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UZBEKISTAN: Baptists forced to pay massive fines, "taxes" and removed from posts

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Uzbekistan continues to attack the country's registered Baptist Union, local Baptists have told Forum 18 News Service. One Baptist, Valery Konovalov, has been forced to pay a fine imposed in his absence, after he was forced to appear as a witness in the trial of three leaders of the Baptist Union. The three have themselves been forced to pay what the same court claimed was unpaid tax and two were removed from their posts. Uzbek state TV has broadcast a programme focussing on the Baptist trial. After the programme, parents whose children attended Protestant churches were summoned to schools and warned. "The children were made to write statements promising that they would stop attending churches," a Protestant who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. "People are afraid to talk to us when they find out we are Christians." This is part of frequent state-sponsored media attacks on religious believers of all faiths and freedom of religion and belief.

Uzbekistan is continuing its attack on the country's registered Baptist Union, local Baptists have told Forum 18 News Service. One Baptist in the capital Tashkent has been forced to pay a fine imposed in his absence by a Tashkent court in October 2009, after he was forced to appear as a witness in the trial of three leaders of the Baptist Union. The three have themselves been forced to pay what the same court ruled was unpaid tax and two were removed from their jobs. As a result, the Baptist Union is being forced to choose a new leader to replace Pavel Peichev, who has headed the Baptist Union since 1994. Similarly, the Union's accountant Yelena Kurbatova was also removed from office by the court verdict.

Meanwhile, national Uzbek television's First Channel has again broadcast a programme attacking Protestants, particularly the three prosecuted Baptist leaders. Despite being interviewed by state TV for the 11 February programme attacking the Baptists, Begzod Kodyrov of the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent refused to discuss the latest harassment of religious communities with Forum 18 on 19 February. "We cannot give interviews." Asked why he so readily gave a television interview attacking the Baptists, he responded: "I absolutely will not talk to you." He then put the phone down.

Among other recent harassment, the Protestant Greater Grace Church in Samarkand was raided and three church members fined (see F18News 24 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1413).

The raid and fines and media hostility come amid a continuing crackdown on believers of all faiths in Uzbekistan. Muslim journalist Hairulla Hamidov was arrested in Tashkent on 21 January and is awaiting trial, apparently to punish him for a popular religious radio show (see F18News 17 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1410). Deported in late 2009 for their religious activity were a Baha'i and a Protestant (see F18News 16 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1409). Protestants were beaten up and apparently had drugs planted on them (see F18News 9 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1406); Muslims engaging in peaceful religious activity have been repressed, with recent arrests of 57 on unknown charges (see F18News 27 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1399).

Tashkent Baptist forced to pay massive fine

A Tashkent Baptist Valery Konovalov, who was punished in his absence when the three prominent Baptist Union leaders – Peichev, Kurbatova and Dmitri Pitirimov - were themselves fined in October 2009, has been forced to pay the massive fine imposed on him (see F18News 7 December 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1384). Konovalov had been threatened by Tashkent City Prosecutor's Office "that he was a witness but could at any moment be turned into a crime suspect." He told a court in October 2009 that because of the pressure he had signed the interrogation record without reading it, as he wanted to leave the Prosecutor's Office quickly (see F18News 15 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1362).

Konovalov was found guilty in October 2009 of violating Article 240 Part 2 ("proselytism") and Article 241 ("teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately") of the Code of Administrative Offences. He was fined 2,804,200 Soms (10,616 Norwegian Kroner, 1,253 Euros or 1,858 US Dollars) (see F18News 7 December 2009

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1384). Sh. Eshkuvatov, the Bailiff of Tashkent's Chilanzar District, visited Konovalov in late January 2010 seeking payment.

"Konovalov was forced to pay the fine because the bailiffs came demanding payment," Pitirimov told Forum 18 from Tashkent. "Otherwise they threatened to confiscate items he need for his livelihood. The church helped him because he had no such money to pay since he is unemployed."

When Konovalov found out he had been convicted himself when the verdict on all four was handed down on 9 November 2009, he appealed against the conviction (see F18News 7 December 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1384).

On 14 January 2010, again in Konovalov's absence, Judge J. Saidaliev of Tashkent City Criminal Court rejected his appeal against the October 2009 verdict.

Baptist Union leaders fail in final appeal

Peichev, the head of the Baptist Union, the Union's accountant Kurbatova and layman Pitirimov were given massive fines, instructed to pay allegedly unpaid taxes and banned from holding office for three years at their trial at Tashkent's Yakkasaray District Criminal Court which concluded on 29 October 2009. Tashkent City Criminal Court overturned the massive fines at their appeal on 4 December, but left the requirement to pay the allegedly unpaid taxes and the three year bans unchanged. Each of the three was required to pay a third of the claimed unpaid taxes of 3,620,200 Soms (13,580 Norwegian Kroner, 1,615 Euros, or 2,380 US Dollars) (see F18News 7 December 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1384).

Pitirimov told Forum 18 that Peichev and his colleagues then complained to the Supreme Court. However, in a letter of 8 January seen by Forum 18, the Court merely sent back the case to Tashkent City Court. On 19 January, in a decision also seen by Forum 18, the City Court upheld its original decision. "There are no reasons to annul or change the court decisions in this case," Sh. Gaziev, the Court chair, wrote to the church members.

