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UZBEKISTAN: Cleric takes part in police raid on religious community

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Police in Uzbekistan "decided to invite" a Russian Orthodox priest to take part in a raid on a group of Baptists, a police officer has told Forum 18 News Service. Father Igor Skorik of Almalyk's Assumption of the Mother of God Church pressured Baptists not to attend unregistered worship and to come to his church instead, church members told Forum 18. The use of a cleric of one religious community to pressure members of another in cooperation with the authorities is a disturbing new development. The raid on a private home was led by Major Urazali Kholbekov, from the Tashkent Regional Criminal Investigation and Counter-Terrorism Department, who apparently arranged for Fr Skorik to take part in the raid. Fr Igor claimed he did not violate the law by taking part. "I was not there to check up on the Baptists but to just advise them," he insisted. Local Baptists point out that the raid and Fr Skorik's participation violates both Uzbek law and international human rights law. Church members were arrested, and police claimed Baptists were "at risk of danger in the case of a terrorist act which could be carried out by people in their home".

An officer of the Police Anti-Terrorism Department in the industrial town of Almalyk [Olmaliq] in Tashkent Region has defended a raid on a Sunday morning Baptist worship service in the town. Officer Shavkat – who would not give his last name - insisted to Forum 18 News Service on 31 March that the authorities did not violate the law by inviting the local Russian Orthodox priest to join the raid. "We have been allowed to do that," he claimed, though he did not explain what law allows this. Local Baptists have told Forum 18 they believe both the raid and the involvement of a cleric of a different religious organisation are illegal.

Officer Shavkat said they "decided to invite" the Orthodox priest too during the raid, because the Baptists did not heed the authorities' earlier warnings to stop meeting in private homes. "They may go to an official church building but the law prohibits meeting in private homes for religious purposes," he said.

During the 15 March raid on the service, Father Igor Skorik of the town's Assumption of the Mother of God Church pressured the Council of Churches Baptists not to attend unregistered worship and to come to his church instead, church members told Forum 18 from Almalyk on 25 March. The use of a cleric of one religious community to pressure members of another in cooperation with the authorities is a disturbing new development for Uzbekistan.

Congregations of the Council of Church refuse on principle to register with the authorities, insisting that Uzbekistan's Constitution and the country's international human rights commitments make no mention of any requirement that they should have state registration before they can function.

Protestants told Forum 18 that the service in a private home was raided by eight police officers – two in uniform and six in plain clothes. It was led by Major Urazali Kholbekov, who identified himself as being from the Tashkent Regional Criminal Investigation and Counter-Terrorism Department. It was he who, they say, arranged for Fr Igor to be brought along. They say this is a violation of Article 5 Part 1 of the Religion Law, which declares that religion and the state are separate and does not allow any privileges for any one faith over any other, and Article 5 Part 4, which bans state officials from giving any state functions to religious organisations.

Fr Igor's account of his participation

Fr Igor confirmed that he visited the Baptist meeting on 15 March together with Almalyk Police. He said he did not remember who exactly it was but "the gentlemen who asked" him to go with them "were in police uniform." "I went there to warn the people that they would get into trouble for attending unregistered meetings," he insisted to Forum 18 on 30 March. "I suggested to them instead that they come to our church services since we are an officially registered church." Fr Igor said it was the first time he was involved in a raid on an unregistered church.

Protestants complain that Fr Igor accused those present of having done "a deal with the West," that they were meeting "illegally" and acting "against the state". He called on them to come to him at the Russian Orthodox Church. The Protestants noted ironically that Fr Igor was himself violating Article 240 Part 2 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes "proselytism".

Fr Igor said he is "disturbed" by the Baptists who teach ethnic Russians contrary to Russian Orthodox doctrines. "They are leading [ethnic] Russians astray," he complained. Fr Igor also told Forum 18 that the Baptists proselytise ethnic Uzbeks which is against the law. "We do not go out on the streets specifically inviting Uzbeks to our church." Asked whether he would turn away Uzbeks who wanted to attend his church, he said they are welcome "if they come of their free will."

He denied having accused the Baptists of cooperating with the West. "Personally I said nothing of the sort to the Baptists," Fr Igor commented, although he would not clarify if he has said anything on those lines to anyone.

Fr Igor also said he does not think he violated the law by participating in the raid. "I was not there to check up on the Baptists but to just advise them," he insisted. "I am not against their praying or reading their Bibles in twos or threes in their homes but I am against imposing their religious views on people on the street."

Officials' accounts of Fr Igor's participation

Anti-Terrorism Department officer Shavkat told Forum 18 that the law allows the authorities to quickly create a group of officials from Anti-Terrorist Police, National Security Service (NSS) secret police, religious affairs bodies and mahalla committees (residential self-governments), as in this case with the Baptists. "We went there to check up on their activity, which we knew was illegal," he told Forum 18.

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).

Tashkent Regional Police's Anti-Terrorism Department told Forum 18 on 31 March that Major Kholbekov works out of his office in Almalyk. However, Officer Shavkat told Forum 18 that Major Kholbekov works for Tashkent Regional Police Anti-Terrorism Department, and "oversees the whole region." "He comes here when he has a task to do," he said. Neither Tashkent Regional nor Almalyk City Police would give any contacts for Major Kholbekov.

