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UZBEKISTAN: Is interrogation and banning activity just "we simply chatted to him as friends"?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Ulugbek Taishmatov, of the Andijan regional Department of Internal Affairs, has denied pressuring Protestant pastor Bakhtier Tuichiev, despite interrogating him daily over four days and banning his church's activity. Taishmatov told Forum 18 News Service that "no-one has been questioning him; we simply chatted to him as friends. We don't have any intention of making trouble for him." Pastor Tuichiev is not reassured, stating that "he didn't talk to me in a friendly way at all. I remain very concerned for my safety." Tuichiev noted that he was questioned personally by Taishmatov from 9 o'clock in the morning until 6 o'clock in the evening over four days, and that Taishmatov forced him to write a statement that church members would not meet for religious gatherings. Pastor Tuichiev told Forum 18 that "I was afraid that if I did not write it, I would simply be arrested." Under Uzbek law – and against international human rights standards – unregistered religious activity is illegal.

Ulugbek Taishmatov, head of the Department for Combating Religious Extremism and Terrorism in the Andijan [Andijon] regional Department of Internal Affairs, has denied putting any pressure on Protestant pastor Bakhtier Tuichiev, despite interrogating him daily over four days in mid-November and banning all further activity by his church. "We do not have any issue with Tuichiev," Taishmatov told Forum 18 News Service from Andijan on 14 December. "No-one has been questioning him; we simply chatted to him as friends. We don't have any intention of making trouble for him."

Tuichiev is not reassured by these comments. "Taishmatov was simply trying to conceal the problem from a foreign journalist," the pastor told Forum 18 from Andijan on 14 December. "He didn't talk to me in a friendly way at all. I remain very concerned for my safety."

Andijan is located in Uzbekistan's part of the Fergana [Farghona] Valley and was the centre of an anti-government uprising in May (see F18News 23 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567).

Tuichiev was subjected to the four days' questioning by the regional Department of Internal Affairs. "I arrived for questioning at 9 o'clock in the morning and returned at six o'clock in the evening," he told Forum 18, adding that he was questioned personally by Taishmatov.

The pastor reported that Taishmatov was interested primarily in his contacts overseas, including human rights organisations, and whether he received financial support from abroad. Taishmatov made Tuichiev write a declaration that members of his church would not meet for religious gatherings, because the church is not registered with the Justice Ministry. "I was forced to write that declaration. I was afraid that if I did not write it, I would simply be arrested," Tuichiev told Forum 18. Under Uzbek law – and against international human rights standards – unregistered religious activity is illegal.

Since the Andijan uprising, Uzbek authorities have increasingly attempted to isolate religious communities from international support (see F18News 3 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=665). The censorship of international post in Uzbekistan is routine, open and severe (see F18News 14 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=687). Controls on access to some websites – especially websites with Muslim content – are also in place (see F18News 19 June 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=86).

Tuichiev has been trying unsuccessfully to register his church with the state since 2002. He maintains that the National Security Service (NSS) secret police has placed him under surveillance, along with other active members of the Protestant community, and claims that NSS officers are trying to stir up residents of his local mahalla (city district) against him.

In 2002, a group of people claiming to be BBC and CNN journalists visited Tuichiev, but he subsequently concluded that these were really NSS secret police, as both the BBC and CNN told him by phone that none of their employees had visited him (see F18News 14 March 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=5). (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 what is known about Akramia and the Andijan uprising see F18News 16 June 2005
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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