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UZBEKISTAN: Police and Imam "forced family to bury deceased in cemetery where officers took them"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Fearing problems, a Jehovah's Witness family sought approval from the Religious Affairs Department to bury a deceased family member in a local cemetery in July. Yet police and the local Imam blocked the burial. Asked why he told them not to bury the deceased in the cemetery, Captain Ruslan Allanazarov told Forum 18 News Service: "Because it is Muslim." Police chose a cemetery for the burial 20 kms (12 miles) away and accompanied community members with cars. Officers and the Imam stood outside the family home to prevent people visiting to offer condolences. At a meeting of non-Muslim religious leaders in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent, officials proposed or ordered that ethnic Uzbek adherents of non-Muslim faiths should write a will before they die setting out their burial wishes (not required of people of non-Uzbek ethnicities, Muslims or atheists). A state religious affairs official complained about publicity over burial difficulties. "Relatives made so much noise about the cases that the state leaders, who strive for peace in the country, were disturbed," he told the meeting. One Protestant complained to Forum 18 of "pressure on Churches when they complain about burial problems publicly". After one complaint, the authorities "immediately demanded the central organ of the religious community that they make the local believers shut up".

Officials of Uzbekistan's central authorities and local Administrations refused to explain to Forum 18 News Service why the authorities on occasion obstruct burials of members of non-Muslim faiths according to their own rites. Officials sometimes deny access to the local cemetery and force communities to bury individuals in a distant cemetery or to allow burials only with rituals of another faith (often accompanied by a requirement by relatives to renounce the non-Muslim faith publicly).

Officials also refused to say whether cemeteries are open to anyone who dies or officially divided according to religious affiliation, or where members of non-Muslim religious communities can be buried under their own rites.

Some are concerned at an official proposal or order – put to non-Muslim religious leaders at a 4 November meeting in Tashkent – that ethnic Uzbek adherents of non-Muslim faiths should write a will before they die setting out their burial wishes. Officials do not seem to require this of people of non-Uzbek ethnicities, or of Muslims or atheists.

Non-Muslim communities which face burial problems are often highly reluctant to speak publicly of specific cases, preferring to try to resolve them quietly to avoid further conflict, Forum 18 notes.

In a July case in the north-western Karakalpakstan Autonomous Republic, police and the local Imam banned the burial of a Jehovah's Witness in a local cemetery and forced the family to bury the deceased in a cemetery police officers chose 20 kms (12 miles) away. Police – who installed a surveillance camera opposite the house - also warned that anyone who visited the family to offer condolences would be at risk of fines (see below).

Catholic and Hare Krishna leaders told Forum 18 that they have had to allow some of their deceased members to be buried with Muslim rites to avoid conflicts.

Imams and officials told Forum 18 that non-Muslim communities cannot bury their dead in "Muslim cemeteries". However, in Uzbekistan all cemeteries are state property (except those immediately surrounding places of worship) and there is no official division of cemeteries based on religious beliefs.

Officials exploit fear of shame and ostracism

In Central Asia, being buried with full dignity where ancestors are buried is an important part of local culture. Denying an individual that right can lead to a family suffering shame and ostracism in village society. Uzbek officials often exploit this to put pressure on non-Muslim religious communities (see F18News 25 April 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1951).

In 2014 an Uzbek newspaper and Ozbekiston State TV Channel attacked an ethnic Uzbek husband and wife who became Christians. When the wife dies in an accident, elders of the mahalla (local residential district) did not allow her to be buried in any district

cemetery, the dead body was not washed, an imam refused to pray over her body, neighbours rejected the family and did not come to the funeral meal, and the dead body of the "apostate" was buried in a remote and abandoned location, the media said (see F18News 8 December 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2022).

Officials in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan have similarly failed to prevent obstructions to the burial of members of non-Muslim religious communities according to their own rites (see Forum 18's Kyrgyzstan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2013).

Officials also refused to discuss tight new restrictions on participation by foreigners in religious community activities and their religious literature issued to non-Muslim leaders of registered religious communities at the 4 November Tashkent meeting (see below).

