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UZBEKISTAN: "We are a free country"

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

Uzbekistan has been harassing people meeting peacefully for worship, ordinary police and the NSS secret police in the region around the capital Tashkent having stopped and questioned people attending mosques in the month of Ramadan. The authorities in the west of the country have prevented women and children from attending mosques, and in the central city of Samarkand police raided and fined Baptists conducting worship. Bahodyr Mamedkarimov, Legal Advisor to the Minister of the Interior, denied to Forum 18 News Service that mosques had been and were under surveillance. "It's nonsense, we are a free country, and anyone can attend the mosque especially during the holy month of Ramadan," he claimed. In separate incidents, Baptists in Tashkent have been fined 50 times the monthly minimum salary for visiting a friend in hospital; the Baptists were also detained by police for more than 24 hours. Also a Protestant has been fined 50 times the minimum monthly salary for possessing four books and two DVDs. He had been fined in 2007, and in 2010 had been imprisoned for fifteen days for his religious activity.

Uzbekistan has been harassing people meeting peacefully for worship, local observers have told Forum 18 News Service. Police and the National Security Service (NSS) secret police in the region around the capital Tashkent stopped and questioned people attending mosques in the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. The authorities in the west of the country have prevented women and children from attending mosques, and in the central city of Samarkand [Samarqand] police raided and fined Baptists conducting worship.

In separate incidents, Baptists in Tashkent have been fined 50 times the monthly minimum salary for visiting a friend in hospital, and a Protestant has been fined 50 times the minimum monthly salary for possessing four books and two DVDs. He had earlier been fined 80 times the minimum monthly salary for possessing religious literature at home.

"We are a free country.."

During Ramadan, which this year almost coincided with August, uniformed ordinary police and plain clothed NSS secret police put mosques in Tashkent Region under surveillance, a local observer who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 3 October. The police and NSS officers "stood at the entrance of mosques, observing attendees and stopping some men wearing atypical short trousers or longer beards".

Uzbekistan has routinely imposed greater controls on Muslims in Ramadan (see F18News 16 September 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1489). Followers of all faiths are subject to NSS secret police surveillance, which can often be highly intrusive, as well as the use of informers inside religious communities (see F18News 5 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1014).

Bahodyr Mamedkarimov, Legal Advisor to the Minister of the Interior, denied that mosques in Tashkent Region had been and were under surveillance. "It's nonsense, we are a free country, and anyone can attend the mosque especially during the holy month of Ramadan," he claimed to Forum 18 on 4 October.

Surveillance by police was not noticeable, an imam in the west of the country, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 3 October. However, the authorities neither allow children to attend mosques without their parents, nor women in mosques without their husbands or very close male relatives.

Uzbekistan has targeted children and parents attending places of worship, including mosques, with overt threats and bullying at schools (see F18News 12 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1239).

Mamedkarimov of the Interior Ministry denied this to Forum 18. "We have no such laws banning children or women at any time or under any circumstance from attending the mosque," he said. When Forum 18 noted that written laws and reality may be different, he claimed that "we have no such practice in Uzbekistan".

Raid

In Samarkand, on 18 September, at 11 am police raided a Baptist Sunday worship service. Around 20 members of the Church, which

is not registered, were present as some of the police officers climbed over a fence around the church building, followed by 14 police officers – only four in uniform – breaking into the service. Police then began filming all those present without their consent, and did not identify themselves when asked to do so.

Police also broke into the home of the Nemirovs, a church family living in the same courtyard as the church. After police recorded the names of all present at the service, six church members were detained and taken to a police station for questioning. The six were: Alisher Abdulayev, Nadezhda Chaplygin with her daughter Olesya and son Vyacheslav, as well as Vladimir Abramov and Timofei Nemirov. Four hours later they were released, but police opened a case against Abdulayev that day under the Code of Administrative Offences.

Local police officer Azamat who took part in the raid, who would not give his last name, refused to comment on the case to Forum 18. "I cannot answer you right now," he stated on 3 October when asked by Forum 18 why the raid took place. "I first need to check who you are." Subsequent calls to Officer Azamat on 3 and 4 October went unanswered.

Fine

Abdulayev was on 3 October fined 60 times the minimum monthly wage, or 3,432,000 Soms (11,500 Norwegian Kroner, 1,466 Euros, or 1,945 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). Judge Arif Pardayev of Samarkand Criminal Court found him guilty of breaking Article 240, Part 1 of the Code of Administrative Offences by leading unregistered religious activity and illegally teaching children religion.

Article 240, Part 1 ("Violation of the Religion Law") punishes: "Carrying out of unauthorised religious activity, evasion by leaders of religious organisations of registration of the charter of the organisation, the organisation and conduct of worship by religious ministers and of special children's and youth meetings, as well as vocational, literature and other study groups not relating to worship". Punishments for breaking this Administrative Code article range from fines of 50 to 100 times the minimum monthly salary to administrative arrest for up to 15 days.

The official of the Samarkand Court who answered Judge Pardayev's phone on 3 October, who would not give his name, told Forum 18 that Pardayev was hearing the case. Told that the judge had finished Abdulayev's case more than 30 minutes previously, the official put the phone down.

