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UZBEKISTAN: Sentenced "only for practising religion outside the framework" of state-controlled Islam

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Two mass trials which ended in July have brought to 47 the number of followers of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi known by Forum 18 News Service to have been sentenced to long prison terms under various articles of the Criminal Code in Uzbekistan in 2009. A total of 21 men – all in their twenties and thirties - received sentences of between eleven and five years' imprisonment at separate trials in Samarkand and Khorezm. Human rights activist Surat Ikramov told Forum 18 the men in Samarkand were brutally beaten by the secret police in pre-trial detention. Officials refused to discuss with Forum 18 why they were sentenced. "An analysis of the indictments and the verdicts on these cases shows that the guilt of the accused is not proven and that they are sentenced for religious extremism only for practising religion outside the framework of the traditional stream of Islam propagated and controlled by the state," two human rights groups noted.

Two mass trials of alleged followers of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi ended in July with heavy prison sentences being handed down on twenty one people, human rights activists and court officials told Forum 18 News Service. In Samarkand [Samarqand] eleven sentences of between seven and eleven years' imprisonment were handed down, while in Khorezm ten men received sentences of between eleven years' and just under five years' imprisonment. The Uzbek authorities launched a huge clampdown on Muslims promoting Nursi's teachings in late 2008 and this year has already seen heavy sentences handed down on dozens of adherents.

The sentences bring to 47 the number of followers of Said Nursi – all men - sentenced to prison terms totalling some 380 years under various articles of the Criminal Code in Uzbekistan in 2009. Another trial on four alleged followers began in Namangan on 26 June, but the outcome is not yet known (see F18News 31 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1333).

"An analysis of the indictments and the verdicts on these cases shows that the guilt of the accused is not proven and that they are sentenced for religious extremism only for practising religion outside the framework of the traditional stream of Islam propagated and controlled by the state," a 10 August analysis of the crackdown on Nursi followers by the Veritas Youth Human Rights Group and the Khorezm-based Najot Human Rights Group concluded.

As is their usual practice, officials of the state Religious Affairs Committee refused to discuss the continuing repression of Nursi followers with Forum 18.

Among other prisoners of conscience still serving sentences are a Pentecostal Pastor from Andijan [Andijon] in eastern Uzbekistan, Dmitry Shestakov, who is serving a four year sentence, and three Jehovah's Witnesses: Abdubannob Ahmedov, Sergei Ivanov, and Olim Turaev (see F18News 6 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1280).

In addition to these long-term prisoners of conscience, the Uzbek authorities are increasingly using imprisonment for up to 15 days to punish members of minority religious communities. Several Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses have been handed such sentences so far this year. Most recently, the pastor and three other members of a registered Protestant church in the capital Tashkent were each given fifteen-day prison terms on charges of leading an "unauthorised" religious meeting on 24 August (see F18News 26 August 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1341).

Eleven Nursi followers sentenced in Samarkand

The trial of eleven men at Samarkand Regional Criminal Court began under Judge Tulkin Kodirov on 12 June, Surat Ikramov told Forum 18 from Tashkent. All were accused under Article 244-1 of the Criminal Code, which punishes "preparing or distributing materials containing a threat to social security and social order", and Article 244-2, which punishes "creating, leading or participating in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations". Citing the court documents, Ikramov said the indictment was prepared by Captain Sh. Norbutaev of the National Security Service (NSS) secret police.

The sentences were handed down on 6 July. Hasan Karimov, Bahtiyor Fattaev, Nusratulla Ibadullaev and Bahodir Hamraev received

eleven year general regime labour camp sentences. Solejon Shirmatov, Bahodir Muhamadiev and Shuhrat Hodiev each received nine year general regime labour camp sentences. Jamshid Oblokulov and Abbos Toirov received eight year sentences and Rahmatulla Ibadullaev and Fozil Ikromov seven year sentences. All the men are in their twenties or thirties.

