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CRIMEA: Prisoner sent to Russia, more awaiting trial

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Arrested in 2017, sentenced in January 2019, Muslim prisoner of conscience Renat Suleimanov has lost all his appeals. In May he was transferred from occupied Crimea to a labour camp in Russia, where he was placed in punishment cell. A court transferred Imam Rustem Abilev to house arrest as he awaits trial. Russian FSB officers raided Jehovah's Witnesses in Yevpatoriya and Sevastopol, bringing another criminal case.

In May, the Russian authorities transferred 49-year-old Muslim prisoner of conscience Renat Suleimanov from occupied Crimea to a labour camp in Russia. After his eventual arrival at the camp in Kabardino-Balkariya, the camp administration placed him in a punishment cell. Suleimanov, who on 11 July lost his second appeal against his four-year jail term, is planning an appeal to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

The 1949 Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War covers the rights of civilians in territories occupied by another state (https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.33_GC-IV-EN.pdf) (described as "protected persons"). Article 76 includes the provision: "Protected persons accused of offences shall be detained in the occupied country, and if convicted they shall serve their sentences therein."

Suleimanov – who has been in jail since his October 2017 arrest - met with friends to study his faith in local mosques. Prosecutors accused him of being a member of the Tabligh Jamaat Muslim missionary movement, which Russia's Supreme Court has banned as an "extremist" organisation (see below).

Meanwhile, a court in Sevastopol has extended the pre-trial detention of 45-year-old Imam Rustem Abilev, but transferred him from Investigation Prison to house arrest. Arrested by the Russian FSB security service on 15 April, he is being investigated on charges of "public calls for extremist activity". "Local residents and activists say Rustem Abilev cannot have called for extremism," a Radio Free Europe journalist told Forum 18 in April (see below).

Russia's FSB security service is also seeking to prosecute Crimean Jehovah's Witnesses, a community Russia's Supreme Court has also banned as an "extremist" organisation.

FSB officers raided Jehovah's Witnesses meeting in a home in Yevpatoriya on 13 July. Officers singled out for interrogation Oleg Osetsky, questioning him all night at the police station although he felt unwell (see below).

On 4 June, Russian FSB investigators launched a criminal case against Sevastopol resident Viktor Stashevsky, accusing him of Jehovah's Witness activity. That evening, the FSB raided at least nine homes, with a further follow-up raid on 7 July (see below).

The FSB Investigator handling Stashevsky's case - Lieutenant Aleksandr Chumakin – is also conducting the criminal investigation into fellow Crimean Jehovah's Witness Sergei Filatov, launched in November 2018. Lieutenant Chumakin has repeatedly refused to talk to Forum 18 (see below).

Earlier in 2019, Suleimanov and Filatov were added to the Russian Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists", whose accounts banks are obliged to freeze, apart from small transactions. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215) Investigators had Abilev and Stashevsky added on 11 July (see below).

Annexation, restrictions imposed

Ukraine and the international community do not recognise Russia's March 2014 annexation of Crimea. The peninsula is now divided between two Russian federal regions, the Republic of Crimea (with its capital in Simferopol) and the port city of Sevastopol.

After the annexation Russia imposed its restrictions on freedom of religion and belief. Many religious communities have been raided, and many individuals have been fined for possessing books – such as the Muslim prayer collection "Fortress of a Muslim" - which have been banned as "extremist" in Russia. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2051)

Russia's Supreme Court banned the Tabligh Jamaat Muslim missionary movement in 2009. The ban was extended to Crimea following Russia's 2014 annexation of the peninsula.

Russia's Supreme Court banned Jehovah's Witnesses in April 2017. It declared the Jehovah's Witness Russian headquarters in St Petersburg and all 395 local organisations "extremist", banned all their activity immediately, and ordered their property seized by the state. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2274) The ban was immediately imposed in Russian-occupied Crimea, where 22 communities were liquidated.

Religious communities and individuals in Crimea continue to be fined for not displaying the full name of their registered religious organisation at their place of worship, for meeting for worship without Russian state permission or advertising their faith. Forty such administrative prosecutions are known to have been brought in 2018 of which 28 ended with punishment. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2441)

Suleimanov: Moscow appeals fail, preparing Strasbourg case

Prisoner of conscience Renat Rustemovich Suleimanov (born 30 August 1969) was arrested in October 2017, accused of membership of the Tabligh Jamaat Muslim missionary movement, which Russia's Supreme Court banned in 2009. The ban was extended to Crimea following Russia's 2014 annexation of the peninsula.

Suleimanov, a Crimean Tatar, was born in exile in Kazakhstan's then capital Almaty. When the Crimean Tatars were allowed to return to Crimea, he settled in the village of Molodezhnoe just north of Crimea's capital Simferopol. He is married with three teenage daughters.

