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UZBEKISTAN: "Your dead will not be buried"

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

Uzbekistan's NSS secret police, the head of a local mahalla (town district) and a local imam in the north-west of the country have obstructed the burial of a Muslim, Zhumabai Smetullaev, because his widow and son are Christians, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Elsewhere in Karakalpakstan, Forum 18 has been told that the authorities do not allow burials of Christians to involve the local community as would be normal in Central Asian culture. Non-participation of the community indicates exclusion of the deceased person's family from the community. Mahalla officials admitted to Forum 18 that Smetullaev's burial had been obstructed, but denied that the initiative came from them. Pressure on the family continues, officials warning people that whoever accepts Christianity will be punished. They were reported as telling people: "Your dead will not be buried." Local residents are in shock, sources told Forum 18. All non-state-controlled Muslim and non-Russian Orthodox religious activity in Karakalpakstan is a criminal offence.

The National Security Service (NSS) secret police and the head of the local mahalla (town district) have obstructed the burial of an elderly Muslim, Zhumabai Smetullaev, who had died in the town of Khodjeli, close to Nukus in the Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpog'histon] Autonomous Republic of north-western Uzbekistan. A source who preferred not to be identified for fear of reprisals from the authorities told Forum 18 News Service from the town that this was to punish the man's widow, Aksulu Smetullaeva, and their son Polat for their Protestant Christian affiliation. The two are the only Christians in their family. Mahalla officials admitted to Forum 18 that Smetullaev's burial had been obstructed, but denied that the initiative came from them. One official who asked not to be identified said the decision had come from the NSS secret police, but Forum 18 was unable to reach any official at the town NSS.

Sources told Forum 18 that pressure on the family and people in the mahalla from the Khodjeli authorities continues, even though Smetullaev has now been buried. "Today [16 March] Aksulu's neighbours were summoned to the NSS and warned that if anyone helps the family organise the traditional 40th and 100th day ceremonies after the burial will be liable under the Criminal Code," sources told Forum 18. Aksakals (respected community elders) who helped with the burial have also been summoned to the NSS. Officials go from home to home warning people that whoever accepts Christianity will be punished. They were reported as telling people: "Your dead will not be buried." The local residents are in shock, sources told Forum 18.

In Central Asian culture, participation by perhaps fifty or more local residents is an important element in burials and subsequent commemoration of the dead. Families who cannot attract such community participation are seen as social outcasts.

The source said that when 67 year-old Smetullaev died of a heart attack on 11 March, the family wished to bury him in the town cemetery. "The authorities tried to prevent the burial at first by not allowing any imam to conduct the funeral procession," complained the source.

When "finally" some aksakals from KS-5 district of the town where the family lives decided to go ahead with Smetullaev's burial, the authorities did not interfere. However, they only allowed his burial "just outside the cemetery" on 13 March. "The authorities treated the deceased Smetullaev not as human." The authorities "want to showcase" in Khodjeli that whoever accepts Christianity will be punished, the source complained.

In the wake of Smetullaev's death, four local officials came to the family home on 11 March. They identified themselves as the town's Head Imam, the Deputy Head Imam, the Head of the Mahalla Committee and an NSS secret police officer. They told the family that it was "forbidden" for them to hold the traditional funeral ceremony, Forum 18 was told. The officials warned people in the area that if any imam conducts the funeral "then he will have to deal with the NSS," said the source. Also, the officials "forbade" allocating a plot in the town cemetery for the burial and "fixed surveillance" at the cemetery so no one could dig a grave.

Mahalla committees are a key part of Uzbekistan's structures of control and oppression (see eg. F18News 27 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936). The NSS secret police very closely monitors all religious activity (see eg. F18News 5 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1014).

When Aksulu Smetullaeva went to Khodjeli's main mosque to sort out the problem, Khodjeli's Head Imam Urazymbet (last name

unknown) "demanded" that she write a statement saying that she attends "the Isa Masih [Jesus Christ] sect", teaches people Christian doctrines and holds religious services. "She was also told to indicate their leaders and pastors," the source from Khodjeli told Forum 18.

The imam told Smetullaeva that it was "necessary" to send such a statement to the central authorities in Tashkent to get permission for the burial. "The authorities from Tashkent have warned us not to participate in the funeral and not to allow any imams to conduct a funeral either," Imam Urazymbet was reported as telling Smetullaeva. The imam also told her that she needed publicly to renounce her faith in Christ. "Only then would you be allowed to bury the deceased," he was reported as telling her. She did not agree to the conditions and went back to ask the local aksakals to help with the burial.

Aliko Sultanov, the Chair of the KS-5 Mahalla, told Forum 18 that they are not pressuring the Smetullaevs for their religious beliefs. "The order to prevent the burial did not come from us," he insisted to Forum 18 from Khodjeli on 16 March. He referred Forum 18 to Hodjabai, his deputy who oversees the apartment block where the Smetullaevs live – his last name was not given – who happened to be there in the office.

Hodjabai likewise denied the allegations that they put pressure on the family. "We are small people, we are not the ones who command here," he told Forum 18. "We had warned the family earlier too, but they did not heed our warnings." Hodjabai refused to explain what the warnings were about.

