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UZBEKISTAN: Authorities try to stop children attending meetings for worship

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

The authorities in Uzbekistan's city of Angren have warned local religious communities not to be involved in unspecified "proselytism" and "missionary activity", as well as not to allow children and young people to take part in meetings for worship, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Saidibrahim Saynazirov, Deputy Head of the Administration, made these demands at a meeting of representatives of a variety of religious communities. He also demanded that the communities provide him with lists of their members. Many at the meeting do not want to do this, as one put it to Forum 18, for fear of pressure by the authorities against individual members. When asked what legal basis he had for his demand for membership lists, Saynazirov told the meeting "it's not in the law but we recommend that you do it". He adamantly denied to Forum 18 that he had demanded that communities provide lists of their members. "I did not demand such lists," he insisted. But he admitted that he "only asked" for them. However, the city's Catholic community hope that they will at last be allowed to be legally registered.

The authorities in Angren, a city 110 km. (70 miles) east of Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent, have warned local religious communities not to be involved in unspecified "proselytism" and "missionary activity", as well as not to allow children and young people to take part in meetings for worship. On 2 November Saidibrahim Saynazirov, Deputy Head of the Administration, addressed representatives of the Catholic, Russian Orthodox, Presbyterian, Seventh-day Adventist and Baptist churches, at a meeting he called, Forum 18 News Service has learned. The only communities present were those with registration somewhere in the country, which the state allows to exist. All unregistered religious activity is a criminal offence, in defiance of the international human rights agreements Uzbekistan is a party to.

Also present at the meeting were the chairpersons of local mahalla (residential district) committees. Mahalla committees, in theory locally-elected but in practice state-appointed, are a key part of Uzbekistan's structures of control and oppression (see eg. F18News 27 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936). They are for example used as part of the state apparatus to restrict the numbers of Muslims allowed to make the haj pilgrimage to Mecca, as part of the total control the state has over all aspects of officially-permitted Islam (see F18News 7 November 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1634).

Saynazirov of the local administration also demanded that religious communities give the authorities a list of all their members, as well as copies of their state registration documents, a source from Angren who asked to remain unnamed for fear of State reprisals told Forum 18 on 30 November.

Two weeks before the meeting, Saynazirov and local police raided the local Baptist church's Sunday morning meeting for worship. Two schoolgirls present were later called to a police station and pressured to write statements against the Church's Pastor Vyacheslav Gavrilov, and to stop attending the Church (see F18News 5 December 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1643). As of 7 December no charges have been brought against Gavrilov.

Threats

Saynazirov claimed to the meeting that on his initiative the authorities closed a mosque which was attended by school pupils for Friday prayers, and the Imam of the Mosque was fined. He did not identify the mosque or imam, or when these human rights violations took place.

Asked by Forum 18 on 7 December which mosque's imam was fined and why, Saynazirov derisively said "I don't understand Imam-Shimam". He then said that he did not wish to talk more to Forum 18. "Please, come to my office or send your representative, and we will discuss the rest of your questions here." He then put the phone down.

Dmitry Tikhonov, an independent human rights defender in Angren told Forum 18 on 8 December that he had not heard of any recent closures of mosques. "Ten unregistered small Muslim communities were closed down by the city authorities in 2010, just before the new year", he told Forum 18 on 8 December.

Saynazirov also claimed that he was responsible for Angren's then permitted Pentecostal Church being banned for unauthorised religious activity. The Church's Pastor, Askhad Mustafin, had previously been twice prosecuted for leading the Church (see F18News 16 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=855).

Human rights defender Tikhonov suggested that the examples of the mosque closure and the church ban was to scare the communities, to "make them cooperate" with the authorities.

Can children and young people attend meetings for worship?

Various religious communities at the meeting told Forum 18 that Saynazirov demanded that children and young people be stopped from attending. In other contexts, he has apparently demanded that this happen even if the required written parental consent has been obtained. During the 16 October raid on Angren's permitted Baptist Church, Furkat Boltayev, Deputy Chief of the town's police Criminal Investigation and Struggle against Terrorism Division, confiscated written consent letters of parents allowing their children and young people to attend the Church (see F18News 5 December 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1643).

Saynazirov was told at the meeting by some that they will not stop children and young people from attending meetings for worship, "especially if they are coming with their parents or with their written consent". "Why should we stop teaching our children our faith," some asked.

Asked by Forum 18 whether children and young people can attend Christian meetings for worship, Saynazirov stated that "children can attend with their parents outside the school hours". He would not respond on whether children and young people can attend mosques.

In other parts of Uzbekistan, the authorities have bullied and harassed school pupils who attend places of worship including mosques and Christian churches (see F18News 12 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1239).

