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UZBEKISTAN: Attacks, including violence, against religious minorities continue

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

Uzbekistan is continuing its nationwide attacks on religious minorities, Forum 18 News Service notes. The trial of Aimurat Khayburahmanov, a Protestant detained since 14 June in the north-west of the country, is in progress. He faces a possible sentence of between five and 15 years' imprisonment, and is being tried for teaching religion without official approval and establishing or participating in a "religious extremist" organisation. In a related case, Jandos Kuandikov, another local Protestant, has been fined for unregistered religious activity. The judge in that case, Bakhtiyor Urumbaev, claimed to Forum 18 that the Immanuel and Full Gospel churches were banned in Uzbekistan. Kuandikov disputes this, pointing out that his church is seeking re-registration. In a separate case, Navoi police in central Uzbekistan have claimed that the Jehovah's Witnesses are banned in the country. Officials of the state Religious Affairs Committee have neither confirmed nor denied both these claims. Also, Navoi police have denied that they beat up three Jehovah's Witnesses, the female victim suffering concussion and being denied hospital treatment.

Uzbekistan is continuing its nationwide attacks on religious minorities, Forum 18 News Service notes. The trial on criminal charges of Aimurat Khayburahmanov, a Protestant from Nukus in the north-western region of Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpog'histon], started on 15 August. Judge Yelena Medetova is presiding over the trial, but refused to talk to Forum 18. "The trial has not finished yet and I cannot talk to you about it", she told Forum 18 on 18 August. Bakhtiyor Yerezhanov from the office of Public Prosecutor is leading the prosecution.

Khayburahmanov, who has been detained since 14 June, is facing charges under the Criminal Code of teaching religion without official approval and establishing or participating in a "religious extremist" organisation. The latter charge carries a penalty for those found guilty of between five and 15 years' imprisonment (see F18News 14 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1158).

In a related case another local Protestant, Jandos Kuandikov, was tried on 21 July by Nukus city Criminal Court on a number of Administrative Code articles: 240-2 "breaking the Religion Law"; 241 "teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately"; and 184-2 which punishes repeat offences. He was fined 104,325 Soms (425 Norwegian Kroner, 53 Euros, or 79 US Dollars). Judge Bakhtiyor Urumbaev, who presided, would only tell Forum 18 on 18 August that Kuandikov was fined for unregistered religious activity.

Asked why there are numerous prosecutions for unregistered religious activity in Nukus, Judge Urumbaev stated that it was not the fault of the state Religious Affairs Committee. "Those organisations are probably not collecting in a timely manner the necessary documents for registration, or are violating something," he insisted. "Why would the Committee deny them registration?" he asked. Kuandikov was, he said, in the "expert opinion" of the Committee a member of an organisation banned throughout all of Uzbekistan.

Kuandikov told Forum 18 on 21 August that, before his church was stripped of state registration, they were registered as the Immanuel Protestant Church under the Full Gospel Church in the capital Tashkent. "We have collected documents, and are trying to register again with the Nukus Justice Department," he said.

An official of the national state Religious Affairs Committee, who refused to give his name, did not want to say whether either the Immanuel or the Full Gospel churches were banned. He then put the phone down. Karakalpakstan's Religious Affairs Committee did not answer their telephone on 18 and 19 August. The 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).

In an earlier court case in Margilan city in the eastern Fergana [Farghona] Region, two Jehovah's Witnesses were sentenced to open work camp imprisonment (see F18News 29 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1164). Abdubonob Ahmedov was sentenced to four years, and Sergei Ivanov to three and a half years in an open work camp. The sentence was "justified" by Margilan Criminal Court "because without isolation from society, it is not possible to correct [this] behaviour" [i.e. the

peaceful exercise of freedom of thought, conscience and belief].

Both prisoners of conscience have appealed to a higher court, but the appeal has not taken place yet.

A similar "justification" was used when Pentecostal prisoner of conscience Pastor Dmitry Shestakov was sentenced in March 2007 to four years in an open work camp (see F18News 23 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=935). Shestakov was subsequently transferred to a labour camp with harsher conditions (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=982)

The Court also imposed three year probation periods, from 23 July, Raya Litvinenko, Svetlana Shevchenko and Aziza Usmanova, as part of their three year suspended prison terms. All three must register at the City Police Department monthly, and not participate in the activity of the "formal organisation of Jehovah's Witnesses," by such activities as sharing their beliefs and persuading others to join the Jehovah's Witnesses, and distributing books and publications. Margilan city police have to monitor the behaviour of the three during their sentence. The Court also fined Nazira Rahmanova 931,500 Sums (3,640 Norwegian Kroner, 456 Euros, or 710 US Dollars) (see F18News 29 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1164).

Finally, the Court ordered the destruction of religious books, magazines, video tapes and CDs confiscated from the Jehovah's Witnesses.

In a similar fashion to the claim of Judge Urumbaev in Nukus that the Immanuel and Full Gospel churches are banned nationwide, Navoi [Nawoi] police in central Uzbekistan have claimed that the Jehovah's Witnesses are banned nationwide.

Navoi police on 30 May came to the home of Guldara Artykova and detained her and Tursuna Yuldasheva as the police found Jehovah's Witness publications. Both women were questioned until midnight at a local police station, and then taken to the central police station where Yuldasheva was beaten up by Ilyor Nurmuratov and another unknown police officer, Forum 18 has learnt. Both women were released the following morning, after their passports were confiscated.

Yuldasheva "covered with bruises" went to a hospital, where she was diagnosed as having concussion and needing hospitalisation. Under police pressure, she was not hospitalised.

A Navoi court fined Yuldasheva and Artykova about 98,230 Sums (about 400 Norwegian Kroner, 50 Euros, or 75 US Dollars) on 8 July. They were charged under the Criminal Code's article 240-2 "refusal or evasion of a witness from giving testimony". This is an unusual article for religious minorities to be prosecuted under. The trial of the women was closed, and family members and friends were not allowed to attend the trial, Forum 18 was told.

Deputy police chief Firuz Juraev from Navoi told Forum 18 on 19 August that they "had to" detain the Jehovah's Witnesses "because the Jehovah's Witnesses are a banned organisation in Uzbekistan." Juraev totally denied that Yuldasheva was beaten up by police, repeating the claim that "no, we have not beaten her."

Violence has also been used by Navoi police against another Jehovah's Witness. On 6 July, during the detention of another group of Jehovah's Witnesses for 12 hours, Ruslan Safikhanov was beaten up by police officers Ilyor Nurmatov and Zafar Buranov.

Deputy police chief Juraev denied that police beat up Safikhanov. "Safikhanov was also fined by the court", he said. Forum 18 was not able to confirm from other sources whether or not Safikhanov was brought before a court.

Reached by Forum 18 on 21 August, Begzod Kodyrov of Uzbekistan's Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent, asked Forum 18 to talk to Igor Ivanov about the legal status of Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan. Ivanov was claimed by Kodyrov to represent Jehovah's Witnesses and visiting Kodyrov. "We are not aware that Jehovah's Witnesses are banned," Ivanov said. When Forum 18 insisted that Ivanov ask Kodyrov whether that was the case, Ivanov repeated his answer. (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=1170.

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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