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UZBEKISTAN: "I was only obeying orders"

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

Uzbekistan continues to punish unregistered religious activity, as well as imposing controls on notionally permitted Muslim religious activity, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Courts have fined one Baptist and warned a second Baptist, who was a Soviet-era prisoner of conscience, for religious activity. The judge in the case refused to talk about it to Forum 18, but the police officer who led the raid that led to the prosecution told Forum 18 that "I was only obeying orders" from his superiors. Long-term Baptist prisoner of conscience Tohar Haydarov has had an appeal registered at the Supreme Court, but officials will not say when – or if – a hearing will take place. Uzbekistan has also imposed greater restrictions on Muslim religious activity during the month of Ramadan (which this year ended on 9 September) by banning iftar meals in restaurants, greater surveillance of mosques, banning night prayers away from mosques, and cutting water and electricity at prayer times in different places across the country.

Uzbekistan continues to punish unregistered religious activity, as well as imposing controls on permitted religious activity, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Courts in the capital Tashkent fined one Baptist and warned a second Baptist who was a Soviet-era prisoner of conscience for religious activity, as well as rejecting appeals against the jailing of short-term prisoners of conscience and fines imposed on other Baptists. Also, in an intensification of previous years' practice, controls on Muslim activity were imposed across Uzbekistan during Ramadan.

One Baptist warned, another given a large fine

Judge D. Ubaydulloyev of Tashkent City's Hamza District Criminal Court on 21 August fined Igor Voloshin, a member of an unregistered Baptist Church, 452,215 Soms (1,690 Norwegian Kroner, 210 Euros, or 280 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rates) under Uzbekistan's Administrative Code's article 241 ("teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [state-registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately").

Judge Ubaydulloyev also convicted Nadezhda Matyukhina - a Soviet-era prisoner of conscience who belongs to the same church - of the same "offence", but she was only given a warning. Voloshin and Matyukhina are members of the local unregistered Baptist Church, which belongs to the Council of Churches Baptists who refuse on principle to seek state registration.

Matyukhina was only warned, Baptists told Forum 18 on 1 September, as she is 85 and disabled. In 1966 she was convicted of holding unauthorised religious meetings in her flat, and was imprisoned in a labour camp under severe conditions for three years.

The trial of the two Baptists followed a raid on 4 August on Matyukhina's private flat by local police and Mahalla Committee (local self-government district) officials, Baptists told Forum 18. (Mahalla committees are used by the authorities as a key instrument in their attempts to control Uzbek society (see eg. F18News 1 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=698.) At around 8 p.m. in the evening, Police Inspector E. Parmonov, along with several other police officer and mahalla officials broke in "while Voloshin gathered around 50 people in Matyukhina's flat to teach Baptist Christian doctrines," the verdict stated.

Voloshin did not admit to breaking any laws, or sign any statement during the police raid. He told the court that he had not violated the law by participating in a religious gathering, the Baptists said. They complained that the authorities "in violation of the Constitution, without an official warrant, broke into Matyukhina's flat, took photographs of the attendees, and also did not take any official notes of what took place".

"I was only obeying orders"

Judge Ubaydulloyev on 15 September refused to talk to Forum 18, stating "if you want to receive information on this case you need to come to the court." He then put the phone down.

The state Religious Affairs Committee also refused to talk about this or other cases, claiming that no-one was available to talk as they were all in meetings.

Police Inspector Parmonov (who did not his first name) said that "I was only obeying orders" given by his superiors. "I have worked for 10 years at the local police, and I know these Baptists," he told Forum 18 on 15 September. "They don't drink, and do not disturb others." When asked why he broke in Matyukhina's private flat without an official warrant, Inspector Parmonov said, "I was only doing my official duties, obeying the order given by my chiefs."

Appeal against short-term jailings and fines fails

An appeal by Yuriy Garmashev – who was given five days' detention – and Oksana and Yelena Kamyshina and David Goryachev against fines for unregistered activity has failed. Judge Arofat Alimova of Tashkent Criminal Court on 20 August - in the absence of the defendants - upheld the earlier verdict. The appeal court verdict states that the defendants' arguments that the administrative case was illegally brought against them contradicts the police records in the case, and the evidence of confiscated Christian literature.