Stop "proselytism" and "missionary activity"

Saynazirov also told the meeting that those present must stop "proselytism" and "missionary activity". Some present at the meeting told Forum 18 that it appears he meant any activity that could be described as sharing their faith with others. Saynazirov himself refused to comment on what exactly he meant. "I do not understand what exactly you mean by proselytism", was the only comment he would make on this to Forum 18.

The Code of Administrative Offences' Article 240 Part 2 ("Attracting believers of one confession to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity") imposes punishment for this "offence" of either fines of between 50 and 100 times the minimum monthly salary, or administrative arrest for up to 15 days. However, there is no legal definition of what exactly "proselytism" or "missionary activity" is, leaving much room for arbitrary official interpretations.

Membership lists

Saynazirov also demanded that the communities provide him with lists of their members. Many at the meeting did not want to do this, as one put it to Forum 18, "for fear that the authorities will watch them individually and persecute them" - as in the very recent case of the two schoolgirls present when Angren's Baptist Church was raided (see F18News 5 December 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1643).

Followers of all faiths are subject to National Security Service (NSS) secret police surveillance, which can often be highly intrusive including microphones bugging meetings and open filming of those who attend meetings for worship. The NSS also tries to recruit informers inside religious communities (see F18News 5 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1014).

When asked what legal basis he had for his demand for membership lists, Saynazirov told the meeting "it's not in the law but we recommend that you do it".

Saynazirov adamantly denied to Forum 18 that he had demanded that communities provide lists of their members. "I did not demand such lists," he insisted, "who am I to demand the names of their members." But he admitted to Forum 18 that he "only asked" for them.

He went on to maintain that he "did not demand anything". He claimed to Forum 18 that he "only asked them for copies of registration documents, which we do annually". Asked why he wanted every year to receive copies of documents the authorities already have, Saynazirov said that he could not comment on this.

Will Angren's Catholics be legally registered?

Bishop Jerzy Maculewicz, Catholic Apostolic Administrator of Uzbekistan, told Forum 18 on 8 December that one priest present

was asked to prepare all the necessary documents for the registration of the community in Angren. Currently, Catholics have to travel to Tashkent to attend Mass.

"We have 40 community members in Angren, and the community there has existed for five years", Bishop Maculewicz said. "We cannot celebrate masses in Angren, as we are not registered there".

To gain state registration, communities must first have 100 adult Uzbek citizens willing both to be identified as founders and to supply their personal details to the authorities. Then, religious organisations must submit two letters of guarantee: one from the district hokimat (administration), confirming that the organisation to be registered has a building which corresponds to public health and fire safety requirements; and one from the mahalla committee, stating that other mahalla residents do not object to the organisation. Public health, fire safety and similar requirements are sometimes used to provide excuses to harass religious organisations (see eg. F18News 11 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=714).

Gaining state registration – or permission to exist - is a serious problem for Muslims, Protestant and Catholic Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and people of other faiths. Even those who want state registration face systematic obstruction, as this is often used as a weapon against people who want to exercise the right to freedom of religion or belief. Catholics in Angren have been trying to gain state registration for a number of years (see F18News 4 August 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1334).

The necessary documents for registration were submitted to the authorities in Angren after the 2 November meeting, Bishop Maculewicz told Forum 18. "Now we are hoping that we can soon get registered".

No patriarchal visit for the Orthodox

A rescheduled visit by Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill to mark the 140th anniversary of the Church in Uzbekistan has still not taken place. It is thought that the authorities have blocked the visit because the Moscow Patriarchate in July changed its structures in Central Asia and appointed a new bishop to Tashkent without gaining the approval of Uzbekistan (see F18News 2 November 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1633).

Russian Orthodox believers from Tashkent told Forum 18 on 7 December that, although Orthodox hierarchs and priests from elsewhere in Central Asia attended the ceremonies, "unfortunately neither Patriarch Kirill nor any priests from Moscow could attend".

Uzbek TV encourages intolerance of freedom of religion or belief

In the latest instance of state TV encouraging intolerance of people exercising freedom of religion or belief, Yoshlar TV channel aired a 40 minute programme entitled "Jehovah Witnesses: The art of converting into zombies" on 21 November.

Claiming that Jehovah's Witnesses were conducting "illegal meetings and gatherings at some homes", the TV programme cited two instances where it claimed that Jehovah's Witnesses had been prosecuted for their activities.

The documentary accused Jehovah's Witnesses of using lies in their teachings, and called on people to be vigilant. "Threats to our peaceful life are coming from people among us. (..) It is our human duty to be vigilant about people who want to damage our centuries-old national traditions and values, as well as our beliefs passed on to us by our grandparents", it concluded.

Uzbekistan's state-run TV often broadcasts programmes encouraging intolerance of those exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief. For example, one entitled "In the clutches of ignorance" was shown before live coverage of the Euro 2008 football championship, to attract the largest possible audience. That film made some members of religious minorities "afraid to go out on the street where they live" (see F18News 13 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1143). (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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