Bekzod Kadyrov, Chief Expert of the State Religious Affairs Committee who addressed the 4 November meeting, refused to discuss anything with Forum 18 on 3 December. "Please send all those questions in writing." He then put the phone down.

Neighbours prevented from attending funeral

One recent case of official interference in and obstruction of the burial of a member of a non-Muslim religious community known to Forum 18 took place in Karakalpakstan.

On 28 July, Police Captain Ruslan Allanazarov and Officer Ondasyn Demegenov of Takhiotosh Town Police, and local Imam Tajimurat Orazov in Khodjeli District, "disrupted the funeral ceremony" of a deceased Jehovah's Witness in Takhiotosh.

Later the same day, police cars accompanied the family and local Jehovah's Witnesses gathered for the funeral to the cemetery chosen by the Police and Imam Orazov. There they buried the deceased. "They forced the family to bury the deceased in a cemetery where officers took them," Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18.

The cemetery where the family was forced to bury the deceased was in Takhiotosh District, 20 kms (12 miles) from their home.

Refusal to allow the family to bury the deceased in the town cemetery came despite the family providing Captain Allanazarov with a letter from Karakalpakstan's Religious Affairs Department confirming that it "had no objection to the funeral arrangements". The family, apparently fearing burial obstruction, had approached the Department in an attempt to prevent problems.

The telephone of Nurullo Zhamolov and his colleagues at Karakalpakstan's Religious Affairs Department went unanswered when Forum 18 called on 4 and 7 December.

On being presented with the Department's letter, Allanazarov had insisted to the Jehovah's Witnesses that they "cannot bury their dead in the Muslim cemetery."

The police Officer, Imam and members of the mahalla committee (local administration) also stood outside the house of the deceased, preventing neighbours from entering to offer condolences. "The neighbours observed that a camera was installed across the street from the house," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "Officers told them that anyone found entering the house would later be fined eight times the minimum monthly wage."

"Our believers experienced great stress over the burial," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18, "because they were not prepared to take the body away from Takhiotosh, the grave was not prepared in that place."

Jehovah's Witnesses cannot bury their dead in local cemetery "because it is Muslim"

Asked on 25 November why he and other officials disrupted the Jehovah's Witness burial ceremony and forced them to bury the deceased not in the cemetery where they wished, but in another cemetery some distance away, Captain Allanazarov avoided the question. "Who gave you my number?" he asked Forum 18.

Asked why he told the Jehovah's Witnesses not to bury their dead in the local cemetery, Captain Allanazarov retorted: "Because it is Muslim." He then said that he could not talk to Forum 18 and put the phone down. Subsequent calls to him on the same day went unanswered.

Lieutenant-Colonel Kudrat Ismoilov, Chief of Takhiotosh Town Police, adamantly denied that his Officers Allanazarov and Demegenov disrupted the funeral or that a camera was installed to monitor who was attending the funeral. "Nothing like that happened," he insisted to Forum 18 on 25 November. Asked why then Police officers went to the Jehovah's Witnesses' home on 28 July, he replied: "They just went there to check up, to see what was happening."

Told that the neighbours had informed the Jehovah's Witness family of the installation of the camera and that they were warned that

anyone entering their yard would be fined, Lieutenant-Colonel Ismoilov did not answer. "I cannot discuss this with you over the phone," he said. "Please, come to talk to us at the Police Station." He then declined to talk further to Forum 18.

Asked who had asked him to interfere in the funeral of a member of a different faith, Imam Orazov told Forum 18 on 25 November: "No one called me there - the Takhiotosh Police took me there." Asked why he and the police told the Jehovah's Witnesses they cannot bury their dead in the local cemetery, he insisted: "According to Muslim tradition, unbelievers like Jehovah's Witnesses cannot be buried in the same cemetery with Muslims."