Suleimanov and three friends met openly in mosques to discuss their faith. "At lessons we studied ayats [verses] from the Koran, the value of praying the namaz, and the zikr [reciting devotional phrases as a reminder of Allah]," one of the men told the court at their trial. "These lessons were not conspiratorial and took place in mosques."

Fifteen months after his arrest, Crimea's Supreme Court in Simferopol finally convicted Suleimanov and the three other men on 22 January 2019. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2444)

All four were sentenced under Russian Criminal Code Article 282.2. This punishes organisation of or involvement in "the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity".

The Judge jailed Suleimanov for four years in an ordinary regime labour camp, followed by one year under restrictions. He handed the other three men suspended sentences, with one year under restrictions.

Suleimanov appealed for the first time against his conviction and four-year jail term to Russia's Supreme Court in Moscow. But in a closed hearing on 16 April, the Court rejected his appeal. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2470)

On 21 June, Suleimanov lodged a second appeal to Russia's Supreme Court. However, on 11 July without a hearing the Court declined to consider his appeal, according to court records.

Suleimanov's lawyer Roman Martynovskyy and his colleagues at the Regional Centre for Human Rights, originally based in Sevastopol but now in the Ukrainian capital Kiev, are preparing his case to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, he told Forum 18 from Kiev on 26 July.

Suleimanov: Transferred to Russian jail

On 18 May, prison officials began the transfer of Suleimanov from the Investigation Prison in the Crimean capital Simferopol to serve his sentence at a labour camp in the village of Kamenka near Kabardino-Balkariya's regional capital Nalchik in the Russian North Caucasus. Sometimes such transfers can take a month or longer.

Kamenka is about 950 kms (590 miles) by road from Simferopol.

Once arrived at the Kamenka camp Suleimanov was, like all newly-arrived prisoners, placed in quarantine, which usually lasts about two weeks. However in early July, immediately after the quarantine period, camp officials placed him in a punishment cell, his lawyer Martynovskyy told Forum 18.

An official at the Kamenka camp, who did not give his name, refused to discuss Suleimanov's conditions. "I won't give you any information on why he was put in the punishment cell," the official told Forum 18 on 26 July. "I don't have the right to do so." He said Forum 18 should send a letter to the camp head, Salikh Gurizhev.

"At present I am asking the camp administration why Suleimanov has been placed in a punishment cell, as they can do this only after a disciplinary warning," the lawyer Aleksandr Lesovoi – who represented Suleimanov in his earlier hearings - told Forum 18 from Simferopol on 24 July. "After getting a response from the camp administration, if there is a basis to do so I will challenge the decision to place Suleimanov in a punishment cell."

Forum 18 was unable to ask the camp official whether Suleimanov is allowed to have religious literature with him and to pray unimpeded. His lawyer Martynovskyy said he does not know if Suleimanov can exercise freedom of religion or belief in the camp or not.

Suleimanov's labour camp address:

361424 Kabardino-Balkariya

Chegemsky raion

Pos. Kamenka

Ul. D.A. Mizieva 1

Ispravitel'naya Koloniya No. 1

Suleimanovu Renatu Rustemovichu

Abilev: Pre-trial detention changed to house arrest

The Russian FSB security service continues to investigate the criminal case against Rustem Enverovich Abilev (born 18 May 1984), Imam of the Khayat (Life) mosque in the village of Shturmoev on the eastern edge of the city of Sevastopol.

On 5 June, Judge Anatoly Vasilenko of Sevastopol's Lenin District Court approved Imam Abilev's continued detention, but ordered his transfer from the Investigation Prison in the Crimean capital Simferopol to house arrest, court officials told Forum 18 on 25 July. Investigation Prison officials told Forum 18 he was released from the prison on 7 June.

The FSB investigator Yuri Andreyev is investigating Imam Abilev under Russian Criminal Code Article 280, Part 1. This punishes "public calls for extremist activity" with a maximum punishment of four years' imprisonment and a ban on specific activity for the same period.

"Local residents and activists say Rustem Abilev cannot have called for extremism," Radio Free Europe journalist Taras Ibragimov told Forum 18 in April. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2470) "They insist he is not an extremist and don't believe the FSB allegations."

The telephone of the FSB Investigation Department in Sevastopol went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 25 July.

FSB officers arrested Imam Abilev on 15 April as armed, masked men, most of them in camouflage with FSB insignia, raided Khayat mosque and his nearby home. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2470) Officers seized religious literature, hand-written notes and documents, computers and mobile phones. One masked man copied files from a laptop computer.

The following day, 16 April, Lenin District Court ordered Imam Abilev held in pre-trial detention for eight weeks, until 11 June. His lawyer Lenyara Gabdrakhmanova appealed against the pre-trial detention order to Sevastopol City Court. However, Judge Danil Zemlyukov rejected the appeal on 26 April, according to court records.

