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UZBEKISTAN: Protestant in detention facing criminal charges, Baptists jailed for 10 days

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A Protestant from north-west Uzbekistan, Aimurat Khayburahmanov, was arrested on 14 June and is still in detention before facing criminal trial on terrorism charges, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Uzbek police have also recently falsely accused a Protestant refugee in Kazakhstan of terrorism charges. Among other recent violations of freedom of thought, conscience and belief, four Baptists in Tashkent Region - Natalya Ogai, Filipp Kim, Dmitri Kim and Nurlan Tolebaev – have been fined and sentenced to ten days' imprisonment, because of their peaceful religious activity. Fines continue to be imposed on other Protestants. However, in a highly unusual move, a court in the capital Tashkent found that charges against a Protestant had been fabricated and ordered police to be punished for this. But members of Tashkent's Hare Krishna community have been banned from taking part in a music and environment festival.

A Protestant from the Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] Region of north-west Uzbekistan, Aimurat Khayburahmanov, was arrested on 14 June and is still in detention before facing criminal trial on terrorism-related charges, Protestant sources told Forum 18 News Service. Among other recent violations of freedom of thought, conscience and belief, four Baptists in Tashkent region have been fined and sentenced to ten days' imprisonment, because of their peaceful religious activity.

Karakalpakstan Region operates a particularly harsh religious policy, with all non state-controlled Muslim and non-Russian Orthodox activity being a criminal offence (see eg. F18News 17 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1019).

Continued pressure on Protestants across Uzbekistan is happening as the state-controlled mass media is being used to encourage religious hatred and intolerance against all religious minorities. An open letter from Uzbek Protestant leaders complaining about a repeatedly-shown state TV film inciting religious hatred received no response. Sergei Nechitailo, head of the Full Gospel Church, then wrote a 27 June open letter to President Islam Karimov, asking him to stop state-run mass media "stirring up of intolerance and incitement of hatred on a religious basis." Both open letters were posted on the church.uz website (see F18News 25 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1148).

In Karakalpakstan on the morning of 14 June, eight police officers raided the Nukus home of Jandos Kuandikov, an active member of a local Protestant church, claiming to be conducting an identity check. Although Kuandikov was not at home, Aimurat Khayburahmanov was there, helping the Kuandikov family prepare their contribution for a local wedding. After Kuandikov returned to his house, he asked the police to show documents authorising the identity check.

Police then demanded that the family write statements confirming that no religious meeting was taking place at the house, but the family refused. The police then threatened to search the whole house and break down the door where Kuandikov's wife and most of his family had barricaded themselves. Police then threatened to detain neighbours who came in to help Kuandikov.

Forum 18 was told that the local police chief and the mahalla (district) committee chairman then went round local houses, warning people not to associate with Kuandikov as he is a terrorist and a Wahhabi. (Wahhabi is a term for an Islamic tendency, often inaccurately used by Central Asian officials to describe religious people they dislike.) People in the district became frightened by the authorities' actions and then dispersed from Kuandikov's house to their own homes.

That evening, police – who had remained in the house – finally produced a search warrant. It stated that police were looking for Makset Jabbarbergenov, a local Protestant who had to flee Uzbekistan after being threatened with imprisonment for his religious activity.

Nukus police know that Jabbarbergenov – a Pentecostal - is not in the country, as they recently attempted to have him removed from Kazakhstan where he has refugee status. At that point, Nukus police claimed falsely that he was a Wahhabi and a terrorist (see F18News 4 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1139). When they were hunting him in Uzbekistan, police told Forum 18 that this was because "he gathers people in his home for religious activity" (see F18News 12 October 2007

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1034). "As if Makset would be hiding in Kuandikov's house," one Protestant told Forum 18.

The house search lasted until 9 pm. Police confiscated books, notebooks, videocassettes of weddings and a computer. They also took Kuandikov's passport. Kuandikov, Khayburahmanov and several relatives were then taken to the police station, where they were all questioned. All but Khayburahmonov were freed at 1 am.

