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UZBEKISTAN: After four years' imprisonment, another 30 months

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

One month before the end of his four-year sentence, Jehovah's Witness Abdubannob Ahmedov was given a new 30-month sentence on charges of violating prison rules. Two other Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience also had their prison terms extended, but have now been freed, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 News Service. Four Muslims are known to have been freed from prison under amnesty, with some being forced to speak publicly in favour of government policies. A Baptist from Fergana, Yelena Kim, faces up to three years' imprisonment on charges of "illegally teaching religion".

A Jehovah's Witness from Fergana [Farghona] Region in eastern Uzbekistan, Abdubannob Ahmedov, has been given a new prison sentence of two and a half years, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 News Service. The sentence came just a month before he was due to complete a four-year prison term handed down in 2008 to punish him for his religious activity. And prosecutors are seeking to punish a Baptist from Fergana for "illegally teaching religion", according to local Baptists and case documents seen by Forum 18. If brought to criminal trial and convicted, Yelena Kim faces a maximum sentence of three years' imprisonment.

Meanwhile, three Muslims who read the works of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi were freed early from prison in the prisoner amnesty enacted in early 2012, but at least some of them have had to take part in pro-government propaganda, Muslims who asked not to be identified told Forum 18. Another Muslim freed under amnesty appeared on state-run television in March to regret his actions.

No official of the state Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent was prepared to comment to Forum 18 on 4 July as to why individuals are punished for practising their faith, why worship services are raided and why religious literature is confiscated. The man who answered the phone of Begzod Kodyrov, the Committee's Chief Specialist, said he was not present and immediately hung up.

New prison sentence

Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience Ahmedov has been given a new sentence of two and a half years' imprisonment under Criminal Code Article 221, which punishes violations of prison regime. The sentence was handed down at a trial on 11 June. "We were very sad to learn this," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

The trial appears to have taken place in some secrecy and Ahmedov was not given a copy of the verdict. Jehovah's Witnesses say it might have been sent to the administration of the labour camp in Navoi [Navoiy], where he had most recently been serving his sentence.

Later in June, Ahmedov was transferred to a prison in Kattakurgan in Samarkand [Samarqand] Region, though the reasons for the transfer are unknown. His lawyer was able to visit him there on 4 July. The lawyer intends to appeal against the new sentence if the appeal period has not run out or lodge a supervisory appeal.

The new case was initiated as Ahmedov was close to completing his sentence, which was due to end on 23 July. He had been arrested in the court room on 23 July 2008 when Margilan Town Criminal Court had handed down a four-year sentence under Criminal Code Article 216 ("illegal organisation of public associations or religious organisations") (see F18News 29 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1164).

Ahmedov – like the other two Jehovah's Witness prisoners – was told by prison officials in summer 2011 that he would not be released at the end of his sentence unless he renounced his faith (see F18News 10 February 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1664).

While all three were given extra sentences under Article 221, the other two received much shorter extra sentences and were freed in May (see below).

Raid

The most recent trouble for Yelena Kim and her Baptist congregation in Fergana began on 29 April, when about a dozen police and other security officials raided the Sunday service. The Council of Churches Baptist congregation meets in part of her home. Two of the officers were from the Department for the Struggle with Terrorism, while others were from the National Security Service (NSS) secret police. "They tried to record the service on camera, but church members didn't let them," local Baptists told Forum 18

The officers arrived, looking for evidence to prosecute church members under Code of Administrative Offences 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").

Officers drew up a record of an offence against Yelena Kim, the owner of the home where the church meets, even though she was visiting Tashkent when the service took place. They also drew up records against her husband, Eduard Kim, and church member Iosif Skaev.

Investigator Botir Zokirov summoned all three for questioning on 4 June. He told Yelena Kim that a criminal case had been opened against her under Article 229-2 (violation of the procedure for teaching religious doctrines), which carries a maximum three year prison term. Zokirov said her husband and Skaev would be witnesses in the case.

Zokirov asked Eduard Kim where he had got to know his wife, when they had married, how they had become Baptists, what they do at the services and why the congregation is not registered. Eduard Kim told Zokirov that the services are peaceful and that the Constitution's Article 61 guarantees the separation of religion from the state and bans state interference in the affairs of religious organisations.

Zokirov asked Skaev how many people attend services, who the leader is and who teaches the faith to those who join. Skaev responded that he did not know exactly how many people attend, that the leader is Jesus Christ and that all church members testify to others about God.

Early on 23 June, the local police officer came to the church and said that Eduard Kim and Skaev needed to take their documents confirming their place of residence and their personal reference from the mahalla (local district) committee to the police station so that the cases against them could be closed.

However, when they got there Investigators A. Ahmedov and Erkin Dehkonov told them they would face administrative cases and that they should go straight to court. Eduard Kim and Skaev refused to go to the court, explaining that they had not had the time to study the case documents and did not have a lawyer or translator (they are Russian speakers).

"She continued with religious teaching"

Early on 28 June, officers arrived at the church armed with a search warrant signed by F. Ismoilov, Fergana's Deputy Prosecutor. The warrant, seen by Forum 18, declared that criminal charges had been lodged against Yelena Kim as she had already been prosecuted on 26 July 2011 under Administrative Code Article 241. "Despite this, it was established that she continued with religious teaching, without having the appropriate education," the warrant declared.

According to the July 2011 verdict – seen by Forum 18 – Fergana City Criminal Court had fined Yelena Kim under Article 241 three months' minimum wage, 149,205 Soms (460 Norwegian Kroner, 60 Euros or 85 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

Eduard Kim had also been fined for his religious activity in February 2008, but the punishment had been overturned in August 2008 (see F18News 22 September 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1191). In January 2009 he was one of two Fergana Baptists given a seven-day prison term (see F18News 9 February 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1538).

