

5 May 2006

UZBEKISTAN: JW jailed, Protestants raided, children pressured to renounce Christianity

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

A court in north-western Uzbekistan has sentenced a Jehovah's Witness to ten days' jail, Forum 18 News Service has found. Three days later, on 30 April, about fifty police raided a banned Protestant church and detained church members during Easter celebrations. Simultaneously, police raided the church's land and broke the caretaker's arm in a bid to force the church to give its land to the state. Following the raids, Forum 18 has learnt that the Prosecutor's Office intimidated and threatened children, in a bid to force them to sign statements that they would no longer attend Christian services and that they were renouncing their Christian faith. Parents were also pressured to write statements that they would not "attract their children to Christianity" and warned that failure to comply could see them deprived of their parental rights. A state religious affairs official told Forum 18 that "the police simply have to stop the church's members from holding illegal religious meetings."

On 27 April, a local court in Nukus, the capital of the Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] autonomous republic in north-western Uzbekistan, sentenced a Jehovah's Witness to ten days' imprisonment, Jehovah's Witness sources told Forum 18 News Service.

Three days later, on Sunday 30 April, members of the banned Emmanuel Full Gospel Church were detained when about fifty police officers raided their Easter celebration held in a Nukus hotel, Protestant sources told Forum 18. The authorities are also trying to seize the church's land. The region's senior state Religious Affairs official said he had no knowledge of any problems, but defended the attacks against the Emmanuel Church. "Under Uzbek law, an unregistered religious community is not allowed to operate and therefore the police simply have to stop the church's members from holding illegal religious meetings," Nurula Jamolov of the Karakalpakstan regional state Religious Affairs Committee told Forum 18 from the regional capital Nukus on 4 May.

In the absence of their own church building, the Emmanuel congregation decided to meet in the privately-owned Khoja Hotel, which belongs to a church member. The Easter festival was attended by 160 people and their children. During the raid, police ordered all those present to write statements, whilst issuing threats and frightening young children present. Police then with physical force took eight people to the town's police station, including the church's pastor, Nazim Nebiev. The eight were released after several hours, but the police confiscated Nebiev's passport.

"All the church was doing was celebrating Easter, a festival recognised throughout the world, including in Uzbekistan," one Protestant told Forum 18.

On the same day, 30 April, the police also raided land owned by the church. Protestant sources have told Forum 18 that the church's caretaker, Azat Kaldybekov, was beaten so severely that his arm was broken, as has been confirmed by X-ray. The reason given by the police for their raid on the former church's land was that the Karakalpakstan Justice Ministry insists that the church give its property to the state. This is despite the fact that, under the Uzbek Religion Law, the disposal of the property of a banned religious association is left to the discretion of its members, not the state.

In the wake of the raids, the Prosecutor's Office has summoned many of the children who were present at the festival, intimidating, threatening and pressuring them to sign statements that they would no longer attend Christian services or meetings and that they were renouncing their Christian faith. Parents were also summoned and pressured to write statements that they would no longer "attract their children to Christianity". They were warned that failure to comply could see them deprived of their parental rights.

The Emmanuel Church – the last legal Protestant church in Karakalpakstan - was closed down by order of the regional Justice Ministry in May 2005. All Protestant activity of any kind in north-west Uzbekistan is now - against international human rights standards - forbidden under Uzbek law, making the only permitted Christian activities those of the Russian Orthodox parish in Nukus (see F18News 11 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=686). The reason given for the Emmanuel Church's closure was that the church's members were preaching locally and also teaching religion to schoolchildren (see F18News 26 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=719).

Jamolov of the regional state Religious Affairs Committee also defended the banning of the church. "The Emmanuel Church was

closed down on legal grounds because its members were engaged in proselytism," he told Forum 18. He also said he was not aware of any problems experienced by Protestants over Easter. "They have not asked us for help, and so I know nothing about these incidents."

However, the church's lawyer Iskander Najafov maintains that the church was closed down simply because the authorities did not want Christianity to become widespread in the region. "The church's members taught basic religious doctrines to their own children, as they have every right to do," he told Forum 18 on 2 May. "There is no actual proof of missionary activity on the part of the church's members. The believers were simply visiting each other."

The Jehovah's Witnesses also have no legal religious community in Karakalpakstan and so Nukus City Court on 27 April sentenced local Jehovah's Witness Nurlan Ayatov to ten days' detention under Article 240 (breaking the law on religious organisations) of the Code of Administrative Offences.

The region has also seen ongoing repression of Protestant university students (see F18News 26 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=719).