Forum 18 has been unable to find out from prosecutors or the local courts when Khayburahmonov is due to face trial. Azamat Ismetov, Karakalpakstan's General Prosecutor, refused to discuss Khayburakhmanov's case with Forum 18 on 27 June. "If you want to talk about this, come to my office," he said and put down the phone. Local courts and the Nukus Prosecutor's Office also refused to answer Forum 18's questions.

Protestant religious activity continues to be attacked elsewhere in Uzbekistan. On 17 May, Judge K. Pulatov of Samarkand [Samarqand] Criminal Court fined a local Protestant, Parvina Hojaeva, in absentia under Article 241 of the Administrative Code, which punishes violating the procedure for teaching religion. She was fined 104,325 Soms (400 Norwegian Kroner, 50 Euros, or 80 US Dollars). Protestants complain that Hojaeva knew nothing about the case, or the fine, until the court executor arrived and handed her the verdict.

On 12 June Judge S. Tursunov of Samarkand's Regional Criminal Court rejected an appeal by local Protestant Damir Hojaev. He had been fined 208,650 Soms (800 Norwegian Kroner, 100 Euros, or 160 US Dollars) on 13 May by Samarkand City Criminal Court for violating Article 241 of the Administrative Code.

Meanwhile, four members of the Friendship Baptist Church - Natalya Ogai, Filipp Kim, Dmitri Kim and Nurlan Tolebaev – were arrested on church property in the village of Ahmad Yassavi in Tashkent Region. The church does not have legal status.

On 16 June, Judge S. Matibrahimov of Yukori-Chirchik District Criminal Court of Tashkent Region sentenced the four for violating Article 201 of the Administrative Code, which punishes organising illegal meetings, Article 202, which punishes "creating the conditions" for holding unapproved meetings, Article 240, which punishes violating the law on religious organisations, and Article 241, which punishes violating the procedure for teaching religion.

The four members of the Friendship Church were each sentenced to ten days' imprisonment. Ogai, Dmitri Kim and Tolebaev were each also fined 41,730 Soms (162 Norwegian Kroner, 20 Euros, or 32 US Dollars). Filipp Kim was fined slightly less, 41,000 Soms (159 Norwegian Kroner, 19 Euros, or 31 US Dollars). The four were then sent to serve their terms in the administrative detention facility near the village of Geofizik in Kibrai District of Tashkent Region.

The telephone of Yakori-Chirchik court went unanswered when Forum 18 called on 26 and 27 June.

Other recent religious minority prisoners of conscience include: Pentecostal Pastor Dmitry Shestakov still serving a four-year labour camp sentence; and Jehovah's Witness Irfon Khamidov is still serving a two-year prison sentence. Another Jehovah's Witness, Dilafruz Arziyeva, is still serving a two-year corrective labour sentence, where 20 per cent of her wages are deducted and handed to the state (see F18News 16 January 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1071). The most recent religious minority prisoner of conscience to be sentenced before this month was sentenced in April, Jehovah's Witness Olim Turaev jailed with a four-year labour camp sentence (see F18News 29 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1122).

However, Protestants have gained one legal victory. On 16 June a Tashkent court halted a criminal case on charges of fraud brought against Dmitri Salimonov, son of the deacon of a Full Gospel Pentecostal congregation. "It was proved in court that the criminal case had been instigated illegally, and that materials in the case had been fabricated by the Criminal Investigation Department of the Yakkasari District Police," one Protestant told Forum 18 from Tashkent. The court ordered that some police officers be punished.

Among the other religious minorities to have been targeted by the authorities is the Hare Krishna community. Officials warned Tashkent's Hare Krishna community not to take part publicly in an annual song and environment festival held in Chimgan, a mountain resort east of the capital. The festival was held from 6 to 8 June. People who attended it told Forum 18 that the Hare Krishna community had been scheduled to hold its customary School in the Open Air and offer prasad (food first offered to a Hindu god and then given to people) to participants.

Independent news website Uznews.net stated that plain-clothes officials had approached the organisers, a few days before the festival began, to insist that the Hare Krishna community not take part.

Festival organiser Temur Valitov failed to respond to Forum 18's question on 19 June as to who had barred the Hare Krishna community from participating in the festival. (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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