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UZBEKISTAN: Jehovah's Witness latest victim of "illegal" religious teaching charges

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

Three weeks after Jehovah's Witness Irfon Khamidov was imprisoned for two years by Samarkand City Criminal Court for "illegal" religious teaching, the same court has sentenced fellow Jehovah's Witness Dilafruz Arziyeva on the same charges. She has received a two year correctional labour sentence, where 20 per cent of her wages will be docked, Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 News Service. Authorities in Samarkand have long refused to give the Jehovah's Witnesses legal status. A local official rejected an application in 2002, arguing that enough other religious communities were registered locally for people "to realise their freedom of conscience and to practise their beliefs". Also punished this year on "illegal" religious teaching charges was Pentecostal Christian Salavat Serikbayev. But he has had his two year correctional labour sentence reduced to one year. He has been assigned to cultivate plants in the desert, with 20 per cent of his wages docked.

For the second time in as many months the Criminal Court in the central city of Samarkand [Samarqand] has sentenced a Jehovah's Witness for "illegal" religious teaching, Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 News Service. On 6 June, Dilafruz Arziyeva was sentenced to two years' correctional labour, with 20 per cent of her income to be deducted and handed over to the state. Fellow Jehovah's Witness Irfon Khamidov, sentenced by the same court on the same charge to two years in a labour camp on 14 May, has had his appeal delayed.

However, Protestants have told Forum 18 that Pentecostal Christian Salavat Serikbayev, sentenced to two years' corrective labour in Nukus in May also on "illegal" religious teaching charges (see F18News 10 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=953), had his sentence reduced to one year later that month.

Samarkand City Criminal Court has failed to respond to Forum 18's written inquiry of 20 June about the sentencing of Arziyeva and Khamidov.

This year has seen a growing number of active religious believers being sentenced under the Criminal and Administrative Codes. The longest sentence known to Forum 18 was of four years' imprisonment imposed in March in Andijan [Andijon] in the Fergana [Farghona] Valley on Pentecostal pastor Dmitry Shestakov (also known as David) for leading his Full Gospel church. The authorities claim its activity was illegal and that Shestakov was promoting "religious extremism", charges he vigorously rejected (see F18News 13 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=974).

Jehovah's Witnesses report that Arziyeva was detained on 11 February "while sharing her faith with others". On 15 February a case was instigated against her under Article 216-1 of the Criminal Code for "incitement to participate in the activity of illegal public associations and religious organisations". The authorities claimed this was the second time that she committed this violation within the past year.

However, on 3 April the Samarkand City Prosecutor's Office ordered the charges to be amended to Article 229-2 of the Criminal Code, which punishes "violation of the procedure for teaching religious beliefs" with a sentence of up to three years' imprisonment.

During the 6 June trial, Arziyeva's lawyer filed a motion for a representative of the Samarkand Region Justice Department and a religious expert to be called to give evidence. "These motions were granted by the judge, but not honoured," the Jehovah's Witnesses complained. "The Justice Department informed the court that they would not attend the hearing as they considered that there was no need for them to get involved in the case." Several other motions were dismissed by the judge with no reasons given, and when witnesses summoned for questioning failed to appear at the hearing, the judge gave no reason for their failure to appear.

Arziyeva is due to appeal against her sentence. It remains unclear where she will be assigned to work.

Khamidov's appeal was due to be heard on 19 June, but was postponed until 21 June with no explanation. "They waited for six hours in the heat there until they were told this and two hours later received the written explanation," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Despite the impending appeal, Khamidov has already been sent to the Detention Centre in Kattakurgan, 80 kilometres (50 miles) north-west of Samarkand (see F18News 13 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=974).

Arziyeva and Khamidov are both members of the Samarkand Jehovah's Witness community which has been trying to register in vain for at least five years. A 24 June 2002 response to their application from the Hokim (administration chief) for the city's Bagishamal District, of which Forum 18 has seen the text, says the application cannot be considered because 10 communities "affiliated with Christian sects" were already registered in Samarkand.

"Thus, all the conditions necessary for citizens in the district to realise their freedom of conscience and to practise their beliefs are already in place," the Hokim, N. Pardayev, wrote. "We are obliged to inform you officially that, for this reason, permitting the activity of another religious society belonging to Christian sects would not be advisable."

Religious communities of all faiths are under severe pressure in Uzbekistan. Complaining that it is "too dangerous" to continue to meet, the Resurrection Full Gospel Pentecostal Church in the Fergana Valley town of Andijan [Andijon] – long denied state registration - has decided to close (see F18News 19 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=976)

The Registration Department at Samarkand Regional Justice Department declined to discuss with Forum 18 the refusal to grant the Jehovah's Witnesses legal status on 20 June. An official who would not give his name referred all enquiries to the regional religious affairs chief, Nosir Berdiev. He was not in the office on 20 June, but an assistant, who would not give her name, insisted to Forum 18 that the Jehovah's Witnesses have never sought state registration in Samarkand Region. She refused to answer any questions about why Arziyeva and Khamidov have been sentenced for practising their faith peacefully and put the phone down.

Only one Jehovah's Witness community – in Chirchik near the capital Tashkent – now has legal status in the whole of Uzbekistan (see F18News 13 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=974). Under Uzbekistan's harsh Religion Law, all unregistered religious activity is banned and subject to administrative and criminal penalties.

Meanwhile, Pentecostal Christian Salavat Serikbayev, who lives in the town of Muynak [Muynoq] north of Nukus near the Aral Sea in the Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] autonomous republic in north-western Uzbekistan, has had his sentence reduced, Protestants who preferred not to be named for fear of reprisals have told Forum 18.

On 10 May a court in Nukus gave him a two-year suspended prison sentence on charges of teaching religion illegally. As part of the sentence Serikbayev was ordered to be assigned to work, with 20 percent of his income to be handed over to the state (see F18News 10 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=953).

However, later in May the Criminal Court for Shumanai District west of Nukus reduced the sentence to one year. The term is deemed to begin from the first deduction from his wages to the state budget.

"Salavat is living at home and is taken every day to work a twelve-hour day in the desert cultivating saxaul plants," one Protestant told Forum 18 on 12 June. The saxaul is a water-bearing tree able to grow in desert conditions. "Of course he is pleased the sentence was reduced."

Karakalpakstan has a highly repressive religious policy. Only Muslim communities and one Russian Orthodox parish are allowed to operate. All other religious activity is banned and is a criminal offence. (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.

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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