Another official from Khodjeli – who asked not to be identified - told Forum 18 on 16 March that Khodjeli Department of the NSS secret police was behind the pressure on the family. The phones at Khodjeli Department of the NSS went unanswered on 16 March.

The officer at Nukus Department of the NSS – he did not give his name – told Forum 18 they would call Khodjeli and find out what happened. The officer asked Forum 18 to call back later and talk to their Department Chief. However, the calls later went unanswered.

The man who answered the phone at Imam Urazymbet's office told Forum 18 that he was in a meeting with the Hokimat (Executive authority). He gave a different number for the imam, which went unanswered on 16 March.

Shavkat Shamratov, the Deputy Hokim of Khodjeli, said he would look into the matter and asked Forum 18 to call back later on 16 March. On calling back later, Forum 18 was referred to another official, Khudoyor Kurbaniyazov. Kurbaniyazov insisted that there should be "no problems" with burial in Khodjeli. "We have six cemeteries, and even one for Christians," he told Forum 18 on 16 March. He denied that Christians are persecuted in the town. He also denied that any instructions have been received from Tashkent to prevent Christian activity. "I hear about this problem from you for the first time," he insisted. He too promised to look into the issue.

Nurulla Zhamolov, Chairman of Karakalpakstan's Religious Affairs Committee, also downplayed the issue, insisting that it must have been some misunderstanding. "I will call Khodjeli and sort out the issue, please, call me back in hour." Zhamolov did not answer subsequent calls on 16 March.

The assistant of Muzaffar Akhmedjanov, advisor on Nationalities and Religions to Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov, told Forum 18 on 16 March to call back later when he is free to talk. Later, however, Forum 18 was referred to Uzbekistan's state Religious Affairs Committee.

As has been the custom of the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent, the official who answered the phone told Forum 18 that they do not give interviews over the phone. Informed that Forum 18 was referred to them by the Presidential Advisor, he hung up.

The Smetullaev family has already faced pressure. On 20 February, police and NSS secret police officers had raided their home without a search warrant. They found and seized a personal Bible that belonged to Polat Smetullaev, who is 39 years old and an invalid since early childhood. "The Bible was a source of hope in his life," the source told Forum 18. "The officers put moral and psychological pressure on the family."

Protestants from Nukus, the capital of Karakalpakstan, also told Forum on 16 March that they face similar problems burying their dead. "The authorities do not allow family members of deceased Christians to bury them according to local traditions," one Protestant said. "We will bury a Christian woman today [16 March] on our own. The community is forbidden to participate or render any material help." However, in this case the authorities are not preventing the Protestants to bury the dead in a cemetery, Forum 18 was told.

Officials in Karakalpakstan region are particularly harsh violators of Uzbekistan's international human rights commitments, as all religious activity that is not either state-controlled-Islamic or Russian Orthodox is banned and a criminal offence (see eg. F18News 17 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1019).

Repression against both minority religious communities and the majority Muslim community in Karakalpakstan continues. Mystery

surrounds the fate of imams arrested in the second half of 2008 (see eg. F18News 30 September 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1195). It remains unclear whether all the imams have been tried, and whether they are innocent or guilty of official allegations of embezzlement and drug possession.

On 21 January Karakalpakstan's Supreme Court upheld Tokhtakupir District Court decision from 24 November 2008 to fine local Protestants Vladimir Kim, Ulash Bazarbaeva and Darikhan Toremuratova.

The three had each been fined 25,040 Soms (120 Norwegian Kroner, 14 Euros or 18 US Dollars). In addition to the fines, the court had ordered the confiscation of a Bible, a New Testament in Kazakh and a Christian brochure. The Protestants were not given a copy of the court confiscation order (see F18News 10 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1252).

In another case, Judge B. Bekzhanova of Nukus District Criminal Court on 11 February found local Protestant Serik Kubaisinov guilty of violating Article 184-2 of Uzbekistan's Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes "illegal distribution of religious items". He was fined 569,500 Soms (2,745 Norwegian Kroner, 312 Euros or 405 US Dollars). Three books – two copies of the New Testament and Psalms in Russian and a New Testament in Karakalpak - seven videotapes and ten DVDs were confiscated and ordered to be destroyed by the same decision. Protestants told Forum 18 that the books were planted by the Nukus District Police officers earlier during a search, and did not belong to Kubaisinov. However, Forum 18 was told that the videotapes and DVDs, which were not religious in content, did belong to him.

The religious freedom situation is worsening across Uzbekistan. A country-wide campaign against followers of the Muslim theologian Said Nursi is underway, with harsh sentences being handed down on some Nursi followers while others remain in prison awaiting trial. Members of various Protestant churches, Hare Krishna devotees and Jehovah's Witnesses are also being detained or harassed (see F18News 10 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1265).

Forum 18 knows of four Protestant Christians given administrative sentences of between 10 and 15 days' imprisonment since the beginning of March to punish them for their religious activity (see F18News 18 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1270). (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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