

17 February 2016

UZBEKISTAN: Prisoner of conscience "saying his last goodbye to his sisters"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

When the sisters of Muslim prisoner of conscience Khayrullo Tursunov visited him in labour camp in late 2015 "he sounded like he was saying his last goodbye to his sisters because he thought the end of his life is coming", relatives outside Uzbekistan told Forum 18 News Service. "Khayrullo was either tortured in prison or is in deep depression, his sisters did not know the exact reasons." Other prisoners of conscience punished for exercising their freedom of religion or belief – including the Muslims Zoirjon Mirzayev and Tajik citizen Zuboyd Mirzorakhimov – have given up hope of amnesty and seem set to serve out their terms, their relatives told Forum 18. Prison officials told Baptist prisoner of conscience Tohar Haydarov he will not be freed on parole this year as he had hoped. "Tohar's personal Bible was taken away from him about a year ago and he is trying to recite Bible verses from memory," a fellow Baptist told Forum 18. The Deputy Head of the Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments – which has responsibility for Uzbekistan's prisons – refused to discuss the situation of these prisoners of conscience with Forum 18.

Amid failing health, Muslim prisoner of conscience Khayrullo Tursunov appeared to be "saying his last goodbye" when his sisters visited him in labour camp in late 2015, believing the end of his life might be close, his relatives told Forum 18 News Service. Relatives of Tajik citizen Zuboyd Mirzorakhimov, imprisoned for having the Koran and Muslim sermons on his phone as he transited through Uzbekistan, told Forum 18 their hope of amnesty for him is gone and that he is likely to have to serve out his full five-year sentence. And friends of Baptist prisoner of conscience Tohar Haydarov say prison officials have told him he will not be freed on parole this year as he had hoped.

In January, the authorities handed down an extra prison term to a Sunni Muslim prisoner of conscience from Bukhara, Kamol Odilov, just days before he completed his six-year sentence. They claim he had got into a fight. Another Sunni Muslim prisoner of conscience from Bukhara, Botir Tukhtamurodov, was given an extra three-year prison term in 2015 after he completed his six-year prison term. The two were among more than 100 Muslims imprisoned for meeting to study the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi (see F18News 16 February 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2148).

No one at the Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments – which has responsibility for prisons – would discuss the situation of any of the prisoners of conscience punished for exercising freedom of religion or belief. Abdulaziz (who did not give his last name), who presented himself as Deputy Head of the Chief Directorate, told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 16 February that he cannot discuss anything over the phone, and asked Forum 18 to send its questions in writing.

Tursunov "saying his last goodbye to his sisters"

Relatives outside Uzbekistan of 40-year-old Muslim prisoner of conscience Tursunov have expressed renewed concern about his health following a visit to him in labour camp by his sisters in late 2015. Tursunov's sisters had brought medicines at his request to help his digestion.

Kazakhstan illegally extradited Tursunov to Uzbekistan in March 2013 (see F18News 1 May 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1829). He was sentenced to 16 years in jail in June 2013 for exercising his freedom of religion or belief. Tursunov was subsequently exposed by the authorities to the potentially fatal disease of tuberculosis (see F18News 5 November 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1893).

"Khayrullo was either tortured in prison or is in deep depression, his sisters did not know the exact reasons," Tursunov's relatives outside Uzbekistan told Forum 18 on 15 February. "But he sounded like he was saying his last goodbye to his sisters because he thought the end of his life is coming."

"Some people who were visiting others in the prison the same day tried to give Khayrullo and his sisters moral support," Tursunov's relatives outside Uzbekistan told Forum 18. "The sisters are asking individuals or organisations interested in human rights to give material support for Tursunov in the prison."

Tursunov's prison address:

Uzbekistan

Bukhara Region

Korovulbazar sh.

Uchr. UYa-64/25

Tursunov Khayrullo Turdiyevich

"He will have to serve out the rest of his sentence"

Zuboyd Mirzorakhimov, a Tajik citizen arrested in Uzbekistan in September 2013 for carrying the Koran and Muslim sermons on his mobile phone, is "still in prison, despite the hopes we had for his amnesty this January," his relatives told Forum 18 from the Tajik capital Dushanbe on 15 February. "His wife and mother visited him in prison, and Zuboyd told them he is fine, but it looks like he will have to serve out the rest of his sentence."

Prisoner of conscience Mirzorakhimov – who marked his 40th birthday on 23 January - was sentenced in Tashkent in October 2013 to five years' imprisonment in a general regime labour camp under Criminal Code Article 246, Part 1 ("Smuggling, that is carriage through the customs border .. without the knowledge of or with concealment from customs control .. materials that propagandise religious extremism, separatism, and fundamentalism").

Tashkent Regional Criminal Court rejected his appeal in November 2013. Repeated hopes that Mirzorakhimov would be included in a prisoner amnesty have been dashed (see F18News 8 July 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1975).

Also imprisoned for sermons in mobile phone

The authorities often detain local citizens – as well as foreign citizens like Mirzorakhimov who are transiting through Uzbekistan - if customs officers discover religious material on their mobile phones or other electronic devices (see F18News 25 March 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1942).

One such local citizen imprisoned for having Muslim sermons on his mobile phone is Zoirjon Mirzayev, originally from Fergana. He marked his 29th birthday in prison in Karshi on 2 February.

Mirzayev was arrested at a Tashkent Region train station on returning from Russia to his native Uzbekistan, after customs officials found 29 sermon recordings. In April 2014 he was given a five-year prison term (see F18News 2 May 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1954).

