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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

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UZBEKISTAN: Last Passover in Tashkent for Chief Rabbi?

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

Nearly 90 members of Tashkent's Jewish community have signed a letter to the Justice Ministry calling for their Chief Rabbi Abe David Gurevich to be allowed to stay, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "We do not want him to stop ministering to us," they told the Ministry. The accreditation for Gurevich and his wife, who also works for the Hasidic World Lubavitch Movement, ran out on 1 April and has not been renewed. "Now we are hanging on the air with no status," Gurevich complained to Forum 18. "We remain here in Uzbekistan with expired visas and no accreditation." Forum 18 has been unable to reach Jalol Abdusattarov, the official at the Justice Ministry who refused to extend their accreditation. The Religious Affairs Committee refused to discuss the case. Gurevich said many more people had come to the Passover celebration in Tashkent this April than usual. "It may be that they were afraid that they would not be able to see us again." In recent years Uzbekistan has expelled foreign citizens who have been working in religious communities.

Uzbekistan's Chief Rabbi, Abe David Gurevich, and his wife Malka Gurevich, who also works for the Tashkent branch of the Hasidic World Lubavitch Movement, have been left with no accreditation for a month. The Chief Rabbi told Forum 18 News Service from the Uzbek capital Tashkent on 1 May that he sent letters to the Ministries of Justice and Foreign Affairs on 16 April – just ahead of Passover celebrations - seeking a resolution to the government's refusal to renew their accreditation. However, he has received no response. "Now we are hanging on the air with no status," he complained to Forum 18. "We remain here in Uzbekistan with expired visas and no accreditation."

The Chief Rabbi said 88 members of the Jewish community have signed a collective letter to the Ministry of Justice describing him as an exemplary person and leader. The members of the community explain that they have enjoyed practicing their religion and traditions under his leadership. "We do not want him to stop ministering to us," they told the Ministry.

Chief Rabbi Gurevich said many more people had come to the Passover celebration in Tashkent this April than usual. "It may be that they were afraid that they would not be able to see us again." He pointed out that the Rabbinate was dissolved ten years ago. "I can understand the community's fears," he told Forum 18.

Rabbi Gurevich told Forum 18 that he and his wife had submitted their application to renew their accreditation some five or six weeks before it expired on 1 April. However, they received an official letter on 10 April from the Justice Ministry, signed by Jalol Abdusattarov, telling them that their accreditation would not be renewed. The letter failed to specify exactly what the reasons were (see F18News 11 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1113).

The Jewish community fears that the Chief Rabbi and his wife could be expelled from the country or, worse, charges could be brought against them for unregistered religious activity if their status is not resolved soon. Uzbekistan in defiance of its international human rights commitments punishes unregistered religious activity.

Members of various religious confessions such as Muslims, Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses continue to be fined and sentenced for unregistered activity. On 25 April Jehovah's Witness Olim Turaev was handed a four-year labour camp sentence in Samarkand for hosting unregistered religious meetings at his home (see F18News 29 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1122).

Forum 18 tried to reach Abdusattarov at the Justice Ministry on 28 April to discuss the stripping of accreditation from Gurevich and his wife. However, the person who answered the phone said Abdusattarov was not in the office and asked Forum 18 to call back an hour later. Each time Forum 18 called back the phone went unanswered.

Begzot Kadyrov of the government's Religious Affairs Committee said he did not wish to discuss the case. "Write us a letter we will answer you," he told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 1 May. Told that Bakhrom Abdukhalilov, advisor to President Islam Karimov on ethnic minorities and religion, had referred Forum 18 to the Committee to discuss religious freedoms issues, Kadyrov said he could not care less.

Government-controlled media often equate foreigners with dangerous religious activity. The internet agency Press-uz.info published

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an article on 21 April condemning the activity of Lee Syn Rul, a South Korean citizen, the ex-pastor of the Samarkand Protestant church, and his wife Lee Chjon Suk as unlawful and aimed at proselytising among local people. It said the church's building had been taken away and its registration had been annulled. Uzbekistan's Religion Law prohibits proselytising by local citizens and foreigners.

Although the article did not mention it, Protestants from Samarkand told Forum 18 on 1 May that Pastor Syn Rul was expelled from Uzbekistan. However, they say the removal of the building and the expulsion happened more than a year ago. It remains unclear why the news service has suddenly published an article on the church.

Uzbekistan has expelled other foreigners involved in religious activity. A Tajik citizen who lived in Uzbekistan for more than 10 years was deported back to Tajikistan in June 2007 for her involvement in a Pentecostal church. Before being deported she was held in jail for 22 days (see F18News 26 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=980).

A Baptist who is a Russian citizen, Ivan Bychkov, was deported to Russia in August 2006. Born in neighbouring Kazakhstan, Bychkov was brought up in Tashkent. He led a youth group at the city's Bethany Baptist Church. Officials would not give him a reason for his deportation (see F18News 21 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=833). (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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