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UZBEKISTAN: Four 15-day prison sentences for regular, registered worship service

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Some twenty Anti-Terror Police officers raided the regular Sunday afternoon worship service of the registered Donam Protestant church in the capital Tashkent on 23 August, claiming it was "unauthorised". Seven church members were arrested and Christian literature was confiscated, Protestants told Forum 18 News Service. Three men were soon freed but four – including the church's pastor, Vladimir Tyo – were sentenced to 15-day prison terms for "violation of the procedure for organising and conducting meetings", even though the regular service was included in the required quarterly report to the city Justice Department. The court verdict also records that the judge ordered the confiscated literature destroyed without giving any reason. Raids on both registered and unregistered religious communities, fines, imprisonment and confiscation of religious literature are frequent in Uzbekistan.

The pastor and three other members of a registered Protestant church in the capital Tashkent have each been given fifteen-day prison terms on charges of leading an "unauthorised" religious meeting, the verdict in the case, seen by Forum 18 News Service, reveals. Local church members have expressed their shock and insist the accusations are unfounded. The arrests followed a 23 August raid on the regular Sunday afternoon worship service of the Donam Evangelical Christian Saints Church in Tashkent's Yunusabad District by some twenty officers of the Anti-Terror police.

The verdict also reveals that Christian publications seized during the raid are to be destroyed, a common fate for religious literature confiscated by police during raids on religious communities in Uzbekistan (see most recently F18News 7 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1322).

Forum 18 has been unable to find out why officials believe a regular service on its registered premises by a registered religious community which had included the event in its required regular quarterly report to the Justice Department that registered it is regarded as "unauthorised". Forum 18 has also been unable to find out why confiscated religious publications are to be destroyed even though they have not been proven to contain any illegal content.

The official at the State Committee for Religious Affairs who answered the phone of the Chairman, Artyk Yusupov, told Forum 18 on 25 August to talk to the Committee specialist, Begzod Kodyrov, about the case. However, Kodyrov's phone went unanswered.

The raid on the Donam Church and imprisonment of four of its members are the latest in a series of moves against communities and individuals of a variety of faiths across Uzbekistan.

In autumn 2008 the Uzbek authorities began an intensive campaign against followers of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi which is still continuing. Several dozen adherents have been given long prison sentences so far in 2009, with others being arrested and facing trial (see F18News 31 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1333). The most recent Nursi-related sentences known to Forum 18 came in early July in Khorezm and in Samarkand (see F18News 31 August 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1344).

State officials in the city of Bukhara have also reportedly banned local Muslim women from attending mosques (see F18News 17 September 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1349).

Raid on Donam Church and sentences

Some 20 officers of the Anti-Terror police, led by Timur Daminov and Rustam Tajihanov, arrived at about 3 pm on 23 August in four cars at the worship building of the Donam Church where the service was underway, Protestants told Forum 18. Joining the officers was the local police officer Akramov and an official of the city Justice Department.

The service was being led by the assistant pastor, Andrei Sim, who explained to the officers that the Sunday afternoon service was a regular church event which had been approved by a general church meeting and whose details had been submitted as part of the regular quarterly report that all registered religious organisations are required to submit to the local Justice Department which

registered them.

However, church members complain that the officers paid no attention to this. They say Daminov and Tajihanov forced Sim to write a statement about what they termed an "illegal" meeting.

The Anti-Terror officers ordered the local police officer Akramov to draw up a record of violations under Code of Administrative Offences Article 201, which punishes "violation of the procedure for organising and conducting meetings" with a fine or imprisonment of up to fifteen days, and Article 202, which punishes "creating the conditions for conducting unapproved meetings" with a fine of up to ten times the minimum monthly wage.

When church members showed the Anti-Terror officers the documentation proving that Sunday afternoon services were part of the approved church activity, the officers dismissed the information, insisting that church members would have to show the documents to the court.

Church members complain that the officers forced all those present to give their names and home addresses. Officers stood at the door of the church to prevent anyone leaving without giving their identity.

Police confiscated 28 videos and 181 Christian books and brochures from the church building.

At 5.30 pm that day, officers took seven church members to the Yunusabad police station. Three of those arrested - an elderly, infirm man, another man whose heavily-pregnant wife came to the police station and threatened to blame the officers if she had a miscarriage and a third man whose child was crying - were soon released from the police station. Not released were Andrei Sim, together with the church's pastor, Vladimir Tyo (who was not present at the service but who had been summoned by church members), and two other church members Yuri Tyo and Dmitri Sim.

One of those arrested, Yuri Tyo, had three young children with him. On the way to the police station, officers left the children unaccompanied on the street to find their own way home. The children arrived home safely later. Church members expressed particular concern about the police abandoning the children on the street.

Although police told church members the four detained men would be freed later that evening, they were held for more than 24 hours. Church members complain this was a violation of Article 288 Part 3 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which allows a maximum detention of 24 hours without charge for those accused of these offences.

Some time after 8 pm on the following evening, 24 August, Judge Akbarali Turabov heard the case of the four at Yunusabad District Criminal Court, who all protested their innocence of any wrongdoing. According to the court verdict seen by Forum 18, the judge dismissed the accusations under Article 202, as well as religious offences under Articles 240 and 242, as the congregation is registered and the leaders were able to demonstrate that they have higher religious education. However, judge Turabov upheld the accusation under Article 201. He found the four guilty and handed down the fifteen-day prison terms.

Judge Turabov ordered that the religious literature and videos confiscated during the raid should be destroyed. The verdict gives no reason for the ordered destruction.

After the trial the four men were taken to the detention centre of the City Police in Kuyluk District to serve their terms. A relative of one of the four was able to have a brief meeting with him in the detention centre on 25 August.

Tashkent-based human rights activist Surat Ikramov told Forum 18 that homeless people, hooligans and petty criminals are held at the Kuyluk detention centre, with about ten to fifteen people in each small cell sleeping on the wooden floor. He added that food provided to prisoners is poor.

Also detained at the same service and fined five times the minimum monthly wage was a visiting South Korean citizen.

Officials refuse to discuss raid and imprisonments

The secretary of Judge Turabov at Yunusabad District Criminal Court, who did not give her name, confirmed to Forum 18 on 25 August the sentences of the four Uzbek nationals, but refused to say anything about the South Korean national. She said Judge Turabov did not want to talk to Forum 18 about the case. "I cannot give any more information on that over the phone," she said.

The Deputy Chief of the Interior Ministry's Anti-Terror police, who did not give his name, said he was not aware of the case. "Call me back tomorrow," he told Forum 18 on 25 August.

No one at the Justice Ministry in Tashkent was available to talk about the case. The Assistant to Akborhon Nabiraev – the official who oversees work with religious organisations at the Ministry - kept asking Forum 18 to call back later on 25 August, and finally at the end of the working day telling Forum 18 that he was not available to talk: "I myself am not aware of such a case," he added.

Nor would anyone at the Tashkent City Justice Department comment. The official who answered the phone on 25 August told Forum 18 that Umid Rasulov, the chief of the Department, was on holiday. He added that everyone else was busy with checkups of various organisations.

In the wake of the raid and the imprisonments, twenty eight church members signed a letter of protest to Uzbekistan's Interior Minister, Bahodir Matlyubov, the Tashkent Justice Department and Uzbek President Islam Karimov, of which Forum 18 has seen copies. They spoke of their shock over the raid and imprisonments following a peaceful, regular, approved religious service, describing it as "an unprecedented example of the violation of human rights". (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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