Mirzayev's relatives told Bahodiyr Eliboyev, a human rights defender from Fergana, in January 2016 that Mirzayev is still serving his term in Karshi prison, and that there have been no changes in his case, Eliboyev told Forum 18 on 17 February. "Now we are waiting until he serves out his term," the relatives told Eliboyev. No information was given on his health or prison circumstances.

Mirzayev's prison address:

Uzbekistan

Kashkadarya Region

g. Karshi

otryad 12

UYa 64/61

Mirzayev Zoirjon Zokirovich

Prisoner told parole "will not happen"

The only known current non-Muslim prisoner of conscience imprisoned to punish him for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief is 33-year-old Council of Churches Baptist Tohar Haydarov, an Uzbek-born ethnic Azeri. He was given a 10-year sentence in Gulistan in March 2010 on alleged drugs charges, which his fellow church members insist were fabricated. The Supreme Court

has rejected appeals against the conviction and sentence (see F18News 2 August 2011 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1600).

"We can only visit Tohar now for short meetings for two hours since his mother, who was able in the past to make 24 hour visits to him in the prison, passed away," Haydarov's fellow Baptist Gleb Serin told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 15 February. Haydarov's only other close relative, his sister, is also currently away from Uzbekistan. "Only his close relatives are allowed to make overnight visits, but we can visit him for short meetings when we talk to him by phone and can see each other through the thick glass. He seems to be fine physically, though very thin."

Haydarov hoped to be released on parole in mid-2016, since the Law allows that, Serin told Forum 18. "But the prison authorities told him without explanation that it will not happen." Serin added that "Many times in the past we asked the Supreme Court for a new examination of the case, but received responses that the Courts made the right decisions in the case."

The Baptists last visited Haydarov on 5 January. "At the moment the drinking water in the prison seems to be salty. Tohar is asking to bring him drinking water, but we can only pass food or drinks to him six times a year, with a limit of two kilos each time," Serin said. The next visit to Haydarov is scheduled in April, he added.

No Bible, few letters passed on

"Tohar's personal Bible was taken away from him about a year ago and he is trying to recite Bible verses from memory," Serin told Forum 18. "He also cannot find the Bible our Church gave to the prison library. Although he doesn't have the Bible, he feels like God is next to him in prison."

All prisoners in Uzbekistan have long been denied their right to freedom of religion or belief – for example to pray visibly, to have religious literature, or to receive visits from clergy. Prison and labour camp conditions are harsh, and even the communities regarded as the main "traditional" faiths – the state-controlled Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church – have had only limited access to prisoners, with those of other faiths having stated to Forum 18 that they have almost no access. Prisoners are often punished for religious activity in jails or labour camps, but officials have in the past insisted to Forum 18 that prisoners' religious freedom is respected (see F18News 7 May 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1832).

The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (as adopted unanimously by the UN General Assembly in revised form on 17 December 2015 and known as the Mandela Rules, A/C.3/70/L.3) require governments to respect the religious freedom and other human rights of prisoners.

"So far as practicable, every prisoner shall be allowed to satisfy the needs of his or her religious life by attending the services provided in the prison and having in his or her possession the books of religious observance and instruction of his or her denomination", Rule 66 notes.

Rule 65 of the Standard Minimum Rules requires prisons to allow communal religious observance led by a "qualified representative" of that faith and private visits to prisoners by such representatives at individual prisoners' request.

Haydarov told his fellow Baptists that he knows many people from around the world write him letters. "However, Tohar is given only a handful of them, especially those that do not contain the word God," Serin told Forum 18. "The prison authorities promise him that when he leaves the prison he will be given all the letters. He thanks all those praying for him and thinking about him."

Haydarov's prison address:

Uzbekistan

Kashkadarya Region

g. Karshi

pos. Shaikh-Ali

otryad 13

UYa 64/49

Haydarov Tohar Sariyevich

"Optimistic but not sure" of sisters' release

Two Muslim sisters from Karshi, 46-year-old Mehriniso Hamdamova and her 55-year-old sister Zulhumor Hamdamova, were both arrested on 5 November 2009 to punish them for exercising their freedom of religion or belief. They are serving long prison terms handed down in April 2010 – Mehriniso Hamdamova received a seven-year prison term and Zulhumor Hamdamova a six and a half year prison term (see F18News 26 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1436).

Both sisters have been held in the same labour camp in Tashkent Region, where their health has long caused concern (see F18News 24 March 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1941).

The Hamdamova sisters' relatives told Forum 18 on 15 February that they last visited them in prison on 25 January.

Mehriniso Hamdamova had a minor swelling with pus surgically removed from the back of her head in the prison in late 2015, her relatives told Forum 18. She still has a myoma, a tumour associated with uterine cancer which can be painful and is normally treated by being removed. However, she feels that because she is taking medicines, her myoma did not deteriorate.

Zulhumor Hamdamova is still suffering from goitre, an abnormal swelling that causes a lump to form in the throat, in some cases affecting breathing and swallowing. However, she is taking medicines for this in prison.

The prison authorities told the women's relatives verbally that Mehriniso Hamdamova's sentence was reduced by six months at the request of relatives and that both sisters may be released in late April or early May. "We are optimistic but not sure, since we did not receive anything in writing on any reduction to Mehriniso's sentence," they told Forum 18. "We also know sometimes prisoners were given extra sentences while already in prison."

Zulhumor Hamdamova is due to be released in early May and Mehriniso Hamdamova in November, according to the original sentences they received.

"We are thankful for all the prayers and good wishes for Mehriniso and Zulhumor as well as our family," relatives told Forum 18.

The Hamdamova sisters' prison address:

Uzbekistan

Tashkent Region

Zangiota tumani

Uchr. 64/1

Hamdamova Mehriniso Imomovna

or

Hamdamova Zulhumor Imomovna (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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