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UZBEKISTAN: State-controlled media attacks continue

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

Uzbekistan's state-controlled mass media continues attacking named people exercising freedom of religion or belief, Forum 18 News Service notes. The victims are not given a right of reply and media staff evade answering question on the attacks. The authors of attacks have included a Judge who subsequently fined people he attacked. Asked whether this made the Judge prejudiced against one party in a case, his assistant replied: "Who are you to question the Judge's rights and what he can and cannot do?" Recent allegations against named people include "making zombies out of children", improperly associating with young girls, drug dealing, and that "a sudden death awaits every member of the [named religious community] who owns any kind of property and lives alone". Various religious believers commented to Forum 18 on the contradiction between state-controlled media making serious allegations of crime, and state agencies making no known investigations. Belief communities thought the purpose of media attacks was to publicly discredit them, and when full names and addresses are published to make people afraid of physical attack.

Uzbekistan's state controlled media continues its long-standing routine of attacking named people who exercise the right to freedom of religion or belief which the state has made solemn international obligations to implement, Forum 18 News Service notes.

Routine weapon against freedom of religion or belief

Media attacks are a routine and long-standing part of Uzbekistan's attacks on freedom of religion or belief and other human rights, relying on the state's attempts to control all of society combined with refusal to investigate the truth of allegations, give victims of attacks any right of reply, or implement any legally-enforceable defences against the state and its compliant media's behaviour.

The culture of impunity for officials and their collaborators so created is reinforced by the state's strict censorship of all sources of information, including all books and material touching on anything to do with freedom of religion or belief (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

A small sample of past media attacks on named people and religious communities includes accusations that religious communities are a problem similar to terrorism and drug addiction (see F18News 23 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1133); attacks on Muslim, Protestant and Jehovah's Witness parents and children attending places of worship (including media approval of bullying of children by teachers) (see F18News 12 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1239); alleged "brainwashing" by a Baha'i who was deported (see F18News 16 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1409); attacks on Baptists working at a children's summer camp (written with allegations from an NSS secret police informer) (see F18News 7 August 2011 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1600); and attacks on a Shia Muslim for sharing her beliefs (see F18News 16 December 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1907).

In the cases outlined below, Forum 18 has removed most of the names of the people attacked, as the state media has not given them the right of reply to the serious allegations made against them.

A fair judge?

The authors of media attacks are not only journalists. Judge Oltinbek Mansurov of Navoi [Navoiy] City Criminal Court on 26 August published an article in the Russian-language newspaper Znamya Druzhby (Banner of friendship), controlled by Navoi Regional Administration. In it the judge attacked two named married couples.

Ten days later, on 5 September, the Judge fined one of the couples he named, Artur and Irina Alpayev, 50 times and 40 times the minimum monthly salary respectively for having allegedly "illegal" religious literature. Judge Mansurov threatened the couple that "we will continue fining you unless you stop storing religious literature in your home." (see F18News 18 September 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1998).

Mansurov in his article calls Council of Churches Baptists (which do not seek state permission to exist) a "destructive sect", urging people to "be careful. Remember that often the activity of non-traditional religions is destructive. Do not come under the influence of

these religious movements. Protect the immature minds of your children from their influence." The article claims that Baptists meet for "illegal" worship in their private homes, "illegally" keep religious literature in their homes, and "cloud the minds of young people."

Judge Mansurov also gave the names and addresses of the people he attacked, and claimed they had been under surveillance by Navoi Regional Police since 2012. Close surveillance of people exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief is common (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

It is notable that Judge Mansurov totally ignores in his article the serious legal issues it raises, including his own duty as a judge to Uzbekistan's binding international legal obligations to implement and protect the rule of law and the human rights to a fair trial, to privacy, to freedom of expression, to freedom of association, and to freedom of religion or belief.

"The Judge has the right to do this"

Norbek Mirzayev, the Judge's Assistant who answered Mansurov's phone on 4 December, told Forum 18 that "the Judge has the right to do this" when asked why the Judge is forming a bad public image of the Baptists by writing such an article. Asked whether this did not make the Judge prejudiced against one party in a case he is trying, Mirzayev became agitated and replied: "Who are you to question the Judge's rights and what he can and cannot do?" Mirzayev then put the phone down.

Malika Buranova, Executive Secretary of Znamya Druzhby, did not answer when asked by Forum 18 on 3 December why the newspaper attacked people and did not provide a right of reply to unproven allegations. She claimed she could not reply as she is only responsible for the preparation of materials to be published. Asked who could answer these questions, Forum 18 was told "only the Chief Editor Kamola Adizova". Adizova's telephone was not answered on 3 December.

Abror Sultanov, Secretary of Gafur Musurmanov, Deputy Head of Navoi Regional Administration, on 4 December told Forum 18 that Musurmanov was unavailable to talk. When Forum 18 asked Sultanov why the Administration's newspaper and other state-controlled newspapers attacked people exercising freedom of religion or belief, he replied: "We cannot answer such questions, please talk to the central authorities in Tashkent." He then put the phone down.