Elsewhere, the Jehovah's Witnesses fear that the authorities intend to close down their registered community in the city of Fergana [Farghona] in eastern Uzbekistan (see F18News 1 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=698). In March, the authorities called a residents' meeting in the mahalla (a city sector with private dwellings) which voiced its dissatisfaction at the fact that Jehovah's Witnesses had situated a Kingdom Hall in their district.

Under Uzbek law, mahalla residents have the right to ban a religious community from operating on their territory. The mahalla leadership, which is formally elected by the local population, is in actual fact totally reliant on the city authorities. The creation of "dissatisfaction" among mahalla residents has become a tool routinely used by the authorities in the battle with religious communities.

The latest pressure on Jehovah's Witnesses comes just weeks after nationwide co-ordinated police and NSS secret police raids on their commemorations of the death of Jesus, which Jehovah's Witnesses marked on 12 April. Among the Kingdom Halls raided was that in Fergana, which is one of only two Jehovah's Witness congregations in the whole of Uzbekistan which has managed to gain registration with the regional justice ministry (see F18News 19 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=763).

On 28 April the Fergana city court heard an administrative case against Artur Arsanov, the leader of the city's Jehovah's Witnesses, and Dila Safieva, the owner of the building in which their Kingdom Hall is based. The Jehovah's Witnesses' lawyer managed to demonstrate that the Jehovah's Witnesses had not broken the law, because their community is registered. Yet despite this, the judge referred the case for further investigation by Fergana's prosecutor's office.

"We are very concerned that despite clear evidence that the Fergana Jehovah's Witnesses have not broken the law, the case has been referred for further investigation," Sergei Artyushkov of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan told Forum 18 from the capital Tashkent on 30 April. "One cannot help fearing that the authorities are planning to close down our community in Fergana." He complained that the Jehovah's Witnesses have only managed to register two communities, in Fergana and Chirchik (on the outskirts of Tashkent). "We have made frequent attempts to register our community in Tashkent, but we are invariably unsuccessful."

The Ferghana region has also seen an increase in the authorities' attacks on the region's Protestants (see F18News 2 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=722) and Muslims (see F18News 21 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=747).

Meanwhile, Compass Direct reported that on 24 April, police officers burst into the home of a Protestant pastor Sergey Lunkin in Urgench [Urganch], in the Khorezm region of north-western Uzbekistan south of Karakalpakstan. At the time of the raid, 12 people were having lunch together. Pastor Lunkin's congregation belongs to the Union of Independent Churches (UIC), a grouping of Protestant congregations across the country.

Police confiscated Lunkin's computer and all his Christian literature, including 32 New Testaments legally printed by and purchased from the Bible Society of Uzbekistan. Vasily Chursin, another UIC member present, was detained and his digital camera and laptop computer were confiscated.

Religious literature is strictly censored in Uzbekistan (see F18News 6 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=643) and strict postal censorship of religious literature is also applied (see F18News 14 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=687).

Charges were lodged against both Lunkin and Chursin under Article 241 of the Code of Administrative Offences for "breaking the laws on teaching religion". A court decision on the case is expected soon, after which the defendants have the right to appeal within 10 days.

Compass Direct reported that according to a lawyer defending the Protestants, the police at Pastor Lunkin's home were guilty of no less than 16 separate violations of the law, all of which he has specified in written complaints to the authorities.

Three Turkmen citizens at the lunch were deported back to Turkmenistan, reportedly with black stamps in their passports prohibiting them from re-entering Uzbekistan. Under Uzbek visa regulations, Turkmen citizens living close to the border are allowed to cross into Uzbekistan for a few days, but their travels are restricted to the city of Urgench, 50 kms (30 miles) from the border.

In a separate incident, Compass Direct reported that three Protestants in the capital Tashkent were arrested on 21 April while visiting and helping feed patients at a tuberculosis hospital for children. Through a Tashkent lawyer's assistance, two of the three were soon released, but the third was charged under Article 241 of the Code of Administrative Offences for allegedly "teaching religion". In Tashkent, the authorities have earlier this year conducted a check by all state authorities – including public services such as the fire service – against religious believers (see F18News 11 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=714).

Persecution of Protestants has been continuing throughout the country (see F18News 14 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=744).

A massive rise in fines for unregistered religious activity has also recently been brought in, with increases in fines from 5 to 10 times the minimum wage to 50 to 100 times the minimum wage (see F18News 27 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=720). Against international human rights standards, unregistered religious activity is illegal in Uzbekistan. (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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