Police actions unpunished

On 30 September a Samarkand Court official, who also would not give his name but said he was the Court's Secretary, refused to say what offence Abdulayev had committed and whether police officers who illegally filmed church members would be prosecuted. "He has his legal representative, and it will be an open trial," the court secretary insisted to Forum 18. However, Baptists told Forum 18 that Judge Pardayev conducted the hearing in his office and allowed only two Church members to participate. "The court did not see anything unlawful in the actions of the Police, and in fact used police video film of the church service as evidence," Baptists complained.

Fined for visiting a hospital patient

In a separate case, Baptists who belong to an unregistered church in Tashkent were fined for visiting a fellow Baptist in hospital in the city. Mariya Kim, Natalya Belan and her seven year old daughter, Larissa Permyakova and Lidiya Guseva were arrested by Mirabad Police on 25 September.

Kim and Permyakova were in the hospital waiting room when an apparently "drunk man in plain clothes came up to them, and asked them what they carried", Baptists told Forum 18. One of the two "was holding a New Testament in Kazakh in her hand, and she had a few Christian leaflets in her bag". Another man in plain clothes appeared, the men without identifying themselves began asking the Baptists who they were and what they were doing at the hospital. "We think the two are from the NSS secret police," Baptists told Forum 18.

About an hour later, at around 5 pm, Guseva and Belan with her daughter were also arrested at the hospital by officials while visiting their friend. They had gathered that Kim and Permyakova were in trouble, and were themselves arrested when they enquired what the problem was.

All the Baptists were taken to Mirabad Police Station and "were kept in the cold outside the police station in its courtyard until almost midnight", Baptists complained. They were then taken inside the building, and kept there until 5 pm the next day, 26 September. Belan's daughter was released before the remaining four were taken inside. "They were not provided with beds, and so could not sleep," Baptists stated.

At 5 pm on 26 September, police took the Baptists to Mirabad District Court for trial. After two hours, court officials could not say when the hearing would take place, and so at 7 pm the police released the Baptists.

Stop singing or be shot

While the arrested Baptists were in Mirabad Police Station's courtyard on 25 September, some members of their Church gathered outside the police station asking for their fellow-Baptists to be released. Police told these Baptists that the detainees would be held overnight at the station, and then taken to court and tried on 26 September.

The Baptists outside the station then began to sing hymns, at which two police officers on duty ordered the station ordered the singing to stop. "One officer warned us, saying that he would arrest all of us. The other one began applying pressure to the trigger of his machinegun, saying that he would shoot us all down," Baptists stated.

The fines

On 29 September Judge Sarvar Karimov of Mirabad District Criminal Court fined Permyakova, Guseva and Belan each 50 times the minimum monthly salary, or 2,860,000 Soms (9,590 Norwegian Kroner, 1,223 Euros, or 1,624 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate) each. The three were claimed to have broken Administrative Code Article 184, Part 2 ("Illegal storage, production, import, or distribution of religious materials"), Article 240, Part 2 ("Violation of the Religion Law"), and Article 241 ("Violating the order for teaching religious beliefs"), church members who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 29 September.

Article 184-2 punishes the "illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan with a purpose to distribute or distribution of religious materials by physical persons". This "offence" is punishable with a fine of between 50 and 150 times the minimum monthly salary, "with confiscation of the religious materials and the relevant means of their production and distribution".

Article 240 Part 2 punishes "Attracting believers of one confession to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity". It imposes punishment for this of either fines of between 50 and 100 times the minimum monthly salary, or administrative arrest for up to 15 days.

Article 241 punishes "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".

Why?

A Mirabad Court official who did not give his name told Forum 18 on 30 September that Judge Karimov was not available to speak and could not comment the case. He asked Forum 18 to call later. Calls on 30 September and 3 October to Judge Karimov went unanswered.

Nygmat Haydarov, Chief of Mirabad Police, on 29 September did not want to comment on the case. Asked by Forum 18 why the Baptists had been arrested, he put the phone down.

On 30 September Mirabad Police referred Forum 18 to Abdurahim Beknazarov, Chief of Mirabad Police's Criminal Investigation Division. Asked why Baptists cannot visit fellow believers in hospital, or carry Christian literature, Beknazarov, said he could not answer questions over the phone. Asked why a police officer threatened Baptists with a machinegun, he replied "have a nice day" and put the phone down.

Fined again for possessing religious literature

On 3 October Tashkent Region's Chirchik City Criminal Court fined Azamat Rajapov, a local Protestant, 50 times the minimum monthly salary for "illegally storing" religious literature in his home. This fine totals 2,860,000 Soms (9,590 Norwegian Kroner, 1,223 Euros, or 1,624 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). He was convicted under Administrative Code Article 240, Part 1 ("Violation of the Religion Law"), a source from the region who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 3 October.

Five officers of Chirchik District Police raided Rajapov's home on 5 September and seized four Christian books and two DVD discs. Rajapov will appeal against the court decision, the source said, as "he does not have so much money to pay the fine".

Rajapov was among a group of Protestants fined for possessing Christian literature in the southern town of Termez, where he was then living, in October 2007. He was sentenced to 15 days' imprisonment for his religious activity in Termez in April 2010 (see F18News 29 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1438).

Rajapov's brother Anvar, likewise a Protestant, has also recently been fined 80 times the minimum monthly wage for possessing religious literature in his home (see F18News 9 September 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1611). (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://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Uzbekistan>.

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