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TAJIKISTAN: Authorities concerned at publicity over Jehovah's Witness fines

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Media interest in the case of two Jehovah's Witnesses fined for leading a religious meeting in Tursun-Zade raided by the police has provoked serious concern among the local authorities, Forum 18 News Service has learned. They had hoped the case against them – first reported by Forum 18 on 28 April and picked up by a local television station - would go unremarked by the outside world. "We hope the authorities will not take it out on us because our case has unexpectedly received such wide publicity," one of the two, Sukhrob Maksudov, told Forum 18. The Jehovah's Witnesses expect the Supreme Court to hear their appeal against the sentences in about a month's time.

International and local media interest in the case of two Jehovah's Witnesses fined in April for leading a religious meeting in the town of Tursun-Zade, 60 kilometres (35 miles) west of the capital Dushanbe, has provoked serious concern among the local authorities, Forum 18 News Service has learned from sources in the town. The authorities had hoped that the case against them – first reported by Forum 18 on 28 April - would go unremarked by the outside world.

The two Jehovah's Witnesses - Grigori Putenkov and Sukhrob Maksudov - have complained that a local television station portrayed them as criminals in a report broadcast on 30 April. "Our town is quite small and this programme has damaged our image," Maksudov told Forum 18 on 21 May. "We do not think of ourselves as criminals."

However, a producer at Tursun-Zade denied that the report had been biased. "We heard about the court case against the Jehovah's Witnesses from a broadcast by the Tajik service of Radio Liberty, which in its turn quoted Forum 18," Firuz Khalikov told Forum 18 from Tursun-Zade on 21 May. "We found your site on the Internet, translated the article from English and on the basis of that we showed an objective, neutral television report."

On 20 April several police officers raided the flat where around 40 local Jehovah's Witnesses were meeting, instructing all those present to write statements. Putenkov and Maksudov were taken to the town's police station, where officers started to insult them and struck Putenkov several times. On 24 April the town court fined each of the two men five times the minimum monthly wage (some 57 Norwegian kroner, 8 Euros or 8 US dollars) under Article 211, part 2 of the administrative code, which punishes "violation of the law on giving religious instruction" (see F18News 28 April 2003).

Maksudov reported that on 3 May he and Putenkov lodged an appeal against the town court sentence to the Supreme Court in Dushanbe. "We hope the authorities will not take it out on us because our case has unexpectedly received such wide publicity," he told Forum 18. "We do not seek confrontation and hope that in the end we will come to an understanding with the authorities."

No date has yet been set for the Supreme Court hearing, but the Jehovah's Witnesses expect it to be in about a month's time.

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