Such newspaper articles "aim to form a distorted view of Baptists as lawbreakers and dangerous people", Artur Alpayev, one of those named in Judge Mansurov's article, told Forum 18 on 28 November. He noted that such articles had caused some but not all new believers to leave a church. However, the articles did not discourage other believers as "we are not afraid".

Many media attacks

Those attacked by name within the last two months have included Baptists both of the Council of Churches and of Baptist Union congregations, members of the Full Gospel Presbyterian Church and of the Yonsen – Eternal Life Church, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Recent attacks on named Muslims, Baha'is, Hare Krishna devotees or Jews may have taken place but are at present unknown. As well as central and regional administration newspapers, the media agencies used to stage the attacks have included 12news.uz, uzinform.com, noviyvek.uz, podrobno.uz, vesti.uz, and the Ozbekiston state television channel.

For example, on one day – 13 November – 12news published four different articles attacking named Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses for exercising freedom of religion or belief. The articles including allegations that named people were "making zombies out of children", improperly associating with young girls, and drug dealing. One article even states "a sudden death awaits every member of the [named religious community] who owns any kind of property and lives alone". The article also attributes any care for individuals to "the organisation's mercenary interests".

Did reported incidents happen?

Various religious believers in Uzbekistan commented to Forum 18 on the contradiction between the state-supported media making serious allegations of crime, and the state agencies making no known investigations into these crimes. The religious community named by 12news categorically denied any knowledge of both the people 12news named as being associated with them, and the incident 12news claimed to have taken place.

Why?

Like Znamya Druzhby, other media agencies have not answered questions on why they attack people exercising their freedom of religion or belief. A 12news employee who would not give his name refused to talk to Forum 18 on 4 December. He then claimed he could not hear the questions – even though Forum 18 could hear the 12news employee clearly. He then put the phone down.

Various religious communities separately told Forum 18 that they thought the purpose of such articles was to discredit them in the public eye, and discourage people from – as is their right in international law – deciding to follow a particular belief. In addition to such obstacles, sharing any belief with other people is a crime in Uzbekistan (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey

http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

When the state-backed media publish full names and addresses, religious communities thought the purpose was to make their members afraid of physical attack. Forum 18 was told of cases where people named in the state media have been badly beaten by some of their neighbours, and have even had to flee Uzbekistan for fear of their lives.

The state-backed media has not published any articles about state investigations into these crimes or punishments of the perpetrators.

Lost souls?

Another typical example of a recent media attack was carried by the Navoi Region Zarafshan newspaper Oltin Vodiy (Golden valley) on 18 October. It published an article entitled Lost souls where the author Mansur Khusanov attacked by name four local Protestants.

The article starts by discussing a film shown on the Ozbekiston TV channel in July, claiming to show what happened to a husband and wife who left Islam and became Christians. The wife dies in an accident, the elders of the mahalla (local residential district) do not allow her to be buried in any district cemetery, the dead body is not washed, an imam refuses to pray over the body, neighbours reject the family and do not come to the funeral meal, and the dead body of the "apostate" was buried in a remote and abandoned location.

Such tragic denials of the right to freedom of religion or belief affecting the dead and their families take place with the active collusion and participation of the authorities (see eg. F18News 25 April 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1951). Mahalla committees are a key part of the authorities mechanism of repression (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Oltin Vodiy then asks "are there really such people among us in our city?" It then claims that Zarafshan City Criminal Court answered this question, quoting a case in which two local Christians were fined on 16 August for "illegally" having one Christian book, a Russian-Hebrew Dictionary, and three private notebooks in their home (see F18News 18 September 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1998).

The article also quotes another case involving two different local Christians. The full names, years of birth and addresses of all those named are given, as well as the church attended and place of work of some of those named.

Protestants from Navoi Region, who know those involved and did not want to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 8 December that one of those named was fired from their job after the article was published. "It will now be hard for them to find employment," the Protestants commented.

"It's true we have freedom of religion"?

Oltin Vodiy claims: "It's true we have freedom of religion, everyone can choose their religion, but it does not mean that they can do anything they take into their head." Khusanov then asks: "Tell me now, can one store at home illegal literature, can religious organisations secretly distribute imported literature? Does this not violate the law?"

The article ends with a warning: "We must be cautious, and protect ourselves from unhealthy beliefs and misfortunes."

Asked why Oltin Vodiy attacked Protestants exercising their freedom of religion or belief, Deputy Chief Editor Zafar Ishkuvatov claimed to Forum 18 on 3 December: "All religions are free in Uzbekistan but perhaps they violated the Religion Law by illegally storing or distributing religious literature." Asked why the named people were not given a right of reply to the allegations, and were compared to an "apostate" who a film showed as being denied burial in a cemetery, Ishkuvatov did not answer. He paused for some seconds and then asked "Can we talk with you some time later?" When Forum 18 asked why he published named people's personal data and home addresses, he put the phone down. Subsequent calls to him went unanswered. (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=1862.

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.

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