Told that during Soviet times many people were buried in the one cemetery - including atheist relatives of local Muslims - and asked why Jehovah's Witnesses cannot be buried alongside their relatives, Imam Orazov did not answer. He also would not say whether cemeteries in Uzbekistan are divided into Muslim and non-Muslim. He then did not wish to discuss the case further with Forum 18.

Rafaddin Omyrzakov, Chief Imam of Takhiotosh, also did not wish to discuss the case. All he would tell Forum 18 on 25 November was that the Jehovah's Witness was buried in the "common cemetery in Takhiotosh District, where anyone can be buried".

Shovkat Shamratov, Assistant of Orazbay Yengibayev, Head of Khodjeli District Administration, on 4 December declined to tell Forum 18 why the local Police and Imam disrupted the Jehovah's Witness burial, and where non-Muslim communities in the District can bury their dead. He wrote down Forum 18's questions, and asked to wait on the line while he asked Yengibayev for a response. Minutes later he asked Forum 18's details and put the phone down. Subsequent calls to Shamratov on the same day went unanswered.

Similarly refusing to discuss burial problems with Forum 18 on 4 December were officials (who would not give their names) of the Administration of Nukus, the capital of Karakalpakstan.

"Even Russian Orthodox Church did not allow" burial of Protestant

In another case, after the local Imam had blocked burial in the local cemetery of a Protestant in a location away from Tashkent, relatives of the deceased had asked the Orthodox Church to be allowed to use their cemetery. "But even the Russian Orthodox Church did not allow the burial of the Protestant in the Orthodox cemetery when they found out that he was a Protestant," a Protestant from Tashkent recounted to Forum 18.

The Protestant lamented that after this incident, some ethnic Uzbek Church members, in order to be able to go ahead with the burial, "under pressure publicly renounced their faith and declared that they accept Islam". The burial of the Protestant took place with Muslim rites.

Told that the Orthodox Church at least once refused to bury a Protestant in their cemetery, and asked whether Protestants or Jehovah's Witnesses can be buried in an Orthodox cemetery, Father Sergi Alakhtayev of the Russian Orthodox diocese in Tashkent responded: "Perhaps the Protestants misunderstood our priest. We do not mind other Christians being buried in our cemetery, but our priests cannot conduct the burial rituals for them since they are not Orthodox." He said that Protestants can perform their own rituals when burying their dead in an Orthodox cemetery.

Presidential Administration, Cabinet of Ministers refuse to comment

Officials of the Presidential Administration, who would not give their names, also refused to discuss burial problems on 3 December or put Forum 18 through to the Presidential Advisor on ethnic and religious minorities.

Officials at the Cabinet of Ministers on 3 December referred Forum 18 to Lyudmila Nazarova, Inspector of the Legal Expertise Department. But she declined to answer any questions. "You should call the Religious Affairs Committee," Nazarova told Forum 18 on 3 December. Told that Committee officials refused to discuss burial difficulties, she responded: "Please, send your questions in writing." She declined to talk to Forum 18 further.

Ilyas Akhmedov of the International Department of the Muslim Board told Forum 18 on 3 December that cemeteries are divided into Muslim and Christian.

In the capital Tashkent, Shukhrat Turdikulov, Deputy Head of the City Administration with responsibility for religious affairs, also refused to discuss burial difficulties with Forum 18 on 4 December. As soon as he heard the questions, he put the phone down.

Asked with whom it could discuss burial difficulties, the assistant (who did not give his name) of Rakhmanbek Usmanov, Head of the Administration, referred Forum 18 on 4 December to Firuza Khodjaliyeva, the Official responsible for public relations.

Khodjaliyeva told Forum 18 on 4 December that cemeteries are "divided in Uzbekistan into Muslim, Russian Orthodox and Jewish." Asked in which cemetery other religious minorities such as Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses can bury their dead in the capital, and whether the division according to religious affiliation is based on the Law she could not say. "Ask our religious affairs officials,"

was all she would say. Told that neither City Administration nor Religious Affairs Committee officials are prepared to discuss the issue, she told Forum 18: "I cannot do anything."

