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UZBEKISTAN: "Don't report interrogation on the Internet," ex-KGB tells Protestant

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Interrogated for four hours by an officer of the National Security Service (the former KGB), a member of the Asia Protestant church in Tashkent, Nelya Denisova, was told not to report the interrogation. "Just don't publish an article about our conversation on the Internet," NSS officer Vadim Negreyev told Denisova at the end of the interrogation. "No-one here tortured or raped you! We just had a friendly chat." Vladimir Zhikhar, coordinator of the 27-strong Association of Independent Churches, to which the Asia Church belongs, told Forum 18 News Service members of his church are often called in by the secret police.

On 21 June, a member of the Asia Protestant church Nelya Denisova received a summons to the National Security Service offices (NSS, the former KGB) in the Uzbek capital Tashkent, Denisova told Forum 18 News Service on 10 July in Tashkent. Denisova claims that NSS officer Vadim Negreyev spent four hours interrogating her about the activities of the Association of Independent Churches, of which the Asia church is a member. "Just don't publish an article about our conversation on the Internet," Negreyev told Denisova at the end of the interrogation. "No-one here tortured or raped you! We just had a friendly chat."

The Asia church was founded in Tashkent in 1994, as a result of work by American missionaries. The church has gradually become active in Tashkent region, Karakalpakstan in north-western Uzbekistan, the Fergana Valley in the east of the country, and in the Surkhandarya region of southern Uzbekistan. Today, the church has 27 affiliates, which together make up the Association of Independent Churches, with around 1,500 members.

"This is far from the first time that members of our church have been summoned by NSS officers," the Association's co-ordinator, Vladimir Zhikhar, told Forum 18 on 10 July. He believes the main reason for the NSS interest in the church's activity is the fact that it operates without registration. "We are not fundamentally opposed to registration, but so far at least we have not managed to register our church anywhere," Zhikhar told Forum 18.

The Asia church tried to register in Tashkent in 2001, but was unable to gain the agreement of the mahalla committee (a mahalla is a district of a city), which is required for registration. The church tried twice in 2001 and 2002 to register in the town of Almalyk, 50 kilometres (30 miles) south of Tashkent, but was refused on the grounds that its pastor had not received specialist religious education, as required by Article 8 of Uzbekistan's religion law.

"I don't presume to say that the authorities are deliberately refusing us registration, but this problem will have to be resolved in the end," Zhikhar told Forum 18. He said that in the near future all 27 pastors of the Association of Independent Churches plan to visit the Uzbek government's Committee for Religious Affairs in Tashkent to ask the leaders of the committee for help in registering their churches.

However, the chairman of the committee for religious affairs, Shoazim Minovarov, said he had never heard of the Association. "Having 27 unregistered churches functioning illegally is too many," he told Forum 18 in Tashkent on 14 July. He contrasted this number with the 50 or so Protestant churches that have registration in Uzbekistan. "Let them come to us and we'll discuss their situation," he declared.

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