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UZBEKISTAN: "Religious movements are trying to destabilise Uzbekistan"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Uzbekistan continues to harass and fine Christians, Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses exercising their freedom of thought, conscience or belief, Forum 18 News Service has found. In one recent case 13 Baptists have been fined the extremely large sum of 50 times the minimum monthly salary, for meeting for worship. The verdict, which has been seen by Forum 18, claims that it follows police "anti-terror" operations. The judge who imposed the fine has refused to discuss the case with Forum 18. And in a continuation of the current official actions against people with religious literature, two Baptists carrying religious literature have been arrested on the capital Tashkent's Metro, questioned at a police station by the most senior police officer responsible for Metro security, and will be charged for carrying the literature. Attempting to justify the police action, a local official in the capital told Forum 18 that "religious movements are trying to destabilise Uzbekistan." However, he did not explain how violating fundamental human rights stabilises Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan continues to harass and fine people who exercise their freedom of thought, conscience or belief, Forum 18 News Service has found. In some of the most recent known incidents, 13 Baptists have been fined 50 times the minimum monthly salary and had literature confiscated; an official has attacked sharing beliefs, claiming that "missionary work should be done with uncivilised aborigines" and stating that Uzbeks "morally have no rights to change their religion"; and a church has lost its place of worship and ability to meet for worship services.

In the town of Almalyk [Olmaliq], in the region around the capital Tashkent, thirteen members of an unregistered Baptist church were found guilty on 3 April of violating Article 240 Part 2 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes "attracting believers of one confession to another." The thirteen were: Tatyana Shopova, Ivan Danilevsky, Ruslana Karimova, Gulnara Khusnudinova, Yuri Zakharchenko, Vladimir Shirayev, Lyubov Abdalova, Yelena Guseva, Botyr Akhmedov, Sergei, Olga and Yekaterina Brislavsky and Rita Struchayeva.

The guilty verdict followed a Police Anti-Terrorism Department raid on a Sunday 15 March morning worship service in a private home. In a disturbing development, Russian Orthodox priest Father Igor Skorik took part in the raid, pressuring Baptists not to attend unregistered worship and to come to his church instead. 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 the Baptists were "at risk of danger in the case of a terrorist act which could be carried out by people in their home" (see F18News 31 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1276).

Judge Islom Noyobov of Almalyk Criminal Court – in a verdict seen by Forum 18 – fined each of the thirteen fifty times the minimum monthly wage or, 1,402,000 Soms (6,600 Norwegian Kroner, 745 Euros or 990 US Dollars) each. The minimum monthly salary in Uzbekistan is, from 16 November 2008, 28,040 Soms (128 Norwegian Kroner, 15 Euros or 20 US Dollars). The majority of Uzbekistan's population is poor, and has to exist on incomes that are very low, so the fine is an enormous amount.

A Protestant, who wanted to remain unnamed, told Forum 18 that only two of the Baptists, Shirayev and Akhmedov (who cannot hear or speak), were present at the hearing. During the hearing, which lasted "only fifteen minutes," Judge Noyobov stated that "the Bible can only be read in places established by the law." Forum 18 was also told that the court did not offer sign language interpreters during the hearing.

The verdict claims that "anti-terror" operations had found church members offering religious literature on the streets "without special permission from the central organ of administration of a religious organisation" on 7 March and church members gathering for an "illegal religious teaching meeting" [a worship service] in a private house on 15 March.

The court ruled that 189 items of religious literature in Russian and Uzbek seized during the operations should be handed to the government's Religious Affairs Committee for it to decide what should happen to it.

Judge Noyobov refused to talk about the case. "I will not disclose to you any information on this case by telephone," he told Forum

18 from Almalyk on 7 April. He then hung up the phone.

The state Religious Affairs Committee also, as usual, refused to talk about this and other cases to Forum 18 on 7 April.

Hostility to people with religious literature continues

As was seen in the Almalyk case verdict, Uzbek authorities seem to be particularly hostile at present to people possessing religious literature. In Tashkent, Hamza District Police detained Ilgiz Bikkinin, a 66 year-old man and Vera Prokhorova, 54 year-old woman, members of an unregistered Baptist Church, on 5 April in a Metro station. A Bible, a New Testament in Uzbek, a Bible in Kazakh, six other Christian books, and thirty leaflets were confiscated from the two Baptists. They were then taken to Shaykhantakhur District Police's Unit for Guarding the Metro, where they were questioned by Police Major Vakhob Akhmonov. He is the senior police officer responsible for guarding Tashkent's Metro, a source wishing to remain unnamed told Forum 18.

A case under Articles 184-2 and 240 of the Code of Administrative Offences is being prepared, for action by Hamza District Police, Protestants told Forum 18. Article 184-2 punishes "illegal production, import, storage or distribution of religious literature" and Article 240 punishes "violation of the Religion Law". This is the latest in a series of nationwide actions against people with religious literature (see F18News 2 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1278). Religious literature of all faiths remains under tight state control, even for texts such as the Koran and the Bible (see F18News 1 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1153).