State leaders "disturbed" by burial conflicts over ethnic Uzbek non-Muslims

The State Religious Affairs Committee summoned leaders of the officially registered non-Muslim religious communities to a 4 November meeting at the Justice Ministry in Tashkent. Religious Affairs and Justice Ministry officials wanted to discuss with them the issue of burial of their ethnic Uzbek members, those with knowledge of the meeting told Forum 18.

Officials also informed the religious leaders of tighter procedures for inviting foreign citizens to participate in their communities' activity and for foreign citizens or international organisations to import religious materials into Uzbekistan.

Kodyrov, Chief Specialist of the Religious Affairs Committee, who led the meeting, warned the religious leaders that state leaders "are disturbed about the burials of ethnic Uzbeks from Muslim background who joined other faiths," Protestants, informed about the meeting and who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 18 November. "Conflicts take place between relatives of the deceased and local administrations since local Imams refuse to conduct the Muslim burial ceremony for such persons," Kodyrov noted at the meeting.

Kodyrov spoke of three such burial conflicts in 2014, one in Karakalpakstan and two in Tashkent Region. "Relatives made so much noise about the cases that the state leaders, who strive for peace in the country, were disturbed," he complained.

The three cases Kodyrov cited appear to be those investigated by Forum 18 in 2014 (see F18News 25 April 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1951).

Kodyrov "instructed the religious leaders that they must arrange in advance" that ethnic Uzbek members of their communities "write a will indicating where they want to be buried".

"Authorities are stepping up pressure on ethnic Uzbeks who are Christians"

Igor Zakirov, Chair of the Hare Krishna Community, who attended the meeting, told Forum 18 on 26 November that the officials' idea that individuals should sign a will setting out their burial wishes was a "recommendation". He said that it was discussed in the meeting "whether the will should be notarised or not".

However, representatives of another religious community told officials that "once they tried to arrange such a will for their member, the Notary Office told them that they do not legalise such a document," and that the "Law must be amended for such provision."

Asked by Forum 18 on 25 November whether such a will was suggested by the officials as a recommendation or an obligation for ethnic Uzbeks, Bishop Jerzy Maculewicz of the Roman Catholic Church in Tashkent, who participated in the meeting, responded: "I did not quite understand. It was decided in the meeting that the issue would be further analysed and worked on."

Kodyrov told the meeting that more information on the issue would be published on the State Committee's website, Bishop Maculewicz added. (As of 7 December, the State Committee website contains no information on burial issues.)

A Protestant Pastor familiar with the meeting, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 25 November that "with the new initiative the authorities are stepping up pressure on ethnic Uzbeks who are Christians or would like to become one". He pointed to a recent case when an ethnic Uzbek man was prepared to join his Church. "Local officials warned him that if he joins our Church, no one will bury him, and he will be buried in a place of unbelievers. He then just stopped coming to our meetings."

One Protestant from Tashkent, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 1 December that "We do not understand" whether the authorities are using this to put pressure on ethnic Uzbek Christians or are genuinely interested in solving the problem.

The Protestant elaborated that the authorities "put pressure on Churches when they complain about burial problems publicly". The Protestant pointed to one case in Karakalpakstan in 2014 when local believers talked to the foreign media. "The authorities immediately demanded the central organ of the religious community that they make the local believers shut up," the Protestant noted. "Then they buried the deceased quietly as directed by the local authorities."

The Protestant said that the "impression is that the authorities deliberately create problems over burials to provoke the believers, so that they can then accuse them of religious extremism." By such cases the "authorities want to show the majority of Uzbeks the consequences if they decide to become Christians. It is definitely a powerful tool of pressure on ethnic Uzbek Protestants."

"Who will write such a will?"

Some point to fears of consequences for those who write such a will setting out their burial wishes. "Who will write such a will?" a Protestant from Karakalpakstan asked Forum 18 on 1 December. "I personally will not write one. What must we write there - that I am Christian and that I want to be buried as a Muslim? Many believers do not want to tell the State who they are and how they want to be buried."