Asked why the City Court dropped the fines given to the Baptists but not the alleged taxes, and why Konovalov was fined in his absence and not given a chance to defend himself as a result of which his fine was not amnestied, Judge Akbarov of Yakkasaray District Criminal Court on 19 February merely told Forum 18: "If you want to know my opinion you need to ask the Supreme Court for permission for me to speak."

Forum 18 was unable to find out why the Supreme Court refused to investigate the Baptist Union leaders' appeal. The official there who answered the phone on 19 February, who did not give his name, asked Forum 18 why it needed to talk to the Press Service. When the official heard the questions on the Baptist case without saying anything he put the phone down.

Asked by Forum 18 if they would make further appeals, Pitirimov responded: "I don't know how. We have already complained to the Supreme Court. Furthermore, it is useless, and we are tired of going to court."

"Taxes" paid, concerns over Baptist Union leadership

Pitirimov confirmed to Forum 18 that the Baptist Union has reluctantly paid the alleged debt in taxes. "We thought the amnesty given to us would clear us from the alleged fines and debt but it apparently did not."

However, Pitirimov expressed more concern over who will now lead the Union in the wake of the ban on Peichev continuing as Head. He said the Union is planning to hold elections for a new leader in May. The Union has had to appoint an interim leader, Aleksei Konovalov (he is not related to the Konovalov fined in October 2009).

Uzbek television's "outrageous lies"

Pitirimov condemned the 11 February programme "Grief of 'Joy'" on the First Channel of Uzbek television, broadcast nationwide during peak evening viewing, which attacked him and his colleagues. "The show accused the Baptists of making zombies out of people, encouraging them to sell their houses and give the money to the church. It is such hypocrisy and outrageous lies," he told Forum 18. "We now avoid telling people we are Baptists. People try to avoid us when we say we are Baptists."

A Protestant from another region in central Uzbekistan who also saw the show, who wished not to be named for fear of the authorities, told Forum 18 that in the days after the broadcast, parents whose children attended Protestant churches were summoned to schools and warned. "The children were made to write statements promising that they would stop attending churches," the Protestant complained to Forum 18 on 18 February. "People are afraid to talk to us when they find out we are Christians."

According to BBC Monitoring, the programme accused members of the Baptist Union of "abusing favourable conditions created in the country" to carry out proselytism and missionary work. "What is especially threatening is that they are paying great attention to spreading their own ideas, mainly, among Uzbek children," the broadcast said. The programme said missionaries were using

"various tricks to achieve their goal" and complained that the Baptists were particularly involved in missionary activity.

Kodyrov of the Religious Affairs Committee told the programme such missionary activities are alarming. "If they succeed in converting young people to their own faith, this will be a large army for them," he said.

The broadcast reported the prosecution of the Baptist Union leaders for economic crimes and for "illegally" organising summer camps for children, speaking of the Baptists' "evil deeds" at their Radost (Joy) camp in Tashkent Region's mountainous Bostonliq District.

To run the camp, the Baptist church members did not go through necessary procedures required by the Religion Law, Kodyrov claimed. He added that they had not received the parents' consent to preach sermons to children at their camps.

The broadcast concluded by calling on parents to be more vigilant against such missionary activities and take great care of their children. 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).

The broadcast gave no opportunity to the Baptists to refute any of the allegations made against them.

Why were the Baptists attacked on television?

Interviewed in the programme, Judge Akbarov was asked why he had not given the Baptists harsher punishments, Pitirimov told Forum 18. Judge Akbarov responded: "Because we have humane laws."

Asked by Forum 18 why he had told the television programme that the court had been lenient towards the Baptists, Judge Akbarov responded, "I don't understand your question." He then hung up the phone.

The Uzbekistan National TV channel referred Forum 18 on 18 February to its Social and Political Programmes Department's Editor-in-Chief Madamin Safarov. The official who answered Safarov's phone presented himself as Safarov but when Forum 18 asked why the Baptists were not interviewed by the TV channel, he with an angry voice said, "First of all I am not Safarov and second of all I haven't heard about such a show." He then hung up the phone.

Nazar Eshankulov, Editor-in-Chief of Cultural Programmes of National TV, said that he had seen the show but "only the end part of it." "I cannot say how professional my colleagues were, I would need to see the whole show," he told Forum 18 on 18 February when asked why the programme had not sought the Baptists' opinion.

Long-running media intolerance

The television attack on the Baptists is part of frequent state-sponsored media attacks on religious communities and freedom of religion and belief. At the time of the Baptist trial, state TV continued showing films attacking freedom of religion of belief and inciting intolerance of state-disfavoured Muslims, Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Methodists and Baha'is (see F18News 29 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1369). In the wake of the deportation of the Tashkent-based Baha'i Sepehr Taheri in November 2009, he was attacked on the Novosti Uzbekistana website (see F18News 16 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1409).

On 21 January the Urgench Okshomi (Evening Urgench) newspaper published an attack by Judge G. Sobirov, chair of the Urgench [Urganch] City Criminal Court, on local Protestant Viktor Galaktionov. The article recounted the arrest of fifteen people at his home and accused him of storing and distributing "illegal" religious literature. The Judge noted that because the religious literature confiscated from them was illegal it had been ordered destroyed. The Judge called for vigilance towards such believers.

Judge Sobirov gives no dates of when the raid and prosecution took place, nor why he suddenly decided to write about the case.

Galaktionov's home was raided in May 2009 and he and 16 others were fined in October 2009 (see F18News 18 November 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1376). (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 <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>.

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