Religious affairs officials at Tashkent Regional Hokimat (administration) were not available to comment on the case. Forum 18 was referred to Deputy Hokim Sodyg Abdullaev, who oversees religious organisations in the region. However his assistant, who did not give his name, said Abdullaev was unavailable to talk. Forum 18 was referred to Rakhmatullo Shiraliev, but none of the two numbers given to Forum 18 worked.

Similarly the government's Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent did not want to discuss the issue. "If you want to hear us then come to our office in person," the official – who did not give his name – told Forum 18 on 31 March when asked why authorities would invite a representative of one religious community for a raid on another. He then hung up the phone.

Use of clerics in past raids

Although raids by police, NSS secret police and other state agencies on religious communities in Uzbekistan – both registered and unregistered – are common, it is very rare for state officials to use clerics of the state-backed Muslim Board or the Russian Orthodox Church to pressure victims of the raids to halt their activity and change their religious affiliation.

The state has frequently used such pressure from both Muslim and Russian Orthodox clerics in neighbouring Turkmenistan, and officials in Azerbaijan have occasionally used Muslim clerics to pressure non-Muslims to change their religious affiliation.

Forum 18 knows of one case in Uzbekistan several years ago when a number of Baptists – who cannot hear or speak – were summoned to a mosque in a bid to pressure them to renounce their faith and adopt a different faith. However, none of those summoned went.

The raid itself

The eight police officers who raided the Baptist congregation in Almalyk claimed to be conducting an identity check, church members told Forum 18. The church meets in a private home which belongs to Sergei and Olga Brislavsky. Police officer Ilyas Babahonov was among the officers who filmed the Baptists during the raid.

Local Protestants complain that Major Kholbekov warned that, because the congregation is not registered, the Brislavskys were putting themselves and those in their home "at risk of danger in the case of a terrorist act which could be carried out by people in their home". Protestants dismissed this claim.

Officers appeared angry that children were present, accusing the adults of "harming their future". Officials in other parts of the country have stepped up pressure since late 2008 on school children who attend places of worship - including mosques and Christian churches - as well as on their parents (see F18News 12 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1239).

Protestants also complain that Major Kholbekov's questioning of those present about their faith violates Article 3 Part 1 of the 1998 Religion Law, which guarantees the right to practice any faith or none. They complain that his questions as to why they do not attend the town's Russian Orthodox church violate Article 3 Part 2 of the Religion Law, which bans any pressure on any individual in choosing or practicing any faith or none.

Baptists taken to police station

Police took twelve of the Baptists present to the town police station, including the Brislavskys, as well as Lyubov Abdalova and Rita Struchaeva, who were already facing administrative charges for running a street library in the town. The twelve were held and most were questioned for four and a half hours. Sergei Brislavsky was threatened with 15 days in prison. Three of the detained church members, who cannot hear or speak, were forced to remain in the police station corridor.

The twelve refused to sign any statements or documents. Police confiscated three Bibles and five hymn books from them before they were freed. Administrative cases under Article 240 are being considered against the twelve Baptists.

Abdalova and Struchaeva had been detained by two plain clothes police officers in Almalyk on the afternoon of 7 March as they were offering Christian books at a street library. Some 50 Christian books and magazines were confiscated, including five New Testaments in Uzbek and Russian and the Council of Churches' regular magazine "Herald of Truth". The officers took the two women to the town police station. One of the police officers turned out to be Timur Sabriev of the Criminal Investigation and Counter-Terrorism Department, Protestants told Forum 18.

Officers drew up the record of the confiscated literature in Uzbek and refused to provide a translation, as the Baptists do not speak it. Officers threatened to detain the women for up to 72 hours and demanded that they write a statement and sign documents in Uzbek. However, the two women refused to write or sign anything "as they didn't consider themselves guilty," as church members told Forum 18. Abdalova was photographed next to the confiscated literature.

The two women were freed at 9pm after being told that the literature was being sent to the government's Religious Affairs Committee to be checked. Officers said it would only be returned if the Committee declares that it is "permitted in Uzbekistan".

Cases were prepared against them under the Code of Administrative Offences; Article 240 and Article 241. On 20 March they were ordered to appear on 23 March at Almalyk Criminal Court, but the outcome remains unknown.

The wider context

Uzbekistan is in the middle of a crackdown on religious activity. A campaign has been launched in recent months against followers of the Muslim theologian Said Nursi. Five Nursi followers were given harsh prison sentences in Tashkent in February (see F18News 27 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1262). At least nine others accused of following Said Nursi remain in prison in Bukhara [Bukhoro] awaiting trial (see F18News 10 March 2009 >http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1265).

Short-term imprisonments of Protestants for unregistered religious activity have also taken place in March (see F18News 18 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1270).

Uzbekistan also continues to raid, prosecute and fine people, in different parts of the country, for possessing and distributing religious literature (see F18News 18 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1278). (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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