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UZBEKISTAN: Punishments and church closure

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Uzbekistan continues to attack peaceful religious activity, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. A Baptist in the eastern city of Fergana, Eduard Kim, was fined the equivalent of nine months average wages, after a raid by ten state officials on his house where about 40 local Baptists were meeting for Sunday morning worship. A Pentecostal pastor near the capital Tashkent, Kamal Musakhanov, has been fined over two months average wages for "violating the rules on teaching religious doctrines." His congregation is affiliated to a registered Pentecostal church. Jehovah's Witnesses in the central city of Samarkand were raided and some of their members were severely assaulted by police. And Grace Presbyterian Church in Tashkent has been forced to halt all its activities. Asked why the church was stripped of legal status and property, an official told Forum 18 that "they violated the laws on religious propaganda and not everything was in order with the auction whereby they had purchased their building."

February saw continued punishments and attempts across Uzbekistan to halt peaceful minority religious activities regarded by the authorities as illegal. Forum 18 News Service has learnt that a Baptist in the eastern city of Fergana [Farghona] and a Pentecostal in Tashkent Region were fined for conducting religious activities without state approval, Jehovah's Witnesses in the central city of Samarkand [Samarqand] were raided and some of their members were severely assaulted by police. Also, the Grace Church in the capital Tashkent - which had already been stripped of its property and legal status after a long state campaign - was finally forced to halt all its activities.

Baptist sources told Forum 18 that on 26 February Fergana City Criminal Court found Eduard Kim guilty of violating Article 240 of the Code of Administrative Violations, which punishes "violation of the laws on religious organisations". He was fined 372,600 Sums (1,468 Norwegian Kroner, 186 Euros or 287 US dollars) for holding what the court said were "illegal religious meetings" in his house. This represents about nine months' average wages for the city.

The court case followed a raid on Kim's house during Sunday morning worship on 3 February by 10 state officials. Baptists told Forum 18 that only three of the officials identified themselves: the district police officer Captain Rustam Khaitov, Major Bakhrarov of the Criminal Investigations Department, and Farkhod Akhmedov of the city Justice Department. The officials ignored the Baptists' request not to enter the private property and disturb the gathering. Forum 18 learned that the police entered and started videoing the 40 or so people present without their permission.

Afterwards Kim was taken to the District Police to write a confession and sign the official record written by the police officers, which he refused to do. Police then launched the administrative case against him.

Just before the 26 February trial, which lasted about 20 minutes, Khaitov of the District Police explained to Kim verbally what was written in the case materials since they were in Uzbek, a language Kim does not understand. The court rejected Kim's arguments that he and his friends had gathered to sing songs and read Bible verses, which is not prohibited in law.

Forum 18 tried to reach Akhmedov at Fergana city Justice Department on 11 March to ask why the Baptist meeting at Kim's home had been raided. The person who answered the phone - who introduced himself as Akhmedov's boss, Utker Khutkarov - said the Baptists were holding "illegal" meetings. Asked by Forum 18 whether the officials violated people's privacy by videoing the house and the faces of those present he responded: "I will not go into details but we did everything right because these people violated the law."

Bakhrarov of Fergana City Police Department said he was too busy to speak to Forum 18 on 11 March, but said through a colleague that the reason they had raided Kim's house was that he and his fellow Baptists had opened an illegal church.

Judge Shukhrat Akhmedov, who presided at the trial, insisted to Forum 18 on 7 March that the court had been right to convict Kim, as he had hosted "illegal religious meetings" in his house. Asked whether it was allowed for people in Uzbekistan to gather peacefully in private houses and have prayers, sing songs and read religious literature together, Akhmedov responded that it was an organised meeting and they did not have the legal status required to hold such meetings. "In any case, the Baptists have appealed against our decision to the regional court, and I don't want to argue now whether they are allowed to gather in such manner or not." Akhmedov told Forum 18 that the regional court hearing is scheduled for 17 March.

Council of Churches Baptists - to which Kim's congregation belongs - refuse to apply for state registration on principle. In defiance of Uzbekistan's international human rights commitments, unregistered religious activities are banned and punishable under the law with fines and imprisonment. In theory it is possible for a community to register with 100 adult citizen members, though in practice it has been very difficult for communities to gain registration.

Of more than 30 Jehovah's Witnesses congregations in Uzbekistan, for example, only one has legal status. Members of one Jehovah's Witness community which applied for legal status faced not only a rejection but fines and death threats (see F18News 9 January 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1068).

In the city of Samarkand, in central Uzbekistan, Jehovah's Witnesses suffered raids in mid-February by the Regional Police Department, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 11 March. They said that, among other harassment, a young female Jehovah's Witness was sexually molested and a young man beaten on the head (see F18News 17 March 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1101).

Meanwhile, Grace Presbyterian Church in Tashkent - which had state registration - has been forced to stop functioning as a church, after a long-running campaign by various state agencies that has seen threats to its legal status and the cancellation of its 1999 purchase of its place of worship – a former cinema. Criminal charges against church leaders were dropped in January, though hostile articles in the media have continued (see F18News 18 January 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1073).

Church members told Forum 18 on 7 March that they received a letter from the Hokimat (local executive authority) of Tashkent's Khamza District signed by Hokimat chief, Shukhrat Abdukadyrov. The letter demanded that the Church stop its activities as a religious organisation, in view of the Tashkent City Criminal Court decision stripping it of its registration as a religious organisation.

The 8 February letter reached the Grace Church on 15 February, and the church stopped its regular worship services as of the beginning of March. Forum 18 was told that members of the Grace Church have dispersed and some are attending different churches for the time being.

Forum 18 asked Bahadyr Kurbanov of the Tashkent District Hokimat, who was responsible for preparing the letter to the Grace Church, why it was stripped of its legal status and property. "They violated the laws on religious propaganda and not everything was in order with the auction whereby they had purchased their building," he told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 10 March. Asked why any religious organisation should be held responsible for propagating religion peacefully, as they are set up to propagate their religion, Kurbanov said he could not go into details since he did not participate in the court case.

In a separate case, Protestant sources told Forum 18 that Pentecostal pastor Kamal Musakhanov was found guilty on 26 February of breaking Article 241 of the Code of Administrative Violations, which punishes "violating the rules on teaching religious doctrines". Judge Oibek Umurazakov of Kibrai District Criminal Court of Tashkent Region fined him 93,150 Sums (367 Norwegian Kroner, 46 Euros or 72 US Dollars). Musakhanov leads a congregation in the village of Maisky which is affiliated with a registered Pentecostal church. The fine is approximately just over two months' average wages.

Judge Umurazakov refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 12 March. "Musakhanov has received a copy of the decision, and he can complain to a higher court," was all he would say.

All religious activity in Uzbekistan is tightly controlled by the state authorities. The majority Islamic community's religious freedom also suffers from the authorities' repression, such as strict controls on the numbers of Muslims allowed to go on the haj or the umra pilgrimages (see F18News 19 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1064). (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 on freedom of thought, conscience and belief 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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