Zarifa (who did not give her last name), Head of the Court Chancellery, confirmed the convictions of the eleven men under these Criminal Code Articles. "They violated the law," she insisted to Forum 18 on 28 August, but refused to specify what exactly the Nursi followers violated. She did not want to discuss the cases further and hung up the phone.

Ikramov said the eleven men were "illegally" arrested by the Samarkand Regional NSS in February and held in their investigation isolation cells. There they were "subjected to brutal torture", he added, before they were transferred to another investigation prison in Kattakurgan. He complained that relatives were not allowed to visit them.

Relatives told Ikramov that ahead of the trial, Judge Kodirov had said that the case against the eleven was completely fabricated and that he found it difficult to pronounce the verdict, but was forced to do so by his superiors. The eleven pleaded innocent in court and, Ikramov told Forum 18, witnesses testified that they were innocent.

The men's lawyers lodged appeals against the sentences, which were heard at the same court on 11 August, Ikramov added. However, the appeal judge upheld the original sentences.

Fakhib Ardaev, Deputy Hokim (Head of Administration) of Samarkand Region overseeing religious issues refused to talk about the case with Forum 18 on 28 August. "Please talk to the Judge," he said, and hung up the phone.

Judge Kodirov of Samarkand Regional Criminal Court answered the phone on 28 August but did not want to talk about the case with Forum 18, and hung up the phone.

Ten Nursi followers sentenced in Khorezm

On 7 July, the day after the sentences were handed down on the eleven men in Samarkand, Khorezm Regional Criminal Court handed down long prison sentences on ten local men also accused of Nursi-related offences, the Veritas and Najot report noted. All were found guilty of violating Criminal Code Article 244 Part 1, Article 244-1 Part 3a, Article 244-2 Part 1 and Article 246 Part 1. Again, all the men are in their twenties and thirties. Five had studied at the University of World Languages in Tashkent, four at Tashkent Economic University and one at Tashkent Finance Institute.

The heaviest sentence was handed down on Bahrom Aminov, who received an eleven year sentence. Ergash Razakov, Rustambek Hudoiberganov, Hairulla Rahmanov, Rufat Abdullaev, Ravshan Salaev, Ganisher Sobirov and Zohid Matnazarov received eight-year sentences, while Anvar Yusupov received a five-year sentence. Sentenced to just short of five years' imprisonment was Nodirbek Razzakov.

Human rights activists say the ten were arrested on 19 January, were handed the indictments on 13 May and were brought to trial in June.

Timur (who did not give his last name) of Khorezm Regional Criminal Court confirmed the sentences given to Forum 18 but did not want to discuss the case. "Call in two hours when the Chairman [of the Court] will be here," he responded, "you can talk to him then."

When called later the person who answered the Chairman's phone listened to Forum 18's question but said that it was a "wrong number".

Khorezm Regional Hokimat (Administration) referred Forum 18 to Sobirzhan Sharipov, Deputy Hokim, who oversees religious issues, to talk about the case. However, his department told Forum 18 on 28 August that he was "away on an official trip in the region".

One Nursi follower sentenced in Jizak

Another man accused of promoting the Nursi movement, Rustam Kuvandikov, was handed a seven-year term of imprisonment at Jizak Regional Criminal Court on 4 May, Abdulla Akhmadov, Head of the court's Chancellery, told Forum 18. He said there had been no appeal against the sentence, but refused to discuss the case further. "Please, send us an official letter, and we will answer you," he said.

Citing court officials, the Russian newsagency Interfax said on 6 August that Kuvandikov was accused of undermining the constitutional order, participation in a religious extremist organisation and illegal distribution of religious materials and illegal religious education.

A hostile article about his case by a journalist from Jizak Truth newspaper, published on the government-sponsored website press-uz.info on 6 August, said Kuvandikov – also a former student of the University of World Languages in Tashkent - had used in his own teaching literature and discs promoting the teachings of Nursi and the US-based Turkish Muslim teacher Fethullah Gulen. The journalist described him as promoting "the extremist Nurcular movement". Followers of Said Nursi argue that there is no organised movement and that they study Nursi's writings as they find them helpful as they seek to learn more about their faith. (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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