By contrast, Father Alakhtayev, responsible for public relations at the Russian Orthodox Diocese in Tashkent, said that the Orthodox "have no problems" with burials. "Our members do not need to write wills since we know who they are," he told Forum 18 on 4 December.

Zakirov of the Hare Krishna Community elaborated that "I do not think we need to arrange such wills for our members. We as a community have had no problems so far with burials since we allow our believers to be buried in a Muslim or Christian way, based on who their relatives are. So far no problems have arisen with local cemeteries or relatives."

Echoing Zakirov, Bishop Maculewicz told Forum 18 that the "Catholics do not need such will as we have not had problems with burials." He explained that "not many Uzbeks have become Catholics." He gave one recent example: "A Catholic woman who lived in one of the regions, who was married to an Uzbek Muslim, was buried in the local cemetery according to Muslim tradition, and we gave our consent to that."

What possible solutions?

Speaking on the possible solutions of the problem, the Tashkent Protestant told Forum 18 that the "Churches think that one possible solution is that their local communities buy their own land plots for burials." However, "often the problem arises where communities do not have official registration because the authorities refuse to give it."

While all Muslim communities are required to be part of the state-backed Muslim Board before they can get the compulsory state registration, officials often block communities of many other faiths from gaining registration or strip state registration from them (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Despite saying that his community has not had problems over burials, Zakirov of the Hare Krishna community admitted to Forum 18 that "We need to have our own cemetery, and do not have one. Soon we will ask the authorities for a plot of land where we can bury our dead, since we have a number of elderly people."

The Protestant from Karakalpakstan told Forum 18 that "even if such a thing as the will is possible, I don't think that the burial problems will be solved." Asked what solutions might be possible, the Protestant observed: "I don't see that the authorities want to solve the problem. So we try to solve the problems on our own. In 2015 we buried some deceased believers, in each case having to search for cemeteries where we could bury them."

State must be informed of each participation of a foreign citizen

During the 4 November meeting at the Justice Ministry, Kodyrov of the Religious Affairs Committee also warned religious community leaders that they must inform the local State Administrations and gain permission one month before any foreign citizen participates in any event of a religious organisation. He itemised the information that must be submitted over each proposed event:

- title, contents (agenda), purpose and form of the activity;
- data of the foreigner who will participate in the event;
- place and exact date of the event, as well as what time it will begin and end;
- information of sponsorship of the event;
- copies (samples) of religious materials which will be used in the event.

The information must include the foreigner's full name, citizenship, full date and place of birth, place of work and occupation, copy of the passport and programme of their stay in Uzbekistan.

Kodyrov also warned the religious leaders that foreigners or international religious organisations which plan to import religious materials to be used in the activities of religious organisations must inform Justice Departments at least one month prior to the proposed use of such imported materials. Such materials can be imported only after written permission is obtained. The application to a Justice Department must include:

- rough draft of the print, audio-visual and other materials;

- samples of the religious materials prepared abroad;
- title, contents and purpose of the materials;
- information on the persons who prepare the materials (full name, citizenship, full date and place of birth, place of work and occupation);
- where, when and with whom the materials will be shared;
- information on the sources of finances for the materials.

Kodyrov told the religious leaders in the meeting that during the authorised activity, religious communities must give free access to Justice Department officials for monitoring. They must allow officials to freely watch the activity so that they can assess whether the materials and activity are in accordance with Uzbekistan's Law and the organisation's charter.

At the end of the meeting, Justice Ministry officials gave each religious leader a copy of the Statute on "Order of authorisation of activities of non-governmental organisations."

"This is done to keep us under very strict control"

"In the past the authorities only asked us to inform them when foreign guests would attend meetings," one Protestant from Tashkent, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 30 November. "But now they demand that we ask for permission for their participation in an event. This is done to keep us under very strict control."

The Protestant told Forum 18 that "I heard that the authorities unofficially warned the Churches that if they catch any Church member sharing their beliefs - especially with those from a non-Christian background - they will punish not only the member but also their pastor. And if it happens repeatedly they will arrest both the believer and their pastor." (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 is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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