Search

At the Kims' Fergana home on 28 June, officers ordered church members to leave while they searched the premises. "They took printed materials, musical collections, folders with notes, posters, discs, cassettes, Bibles and hymn books into the yard to sort them and note them down," church members said. "They also confiscated a photocopier." Officers then searched the part of the house where the Kim family lives, seizing "everything related to Christianity".

Church members, who were not allowed into the yard, gathered outside to pray and sing. "Officers threatened to bring charges against all of them and filmed them."

At about the same time Skaev's home was also searched. After he refused to let the police in without a translation of the warrant into Russian (he does not read Uzbek), officers gained entry through a window. "Officers frightened his nine children," church members

complained. They seized Christian literature and discs, mobile phones and Skaev's passport. When Skaev refused to open the garage, officers broke a window to get in. They seized 150 copies of the Bible (in Uzbek).

The following day, 29 June, Skaev appealed to the police to return his passport, but they refused.

Forum 18 was unable to reach any of the officers involved in the raid, the criminal case against Yelena Kim or the administrative cases against Eduard Kim and Skaev. The duty officer at the Fergana Regional Police put the phone down on 4 July. Other numbers there and at the town police went unanswered each time Forum 18 called.

The official who answered the phone of Fergana City Prosecutor's Office on 4 July declined to put Forum 18 through to Deputy Prosecutor Ismoilov or anyone else to discuss the case against Yelena Kim. He put the phone down without giving any comment or his name. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

Freed on completing extra sentences

Two Jehovah's Witnesses who had been given extra terms after completing their long prison sentences have now been freed, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Sergei Ivanov was freed on 19 May and Olim Turaev on 22 May.

The two were tried by Gazalkent City Criminal Court on criminal charges of violating prison regulations under Article 221 and sentenced on 12 April. Ivanov was given an extra sentence of four months and three days' imprisonment. Turaev was given an extra sentence of four months and seven days' imprisonment. The sentences were deemed to run from 17 January. Prosecutors had demanded for each of them an extra three year prison sentence, Jehovah's Witnesses noted.

Ivanov had been arrested in the court room on 23 July 2008 (together with Ahmedov) when Margilan Town Criminal Court in Fergana Region handed down a three and a half year sentence under Criminal Code Article 216 (see F18News 29 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1164).

Turaev was handed a four-year labour camp sentence on 25 April 2008 by Samarkand city Criminal Court for unregistered religious activity under Criminal Code Articles 216 and 229-2 (see F18News 29 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1122).

Ivanov's sentence was due to have expired on 23 January 2012, Turaev's on 25 April 2012. However, new cases were brought in February 2012 accusing them of violating the prison regime in Tashkent Region's Tavaksay Prison (see F18News 10 February 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1664).

After his release, Ivanov returned to his home in Margilan. Turaev returned to his wife and children in Samarkand. "They are feeling and doing well," their fellow Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Freed under amnesty, but with obligations

Several Muslims given long prison sentences to punish them for their religious activity have been freed early. At least two of them have had to speak publicly in support of the government's policy of restricting religious communities' activity under the guise of maintaining security.

Freed from prison was Muslim prisoner Hayotjon Joraboyev, according to a broadcast on Uzbek television's First Channel on 17 March. It said he was released as a result of the prisoner amnesty approved by the Senate, the Upper Chamber of Parliament, on 5 December 2011. The amnesty was enacted in the three months following its official adoption.

"My intention and the intention of those who repented like me is to serve this country," Joraboyev declared in the programme. "We will serve this country."

Joraboyev, a teacher of Islam, had fled to neighbouring Kyrgyzstan and had been registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee. However, in September 2008 he was kidnapped by the Kyrgyz National Security Service (NSS) secret police in the capital Bishkek and secretly handed over to the Uzbek authorities, according to the Central Asia programme of the Moscow-based Memorial human rights group. Joraboyev was tried in Tashkent and in February 2009 was given a 13 year prison term.

The three Nursi prisoners freed were Alisher Jumaev, Bobomurod Sanoev and Jamshid Ramazonov. It appears they were also released as part of a prisoner amnesty adopted in December 2011. At least one of them has been obliged to speak up publicly in favour of the government's policies on religion, Muslims who asked not to be identified told Forum 18.

The three had been serving sentences of five and a half years' imprisonment, handed down in Bukhara in April 2009. The six other readers of Said Nursi's works on trial with them were given sentences of between nine and six years' imprisonment (see F18News 29

April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1289).

Svetlana Ortykova, head of the Constitutional and Judicial/Legal Issues Committee of Parliament's Upper Chamber, told Radio Liberty's Uzbek Service on 21 March that 45,383 individuals had benefited from the amnesty. A total of 1,958 had been freed early from imprisonment, while the rest had had their sentences reduced or criminal cases dropped.

Forum 18 has been unable to establish whether other religious prisoners of conscience were freed or had their sentences reduced.

Government propaganda

Television, radio and websites are often used as part of government-run propaganda campaigns against religious communities. Also part of such campaigns are lectures to groups of workers or students (see eg. F18News 23 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1133).

On 30 May, Uzbekistan's Post Office organised a lecture for staff at their national headquarters, Tashkent branch and International Post Office in the capital on the theme "Missionary activity – the Path to Darkness", the Post Office website noted the following day.

During the lecture "video-materials prepared by Uzbekistan's National Television and Radio Company were shown, on the prevention of illegal activity conducted by the religious sect of Baptists/Evangelicals among the country's youth", the website said. Participants in discussion were said to have agreed that increased vigilance and protection against the "pernicious influence of various religious sects" is needed. (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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