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UZBEKISTAN: Protestants face prosecution, fines, raids, kidnapping and death threats

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

Following a January raid on a private home in Nukus in north-western Uzbekistan where 18 Protestants had gathered, one of those present, Salavat Serikbayev, faces criminal trial for teaching religion illegally, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. There is a three year maximum sentence if convicted and the hearing is set for 24 April. The host of the meeting, Grigory Ten, was fined more than many local people earn in a year on 9 April, and his hymnbook was ordered to be confiscated. In the eastern city of Andijan, three members of the embattled church led by Dmitry Shestakov – imprisoned on 9 March – are also facing possible prosecution. In Samarkand police swooped on an outdoor Protestant Easter service. Several prominent Protestants are facing death threats and the daughter of one pastor was traumatised after being kidnapped by unknown young men. However, the Jehovah's Witnesses report that five of their meetings to commemorate Jesus' death were raided this year, far fewer than in the past two years. An official of the state Religious Affairs Committee told Forum 18 that these reports are "false information".

On 24 April, Protestant Christian Salavat Serikbayev is due to face the criminal court in the town of Nukus, the capital of the Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] autonomous republic of north-western Uzbekistan where all non-Muslim and non-Orthodox religious activity is banned. Protestant sources who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18 News Service that Serikbayev – who faces a charge of illegal religious teaching - was arrested on 18 April in the run-up to the trial but was freed the following day. Another local Protestant originally held in the same January raid on a Protestant meeting in Nukus has been given a massive fine, while harassment of Protestant communities – including fines, a kidnapping and death threats - has continued elsewhere in the country.

However, Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 that in five places police tried to prevent their congregations from marking the memorial of Jesus' death, which this year fell on 2 April, a far lower number of raids than in the past two years.

An aide to the chairman of the government's Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent has denied absolutely that any of Uzbekistan's religious communities face official harassment or restrictions. "No-one raised anything with us," Arakjon, who did not give his last name, told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 19 April. Asked about the prosecution of Serikbayev, the fines on other Protestants, the threats on others and the raids on Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses, he responded: "You have false information." He then added that he could not give any information by telephone and ended the call.

Serikbayev, who is from the town of Muynak north of Nukus close to the Aral Sea, was among a group of 18 Protestants held when police raided the Nukus home of Grigory Ten of a local Presbyterian church on 15 January. Many were charged under the Administrative Code (see F18News 23 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=935).

The 32-year-old Serikbayev has long faced harassment for his Christian activity. In 1999 he spent four months in prison, while last year he was fined. Since then he has been repeatedly warned, threatened and harassed. Since the latest case began, the committee of his local mahalla (residential district) began proceedings to deprive him, his wife and their five children of social protection payments, including childcare benefits. Mahalla committees are part of an extensive apparatus of state control and repression (see F18News 27 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936).

Although prosecutors' accusations have varied, Forum 18 has learnt that Serikbayev now faces charges under Article 229-2 of the Criminal Code, which punishes "violating the procedure for teaching religion" and carries a maximum term of three years' imprisonment.

In the wake of the 15 January police raid, Nukus-based Protestant Makset Djabbabergenov also faced criminal charges, but these were later downgraded to charges under the Code of Administrative Offences.

As a result of the raid, Grigory Ten was prosecuted under the Code of Administrative Offences on various accusations relating to his religious activity. On 9 April, the Nukus criminal court found him guilty of violating Article 184-2, which punishes "illegal production, storage, import or distribution of religious materials", Article 240, which punishes "violating the laws on religious

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organisations", and Article 241, which punishes "violating the procedure for teaching religion". He was fined 621,000 Sums (2956 Norwegian Kroner, 365 Euros or 496 US Dollars), a massive sum in Karakalpakstan and more than many local people earn in a year.

The court ordered that a hymnbook "It is blessed to praise the Lord" be confiscated. Ten has also been summoned as a witness in the case against Serikbayev. Confiscated religious literature is frequently destroyed (see eg. F18News 27 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936).

Across Uzbekistan in the town of Andijan [Andijon] in the Fergana [Farghona] Valley, Protestants have complained to Forum 18 of charges apparently being prepared against members of Dmitry Shestakov's embattled Full Gospel Pentecostal congregation. "They are trying to crush Shestakov's church by calling other church members to [legal] responsibility," one source who preferred not to be named for fear of reprisals told Forum 18.

M. Mamadaliev, senior aide to the prosecutor of Andijan region, summoned Susanna Mukhtarova, Yuri Pan and Dilafruz Najmiddinova for questioning. In summoning Najmiddinova to appear on 5 April, Mamadaliev cited "the taking of measures against members of the illegal Charismatic-Pentecostal religious organisation" called for in the case against Shestakov. Protestant sources have described these summonses as "illegal" as Shestakov's case made no mention of any measures against other church members. Najmiddinova had testified on Shestakov's behalf at his recent trial.

Reached on 19 April, the regional prosecutor's office refused to discuss these cases with Forum 18.

Shestakov was sentenced on 9 March to four years' imprisonment in an open work camp in retaliation for his leadership of his church (see F18News 27 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936). Forum 18 has learnt that although Shestakov has lodged an appeal against his sentence, no date has yet been set for the appeal to be heard.