Garmashev had been given five days detention, nine others were detained for three days, and three were fined 80 times the minimum monthly salary. All 13 are members of an unregistered Baptist Church (see F18News 5 August 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1476).

Judge Alimova categorically refused to comment on the case to Forum 18 on 16 September. "Look I am very busy now, and I don't remember that case at the moment," she said, and then put the phone down.

Baptist long-term prisoner of conscience's appeal

An appeal in the case of Baptist long-term prisoner of conscience Tohar Haydarov was registered by Baptists at the Supreme Court on 13 September, they told Forum 18. They were told that officials would contact them in response, but not when – or if - a hearing would take place. Forum 18 called the Supreme Court on 16 September to enquire about the appeal, but officials refused to discuss it unless questions were submitted in writing.

Haydarov was sentenced in March to 10 years in jail on what his fellow Baptists repeatedly and strongly insist are fabricated drugs charges. An initial appeal against the sentence was rejected in April, despite numerous violations of legal procedure in the original trial (see F18News 26 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1436).

Greater controls on Muslim activity during Ramadan

Uzbekistan has also imposed greater restrictions on Muslim religious activity during the month of Ramadan (which this year ended on 9 September) by banning iftar meals in restaurants, greater surveillance of mosques, banning nightly prayers away from mosques, and cutting water and electricity at prayer times in different places across Uzbekistan. Although extra controls have been imposed during Ramadan in previous years (see eg. F18News 17 September 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1349), controls this year appear to be more extensive than previously.

Ban on iftar meals in restaurants

Iftar is a religious evening meal – often held by mosque communities – when Muslims break their fast each day during Ramadan. Explaining the ban on iftar meals in restaurants, Abdulazim Mansurov, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims or Muftiate's Deputy Chair, told Agence France-Presse on 3 September that in previous years "iftars have become too lavish and pompous like wedding ceremonies mostly held by the wealthy and for the wealthy." He denied allegations that Uzbek government officials were seeking to block religious gatherings during Ramadan.

Uzbekistan has imposed complete control on all open Muslim religious activity, including the Muftiate (see the F18News religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1170).

The Muftiate on 16 September declined to give any comments to Forum 18 on the ban. Mansurov's Assistant (who would not give his name) claimed that Mansurov was on leave, and that he could not comment on his statements in the press. He referred Forum 18 to the Board's Division of Fatwas (decisions on the matters of faith and practice). However, the Division's telephones went unanswered on 16 September.

A Muslim from Tashkent, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that several restaurants refused to serve a group including friends when they tried to order an iftar meal. The restaurants told them that it was not possible because of the ban.

Sources elsewhere in Uzbekistan noted to Forum 18 that it was not customary for Muslims outside Tashkent to have an iftar meal in a restaurant.

Greater controls on mosques

Another Muslim from Tashkent said that mosques are being closely monitored during Ramadan, but not many people are attending them because "people are afraid to do so."

A source from Kashkadarya region told Forum 18 on 2 September that the central mosque Kuk Gumbaz in the region's central city Karshi was being monitored by secret police and videoed from a car standing nearby. The source said that he believed this was done because the authorities did not want greater religious activity during Ramadan.

Another source from Fergana [Farghona] Region told Forum 18 on 2 September that plain clothes agents of the authorities were "especially active" in monitoring and controlling mosques in Kokand.

The National Security Service (NSS) secret police and other state agencies routinely impose highly intrusive surveillance on many religious communities (see F18News 5 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1014).

Bans on night prayers away from mosques

The source from Kashkadarya said that night prayers during Ramadan away from mosques were not allowed. However, the source from Tashkent said that they and friends had "no problem" meeting in private homes for prayers.

Water and power cuts at dawn and dusk

The source from Kashkadarya said the authorities cut water and electricity three to four times a day, at sunrise and sunset as well as throughout the day "exactly at prayer times".

However, the source from Fergana said that "it is usual – not specifically because of Ramadan – to provide the population with water and electricity for short intervals in the mornings and evenings". (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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