

3 October 2005

UZBEKISTAN: Growing attempts to isolate religious groups from support

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Andijan Protestant pastor Bakhtier Tuichiev has told Forum 18 News Service that, since the violent crushing of the Andijan uprising in May, he has – along with other local Protestants - been placed under NSS secret police surveillance, and has regularly been threatened with arrest if he does not shut down his unregistered Pentecostal church. Since the Andijan crackdown, Uzbekistan has increased attempts to isolate religious believers from the support of local and foreign journalists and human rights activists. For example, Tuichiev was told by police that "We are not going to let foreign human rights activists into Uzbekistan any more. It's payback time – we've already dealt with Igor Rotar and now we've come for you." Rotar, Forum 18's Central Asia correspondent, was deported from Uzbekistan, apparently as part of a wide crackdown on independent media and human rights activists. Repression and attempts to isolate religious communities – including the unconcealed censorship of international post - are continuing.

Andijan Protestant pastor Bakhtier Tuichiev has told Forum 18 News Service that, since the violent crushing of the Andijan uprising in May, he has regularly been called in by the local police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police and threatened with arrest if he refuses to shut down his unregistered Pentecostal church, he stated from Andijan on 29 September. Pastor Tuichiev has been trying to register his church for several years without success. Under Uzbek law, a religious community cannot operate without state registration. Since the Andijan crackdown, the authorities have increased attempts to try and isolate religious believers from the support of local and foreign journalists and human rights activists.

However, the chief specialist at the Uzbek government's religious affairs committee Begzot Kadyrov denied absolutely that the government's religious policy had been tightened since the crackdown. "We have actually started to treat believers more leniently," he claimed to Forum 18 from Tashkent on 29 September. However, he was unable to cite any evidence for this view.

Tuichiev has been frequently summoned by the police and secret police in recent years, while in September 2002 he was visited by a group of people from Tashkent he believes were NSS secret police officers masquerading as BBC and CNN journalists (see F18News 14 March 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=5).

Tuichiev maintains that since the crushing of the uprising the NSS has placed him under surveillance, along with other active members of the Protestant community. Tuichiev claims that NSS officers are trying to stir up residents of his local mahalla (city district) against him. He says he was told openly at the police station: "We are not going to let foreign human rights activists into Uzbekistan any more. It's payback time – we've already dealt with Igor Rotar and now we've come for you."

Rotar, Forum 18's Central Asia correspondent, was deported from Uzbekistan on 13 August (see F18News 16 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=631). Soon after the events in Andijan, the authorities arrested Nosir Zakir, a Radio Liberty correspondent from Namangan, a city in Uzbekistan's section of the Fergana valley, and forcibly detained Tashkent-based human rights activist Elena Uralayeva in a psychiatric hospital. The courts ordered the closure of the local offices of Internews, a US organisation which assists the development of journalism in developing countries, while the activity of the US organisation IREX has been at a standstill for six months. IREX organises student exchanges in Uzbekistan and promotes the use of the Internet in schools.

During the court case against followers of the Akramiya movement the state prosecutor, Uzbekistan's deputy general public prosecutor Anvar Nabiev, described the group of journalists covering the Andijan events, almost all of whom were from western publications, as "jackals feeding from carrion". The director of the Uzbekistan office of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting Galima Bukharbaeva, a correspondent for the news agency Fergana.ru Aleksei Volosevich, Radio Liberty reporter Andrei Babitsky and BBC correspondent Matlyuba Azamatova have all been accused of being among Uzbekistan's sworn enemies. Because of their fear of repression by the authorities, Bukharbaeva has had to remain in New York (where she had gone to attend a conference), while Azamatova has left for the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek. Many such journalists have reported on violations of the rights of religious believers.

"Since the events in Andijan it has been completely impossible for journalists and human rights activists to work in Uzbekistan," Tulkin Karaev, a human rights activist and journalist from Karshi in southern Uzbekistan, told Forum 18 on 29 September in Bishkek. "Almost all of them have either already left Uzbekistan or are getting ready to leave the country."

Meanwhile, the repression of believers in Uzbekistan continues. Local Council of Churches Baptists - who refuse on principle to register with the state authorities in post-Soviet countries - told Forum 18 on 23 September that the previous day a group of 16 Baptists from Tashkent, Karshi [Qarshi] and Mubarek decided to hold an evangelistic meeting in the town of Kagan near the western town of Bukhara [Bukhoro]. "After prayers, they had just sung a few hymns when divisional police inspector R. Sobirov and an officer M. Alanazarov arrived and banned them from continuing the meeting," the Baptists reported. They put all the Baptists in cars and took them to the town police station. There Alanazarov and an official from the criminal investigation department A. Babaev took the passports from those detained and interrogated them "without following any of the proper procedures". The Baptists complain they also behaved very rudely.

The Baptists were detained all day before being released in the evening. Their equipment was confiscated, along with all their Christian literature, including Uzbek-language Gospels, children's stories, books of music and poetry, and leaflets in Russian and Uzbek.

Kadyrov dismissed any concern over the detention of the Baptists and the confiscation of their literature. "According to Uzbek law, unregistered religious groups are not allowed to meet, so the police in Kagan were acting within the law," he told Forum 18.

The authorities have frequently confiscated religious literature from Muslims, Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees. On occasion courts have ordered that religious literature be burnt (see F18News 6 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=643). The authorities prevent literature being brought in from neighbouring Kazakhstan or from Russia and also obstruct it from being sent from abroad.

One Protestant who had sent a parcel of Christian books from Germany to Protestants in Uzbekistan received them back in summer 2005 with an official letter from the Uzbek post office declaring that sending such religious literature into Uzbekistan is not permitted. The letter particularly instructed the sender not to try to mail further copies of a book by female Uzbek Protestant pastor Shirinai Dosova. She is now based in Moscow and was recently strip-searched at Tashkent airport in April 2005, on a return visit to her homeland (see F18News 12 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=604).

Protestants in Tashkent have told Forum 18 that letters from abroad to local churches are routinely opened and read before being handed on. The authorities make no pretence over this censorship, not bothering to reseal the letters (see F18News 14 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=687).

(END)

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>

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY