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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

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UZBEKISTAN: Crackdown on devout Muslims continues

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

Uzbekistan continues to arrest religious believers, primarily Muslims, throughout the country, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Around 57 Muslims are being held in the central Syrdarya region on unknown charges. It appears that a common factor linking some was that they were devout Muslims who went to gether to mosques to pray. In the south-western Kashkadarya region the son-in-law of Mekhrinisso Hamdamova, a Muslim woman arrested for holding religious meetings in her home, was himself arrested on 16 January 2010. It is thought that his arrest is linked to the authorities' anger at the flight from them of women threatened with rape if they did not testify against Hamdamova. Also, the fate of several men put on trial in 2009 for following the approach to Islam of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi still remains unknown, despite requests by Forum 18 to the relevant courts for information. These cases appear to be part of an ongoing crackdown on peaceful devout Muslims and followers of other faiths exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief independent of state control.

Uzbekistan continues to arrest religious believers, primarily Muslims, throughout the country, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Around 57 Muslims are being held in the central Syrdarya [Sidare] region on unknown charges. In the south-western Kashkadarya region around Karshi [Qarshi] the son-in-law of a Muslim woman arrested in November 2009 was arrested on 16 January 2010. The fate of several men put on trial in 2009 for following the approach to Islam of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi still remains unknown, despite requests by Forum 18 to the relevant courts for information. These cases appear to be part of an ongoing crackdown on peaceful devout Muslims and followers of other faiths exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief independent of state control.

Written official denial to UN of prosecutions

Uzbekistan has, in a written statement of 4 December 2009, claimed to the United Nations Human Rights Committee (HRC) that: "Commentaries on the fact that activists of religious organisations continue to suffer judicial prosecution are without any foundation and are false" (see statement CCPR/C/UZB/Q/3/Add.1 at http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrc/hrcs98.htm). Uzbekistan's human rights record is due to be examined by the HRC on 11 and 12 March.

In 2009 at least 47 followers of Said Nursi's approach to Islam were given prison sentences totalling around 380 years (see F18News 31 August 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1344), and the country used short-term jail sentences against 25 followers of other faiths exercising their freedom of religion or belief between February and November 2009. The state continues in 2010 to punish unregistered religious activity, in defiance of international human rights standards (see F18News 14 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1394).

Why are 57 Muslims still held?

National Security Service (NSS) secret police between the end of September and beginning of October 2009 arrested around 100 Muslims, some of whom were later released. However, around 57 are still being held in Detention Centre No.13 in Khovos in Syrdarya region. It is not known why they were arrested and what charges are being prepared against them. A member of the Ezgulik (Goodness) human rights society told Forum 18 on 19 January that the authorities have accused those detained of being part of the so-called Al-Jihad organisation, a splinter group of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan terrorist group. The Ezgulik member wished to remain anonymous, for fear of state reprisals.

The officer, who answered the phone in Khovos Detention Centre on 20 January, confirmed the arrests, but said that he did not know how many were "actually" arrested. He did not want to discuss the cases further and asked Forum 18 to contact the warden later. Calls on the same day were not answered.

A regional NSS secret police officer (who would not give his name) who answered the phone said that they have been investigating the cases and they "may be" brought before a court at the beginning of February, but he was not sure. "By law we have half a year before concluding the pre-trial investigation," he told Forum on 22 January. The NSS officer did not say how many individuals were arrested, but said that "the figure 57 is exaggerated." He also would not say what the charges are. "Our investigator knows those details," he responded. However, he would not put Forum 18 through to the investigator.

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Mammadali Karimov, Syrdarya Region's chief religious affairs official, refused to explain on 20 January why so many Muslims were arrested. "Why are you asking me, ask the law-enforcement agencies," he said with an angry voice before putting the phone down.

The Ezgulik human rights society member said that relatives of Avaz Soipov and Ravshan Makhmudov, two of the arrested Muslims have complained to them. Soipov is a resident of Gulistan [Guliston] and Makhmudov of Syrdarya Region's Yangiyer District. "It's been almost four months since these people were taken into custody," the human rights defender complained Forum 18 on 19 January.

Most of the arrested Muslims are young men of between 20 and 40, the Ezgulik member said. "No independent legal experts or even relatives have been allowed to meet the prisoners." They added that "even the lawyers are not being told anything of the developments with the investigation."

"I attend mosque only on Fridays but now I am afraid to continue"

The parents of one of the 57 detainees, who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, complained to Forum 18 the detainee had only once since his arrest in October 2009 been allowed to see one family member at a detention centre.

The detainee had told his relative on that one occasion that "he thought he would be given a lengthy prison term." The detainee did not state how he was being treated or in what conditions he was being held. They met in a room where the light "turned on and off" and talked to each other through "thick glass and iron bars". "I could only see his face and that not so clearly," the relative lamented in great distress.

The detainee had before his arrest regularly attended mosque, was "not involved" in anything illegal, and was described as an honest, modest and hard working man. Every day "he would attend the mosque for prayer a few times."

When the detainee was arrested in October 2009, police searched the family home and "found some leaflets they said were extremist religious literature." The family complained that the leaflets did not belong to them and were "planted" by police. Many others friendly with the detainee who together attended mosque and were also arrested. "Many young men were arrested at the beginning of October," the relative said.

The relative told Forum 18 that "I attend mosque only on Fridays but now I am afraid to continue to do so."

The NSS secret police officer claimed to Forum 18 that those arrested "did not get arrested for just attending a mosque." Asked whether so many such arrests would not discourage people from attending a mosque, he said that "my personal opinion is that if a person is a real Muslim and he did not commit a crime then he should not be afraid."

The authorities have bullied and harassed schoolchildren who attend places of worship – including mosques and Christian churches - as well as their parents. The mass media has been used as part of this (see F18News 12 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1239). Similarly, state TV has also been used by the authorities to encourage intolerance of freedom of religion and belief and to encourage religious hatred and intolerance (see F18News 25 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1148).

Arrest of detainee's son-in-law, rape threats against women

The 25 year-old son-in-law of a detainee arrested in November 2009 for holding Muslim religious meetings in her home has also been arrested, human rights defender Surat Ikramov told Forum 18 on 20 January. Nurbek Kulturayev, son-in law of Mekhrinisso Hamdamova, was arrested on 16 January 2010. His mother-in-law was arrested on 5 November 2009 with many other members of her family (see F18News 18 November 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1376).

Human rights defender Ikramov thought that Kulturayev was arrested because six out of eight Muslim women "forced to give testimonies" - under threat of being raped - against Hamdamova have disappeared. "They are thought to have run away from Uzbekistan, and the NSS secret police has not been able to find them," Ikramov said. He also thought that Kulturayev was arrested "as a witness" and is being "tortured in prison to confess" that he was involved with the disappearances.

A relative of Kulturayev told Forum 18 on 20 January that they themselves had been interrogated by the NSS secret police, but did not want to make further comments for fear of the authorities. The family member said that they were "afraid" that they will also be arrested.

Hamdamova's and Kulturayev's family do not know exactly when they will face a trial, or where they are currently being detained. Hamdamova's lawyer thinks the trial will be at the beginning of February.

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At least 30 other people were detained around the time Hamdamova was arrested, about 15 of them being relatives and the others being people who had attended Muslim religious meetings she had held at the Kuk Gumbaz (Blue Dome) mosque (see F18News 18 November 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1376). They were detained for about a week at a police detention centre in Karshi, where human rights defender Ikramov told Forum 18 that the eight women were threatened with rape if they did not testify against Hamdamova. Later all the thirty were released except Shahla Rahmonova, who along with Hamdamova had been human rights defenders in the region.

Mamatkul Rajabov, Kashkadarya Region's chief religious affairs official, on 18 January did not want to comment on the case. He claimed that Hamdamova "did not work as a government employee," and referred Forum 18 to Ismail Raykhanov, Head of the regional office of Uzbekistan's Spiritual Administration of Muslims, or Muftiate. Hamdamova was appointed by Kashkadarya regional authorities to be responsible for work with youth and solving conflicts in mahallas (local residential areas). Her appointment was on the recommendation of Usman Alimov, Uzbekistan's Chief Mufti (see F18News 18 November 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1376).

The official, who answered Raykhanov of the Muftiate's phone on 18 January, first said he was Raykhanov. But when Forum 18 asked about Hamdamova, he then said that he was Raykhanov's assistant and would convey Forum 18's questions to him. However, he did not return Forum 18's phone call. Later the same day when Forum 18 several times tried to reach Raykhanov, the phone was put down.

The regional department of the NSS secret police denied to Forum 18 that they had any involvement in the case. "We do not know Hamdamova or Kulturayev, and we are not investigating any case related to these persons," the NSS officer (he did not give his name) who answered the phone told Forum 18 on 20 January.

Result of some 2009 Nursi trials unknown

At least 47 followers of Said Nursi's approach to Islam were given prison sentences totalling around 380 years in 2009 (see F18News 31 August 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1344), but the results of some 2009 trials are still unknown.

An official, who did not give his name, of the Chancellery of the capital Tashkent's Criminal Court would give no information about a Nursi trial which began in April 2009. In April Ibrohim Khudoybergenov, Talat Pulatov, Jahongir Kurbonov, and another unknown man were tried in Tashkent (see F18News 24 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1286). However the official refused on 25 January 2010 to tell Forum 18 anything about the outcome of the trials, or if prosecutions are continuing. He also would not put Forum 18 through to judges who tried the cases. "The judges are not allowed to talk to you," he said before putting the phone down.

Authorities in Namangan were equally intent on saying nothing about Shokir Koraboyev, a former sports official in the region, who in June 2009 with three other persons went on trial for following Nursi's approach to Islam (see F18News 31 July http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1333). Israil Yusupov, the Press Secretary to Namangan Regional Hokimiyat, referred Forum 18 to the Regional Criminal Court. "I am sorry, it is a criminal case, and I cannot help with this," he told Forum 18 on 25 January. He then refused to talk further.

Irkin Nasyrbayev, Head of the Regional Court's Chancellery refused to give information on the case. "We will not give any information," he told Forum 18 on 25 January before hanging up the phone.

The official answering the phone of the Regional Court's Chair on 25 January said that he was the Chair's Assistant. When asked about the cases of Koraboyev and the other three men he said that "the Chair is not available at the moment." He asked Forum 18 to call back later. Called back the person answering the phone said it was "not the Court but a cotton refining factory." Subsequent calls went unanswered. (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all 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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at

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http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki.

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