Police Major Akhmonov would not say whether any charges were being prepared against the Baptists. "We are still investigating the case," he told Forum 18 on 7 April. Asked whether people can carry religious books authorised by the authorities Akhmonov said, "They can carry only personal books. The Baptists had too many with them." He said the books were sent to the state Religious Affairs Committee for an expert opinion.

"Of course" people can carry their personal books, Alisher (he did not give his last name) from Hamza District Hokimat (Administration) told Forum 18 on 7 April. "However, as you may know, it is prohibited in Uzbekistan to distribute religious literature."

Attempting to justify the police action, Alisher stated: "Please understand that religious movements are trying to destabilise Uzbekistan." He did not explain how violating fundamental human rights stabilises Uzbekistan.

State media promotion of intolerance continues

The state-controlled media continues to be used to promote intolerance of religious minorities. Dilorom Kasymova, of the Chirchik [Chirchiq] Hokimat (Executive authority), has attacked the town's registered Jehovah's Witnesses, the 12.uz Uzbek news service reported on 1 April. Attacking "street preachers," Kasymova told the local press that Jehovah's Witnesses talk to people on the streets on religious topics, by which they "violate their own Charter and several articles of Uzbekistan's law." According to Kasymova "religious rites, spiritual talks, preaching and holding religious services must be done in the place of legal address of a religious organisation." She was also reported as saying that "missionary work should be done with uncivilised aborigines not with those who have firm convictions. Uzbeks are born Muslims, and Jehovah's Witnesses are trying to convert them to their faith."

Chirchik, which is close to Tashkent, is the only place in Uzbekistan where the Jehovah's Witnesses have a legally registered community and place of worship. If they lose registration, Jehovah's Witnesses have feared that all their religious activities in Uzbekistan will be banned (see F18News 21 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1009). The state-controlled mass media is used to encourage intolerance of religious groups the government dislikes, and opposition to freedom of religion or belief in the country (see F18News 12 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1239).

Kasymova told the press that all the religious organisations functioning in Chirchik have been officially registered. "This means there are no conflicting points in charters of those organisations with the law. We also monitor, arbitrate and keep contacts with them so there are no frictions between confessions."

Kasymova told Forum 18 on 8 April that Jehovah's Witnesses are involved in proselytism, which is prohibited. She insisted that they are "imposing" their religious views on people. Asked whether ethnic Uzbeks had the right to obtain information on other faiths and freedom to choose one if they wanted to do so, she said: "Under the Constitution, Uzbeks have the right to do so but not morally, since they are born as Muslims." When Forum 18 tried to ask Kasymova about her comments in the press she, excused herself saying that she could "not use the official telephone line for an interview," and hung up.

Wearing of prayer caps attacked, internet room prayers banned

The eastern Andijan [Andijon] Region's security agencies are making efforts to "eradicate" white prayer caps, Uznews reported in early April. From the middle of March, sellers of white caps in front of mosques and in bazaars were banned from selling them. "We were approached by Police, and officially declared to that we must not sell white caps," one man selling various religious accessories

was reported as saying. An official from the local Muftiate (State-controlled Muslim leadership) was also reported as confirming the ban, saying that "white caps are worn by Arabs. Why should Uzbeks come under Arab influence?"

Such prayer caps are common in Central Asia, and this is not the first time the authorities in the Fergana [Farghona] Valley – many of whose residents are devout Muslims - have tried to stop the caps being worn (see F18News 1 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=747).

Prayer in internet cafés has also been banned by the Andijan authorities. Some internet-café have been allowing young Muslims to pray in a special room, if they happened to be in the café at the times of namaz (prayers). Authorities in the Fergana Valley have in the past attempted to severely restrict Islamic practices and the involvement of young people in the region (see F18News 20 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1020). More recently, officials in other parts of the country have stepped up pressure 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).

Mahmud (he did not give his last name) from Andijan city Hokimat's Religious Affairs Department told Forum 18 on 8 April that Shaket Gulomov, the Head of Department was not available to talk. When asked about the ban on white caps and prayer in internet-café, he kept saying that he could not hear Forum 18. However, his voice was heard with clarity by Forum 18.

Further raids on Protestant churches

On 1 April, police and the National Security Service (NSS) secret police raided Greater Grace Protestant Church in the central city of Samarkand [Samarqand]. "As a result, the church lost its place for Sunday services and Bible classes," Protestants told Forum 18 from Samarkand on 5 April. Nobody is under arrest, but "today [5 April] the church could not hold its Sunday worship service at all. The Church is looking for a new place but it is not sure when it will be able to hold services." Greater Grace Church had prepared to celebrate Easter but "now they are afraid that they will not be able to celebrate."

Forum 18 has also learnt that Pastor Andrei Kosulitsky, who leads the registered Baptist Church in the city of Samarkand, was in late February given an official warning. In early March a registered Pentecostal Church in Fergana was raided and searched. And 10 members of the Korean-led Syn-Bogym Church, in the central city of Bukhara [Bukhoro], were fined under Articles 240 and 241 of the Code of Administrative Offences. (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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