Meanwhile, on 12 April in the town of Gazli in Bukhara region of western Uzbekistan, Pentecostal Christian Jamilya Primbetova was fined 70,000 Sums (333 Norwegian Kroner, 41 Euros or 56 US Dollars) under Article 241 of the Code of Administrative Offences. The court ordered that a copy of the Bible in Kazakh should be confiscated from her.

In another recent case, a group of Protestants who had gathered for a sunrise service on Easter Sunday, 8 April, in the countryside near Samarkand were pounced on by police and the National Security Service (NSS) secret police, Protestant sources told Forum 18. All 23 Protestants present were taken to various police stations, interrogated for the whole day and ordered to write statements. Eighteen of them were freed later in the day but five visitors from other cities who did not have their identity documents on them were held longer before being freed. The authorities threatened to prosecute the five for proselytism, but Forum 18 has not been able to find out if any cases against them are proceeding.

In another case that has caused concern among local Protestants, the daughter of a pastor was kidnapped in April by unknown young men before being freed in a traumatised state. Local Protestants, who asked that the family not be identified for fear of further reprisals, have told Forum 18 that the kidnapping is the latest in a series of attacks on the family, which has included telephoned threats, hostile visits from neighbours and beatings, allegedly inspired by the mullahs at the local mosque angry that the pastor is a convert to Christianity who actively preaches his faith.

Protestant sources have told Forum 18 that other prominent Protestant leaders have also been threatened in recent months, including being threatened with death. However, they asked that names of those threatened not be made public for fear of making their situation worse.

While moves against Protestant Christians appear to be stepping up, by contrast the Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 that only "minor interference" marred their commemoration this year of the death of Jesus, the one festival that the Jehovah's Witnesses mark. The memorial fell this year on 2 April, and the Jehovah's Witnesses report that in five places police tried to halt the commemorations. "That is much better than in the two previous years," one Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18.

The meeting in Yangiyul, a Tashkent suburb, was disrupted by ten police officers, Jehovah's Witnesses reported. Seven male and one female Witness were detained and taken to the police-station where, after giving written statements, they were released at three o'clock in the morning. At two places in Tashkent, the celebration of the Memorial was disrupted, but nobody was taken to the police-station. At one of these places two representatives of the American Embassy were present.

At two places in Samarkand, police tried to disrupt the meetings. At one of them, police officers arrived after the gathering ended and only two men living at that place were at home. The police officers demanded that they write a statement that a religious gathering had taken place in their house that night. At the other place the police detained one male Jehovah's Witness and took him to the police-station, where they beat him on the head. He had to seek medical help.

In March 2005 and again in April 2006, the ordinary police and the NSS secret police carried out a large-scale operation against Jehovah's Witnesses, raiding numerous services commemorating the death of Jesus in what had become an annual crackdown (see

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F18News 1 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=536 and 19 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=763).

Of more than 30 existing congregations, the Jehovah's Witnesses now have only one registered congregation left in Uzbekistan – in the town of Chirchik near Tashkent - and even this has been threatened with closure (see F18News 20 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=892). A delegation of Jehovah's Witness representatives from Belgium, Russia and New York attended the memorial in Chirchik and met officials in the run-up to 2 April.

The Uzbek authorities have continued their moves to suppress foreign non-governmental organisations which they suspect are linked to religious communities. The Justice Ministry in Tashkent told the Russian news agency Interfax on 17 April that staff members of the NGO Friendship and Hope International – which has been conducting humanitarian work in the country since 1995 - had been caught engaging in proselytism. In defiance of the country's international human rights commitments, sharing one's faith is banned in Article 5 of Uzbekistan's religion law, whether for foreigners or local people.

"In connection with signals that had been received that staff members of the representation of Friendship and Hope International are engaging in missionary activity, the leadership of the non-governmental organisation was sent a written warning," unnamed Justice Ministry officials told Interfax. The letter warned that any repeated "illegal" activity would face unspecified measures.

Officials said that residents of Samarkand region had complained that a staff member had allegedly engaged in proselytism. "In the appeal it says that despite numerous warnings from local residents, the foreigner – the unofficial pastor of the Chorkhin Protestant church – regularly conducts missionary activity among young people." Justice Ministry officials quoted the local residents as complaining that the foreigners tried to get local young people to convert from Islam to Protestant Christianity "under the cover of teaching languages". Officials said the foreigner was believed to have left Uzbekistan.

The official recalled that in April 2006, four employees of another NGO, Global Involvement through Education, were fined by a court in Samarkand region for conducting missionary activity and "urging students to change their traditional faith (Islam and Orthodoxy) to the Protestant religious tendency".

The moves against Friendship and Hope International and Global Involvement through Education are part of what appears to be a coordinated campaign to oust from the country almost every NGO which the government believes is religiously-affiliated. Very few such NGOs remain. Christian charity World Vision, which works on HIV/AIDS projects in Uzbekistan, was accused by the Justice Ministry of allegedly holding events without coordinating with the Ministry and of not providing information about charitable spending (see F18News 14 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=911). Non-religious foreign NGOs have also been ousted or threatened, including most recently Human Rights Watch. (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=777.

Full reports of the religious freedom situation in Uzbekistan can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

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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