member of the Full Gospel church, was arrested on 14 June on suspicion of connection to the murder of a US citizen of Korean origin who had links to some Protestant churches. "The murder charge against Bekjanov still hasn't been lifted," Iskander Najafov, a lawyer for the Full Gospel Church, told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 13 July. He said the Church is awaiting the outcome of an investigation which should establish whether or not Bekjanov is guilty. "We are convinced of his innocence, and our suspicion is that his religious beliefs are the reason for his ordeal." Investigators have been more interested in Bekjanov's religious faith than in any alleged links to the murdered woman.

Shukhrat Ismailov, head of the department for non-Muslim faiths at the government's religious affairs committee, dismissed church members' claims that Bekjanov is being punished for his religious activity as "pure speculation". "We've looked into this case," Ismailov told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 13 July. "The accusation against Bekjanov is not linked with his religious beliefs in any way. It's interesting that the Pentecostals have trumpeted this case to the whole world, but haven't found time to appeal to us."

Despite the numerous raids and court cases against religious believers across Uzbekistan, Ismailov categorically denied that the authorities have launched a new campaign against religious minorities. "Operations underway are normal and routine," he told Forum 18.

Since his arrest at his Tashkent home on 14 June in the wake of the murder of 65-year-old Kim Khen Pen Khin, Bekjanov has been tortured both by police officers and cell mates in an attempt to pressure him to abandon his Christian faith. When his mother Gulya was finally allowed to see him at Tashkent city police station on 26 June, he had lost weight, had difficulty walking and his fingers and legs were covered in blood. Police summoned nearly 20 other church members, but were less interested in investigating the murder than in questioning them about their beliefs and threatening and insulting them (see F18News 28 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=595).

Protestant sources told Forum 18 the torture stopped on 28 June after Bekjanov was transferred back from the city police station to the Mirobad district station and was able to speak to a lawyer.

Meanwhile the administrative case continues against Nikolai Shevchenko, pastor of the embattled Bethany Protestant church in Tashkent, who is accused of holding services in a church that has not registered with the justice ministry (see F18News 17 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=588). The Bethany church has been seeking registration in vain for many years and is challenging officials' obstruction of the registration application through the courts. Protestant sources told Forum 18 from Tashkent that the case against Shevchenko has been adjourned until 28 July.

Ismailov of the government's religious affairs committee also defended the prosecution of Shevchenko. "He has continued to hold services at an unregistered church for several years despite all the legal steps taken against him," he told Forum 18. "All in all, it's a very old story." Uzbekistan's insistence that all religious activity by unregistered religious communities is illegal violates its international human rights commitments.

Jehovah's Witnesses also continue to face persecution. In the southern city of Karshi [Qarshi], cases have been instigated against Bakhrom Pulatov and Feruza Mamatova under Article 216-2 of the Criminal Code, Jehovah's Witness sources told Forum 18. Under Article 216-2, repeat offences for illegal religious activity - including avoiding state registration and organising and conducting

special religious meetings for young people - is punishable by a fine of between fifty and hundred times the minimum monthly wage, detention for up to six months or imprisonment for up to three years.

Both Pulatov and Mamatova have already received administrative punishments for their religious activity. They were among those fined by Karshi city court on 26 March for violating Articles 240(1) and 240(2) of the code of administrative offences following the 26 January police raid on the home of Nargiza Buzrukova, where a Jehovah's Witness meeting was taking place. Pulatov was fined five times the minimum wage, or 32,650 soms (186 Norwegian kroner, 24 Euros or 28 US dollars), while Mamatova and Buzrukova were each fined three times the minimum wage, or 19,590 soms. The fines came two days after widespread raids on Jehovah's Witness meetings across Uzbekistan (see F18News 1 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=536).

Jehovah's Witness sources told Forum 18 that it is not yet clear on what basis a criminal case against Pulatov and Mamatova has now been instigated. Under Article 216-2, there must be a repeat of an offence for which administrative penalties have been imposed before criminal charges can be made. The case papers compiled by the prosecutor consist of two large volumes of information on previous incidents involving Jehovah's Witnesses, statements and testimonies from witnesses, expert conclusions on Jehovah's Witnesses religious literature, and a statement that such literature may only be distributed in Fergana and Chirchik where the communities are officially registered.

Ismailov of the government's religious affairs committee pointed out that the Jehovah's Witnesses in Karshi have already faced administrative penalties because of their activity as an unregistered religious organisation. "What they have done repeatedly is a legal offence, and so under Uzbek law they have to be held to criminal account."

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all faiths as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=546

For an outline of the repression immediately following the Andijan uprising, see F18News 23 May http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567 and for an outline of what is known about Akramia and the uprising see 16 June http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586

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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