At the Investigator's instigation, on 11 July Abilev was added to the Russian Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists", whose accounts banks are obliged to freeze, apart from small transactions. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215)

Imam Abilev earned his living as head of the dentistry department at Sevastopol's City Hospital No. 6. However, following his arrest the hospital removed his name from its website.

Following his 15 April arrest, the FSB held Imam Abilev for several days in Sevastopol before transferring him to the Investigation Prison in Simferopol. He was held there until being transferred to house arrest on 7 June.

Yevpatoriya: Raid on Jehovah's Witnesses

On the evening of 13 July, a group of friends and acquaintances gathered in a local woman's home in the western Crimean city of Yevpatoriya. Russian FSB security service officers surrounded the entrance to the stairwell of the block of flats. FSB officers then stormed the woman's flat, Jehovah's Witnesses noted.

FSB officers interrogated those present, filming the interrogations. They also recorded the personal details of those present, seizing personal documents, discs and any printed material they had.

FSB officers singled out 57-year-old Oleg Osetsky. "As a result of the interrogation, he began to feel unwell," Jehovah's Witnesses said, "but despite this they took him to the police station and questioned him all night until six o'clock in the morning." They then released him.

FSB officers admitted to Osetsky during the interrogation that they had been keeping him under surveillance for some time. It remains unclear if FSB investigators have launched a criminal case against Osetsky.

Forum 18 was unable to reach the FSB branch in Yevpatoriya on 25 July.

Sevastopol: Criminal Case, 9 raids

In late May or early June, a Jehovah's Witness family in Sevastopol began suspecting that officials were using their internet connection to spy on them covertly. They changed their internet connection.

On 4 June, Russian FSB investigators launched a criminal case against Sevastopol resident Viktor Vladimirovich Stashevsky (born 11 July 1966), a member of the former Sevastopol Jehovah's Witness community. The community gained Russian registration in May 2015, but was among the 22 Jehovah's Witness communities across the peninsula liquidated on 17 May 2017.

The liquidations of the 22 Crimean Jehovah's Witness communities came less than four weeks after Russia's Supreme Court in Moscow in April 2017 declared the Jehovah's Witness Russian headquarters in St Petersburg and all 395 local organisations "extremist", banned all their activity immediately, and ordered their property seized by the state. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2274)

Russian FSB officials are investigating Stashevsky under Russian Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1. This punishes "Organisation of the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity". The maximum punishment is ten years' imprisonment.

That evening, FSB security service officers raided at least nine local homes. The house searches were approved in advance by Judge Anatoly Vasilenko of Sevastopol's Lenin District Court. "In at least one case, officers forced their way into a flat in the absence of the owners, rendering the door unusable," Jehovah's Witnesses complained. "Searches continued until deep in the night." Officers seized computers, computer hard discs, phones and tablet computers.

During the raid on the family which had changed their internet connection, a masked man billed as a "technical specialist" accompanied the raiding team, Jehovah's Witnesses said.

In one of the raids, FSB and Spetsnaz operatives detained Stashevsky and held him overnight in an investigation cell, Jehovah's Witnesses added. After making him sign a pledge not to leave the city they released him in the morning of 5 June.

That same morning after the raids, FSB Investigator Lieutenant Aleksandr Chumakin summoned for interrogation those whose homes the FSB had raided.

Lieutenant Chumakin, of the Investigation Department of the Russian FSB for Crimea and Sevastopol, is based in the Crimean capital Simferopol. He is also leading the criminal investigation into another Crimean Jehovah's Witness, Sergei Filatov from the northern Crimean town of Dzhankoi (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2466) (see below).

At Lieutenant Chumakin's instigation, on 11 July Stashevsky was added to the Russian Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists", whose accounts banks are obliged to freeze, apart from small transactions. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215)

The man who answered Lieutenant Chumakin's phone on 25 July immediately hung up when Forum 18 introduced itself.

FSB officers made a further raid in Sevastopol a month after the initial raids. In the early morning of 7 July, officers raided the home of Vladimir Petrovsky, Jehovah's Witnesses said.

Criminal investigations of three Jehovah's Witnesses continue

The criminal case opened against Viktor Stashevsky is the third known Jehovah's Witness criminal case in the peninsula. The FSB is still investigating two other cases, against three individuals. None of the three is under arrest.

On 10 November 2018, the FSB launched a case against Sergei Filatov from the northern Crimean town of Dzhankoi. Five days later, the FSB and OMON riot police launched coordinated raids on eight Jehovah's Witness family homes (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2432). He has had to sign a pledge not to leave the town.

On 17 January 2019, Filatov was added to the Russian Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists", whose accounts banks are obliged to freeze, apart from small transactions. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215)

On 15 March 2019, the FSB launched a case against Artyom Gerasimov and Taras Kuzio from the southern Crimean town of Yalta. Five days later, officers raided eight Jehovah's Witness family homes in and around Yalta. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2466)

Like Stashevsky, all three men are being investigated under Russian Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1. This punishes "Organisation of the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity". The maximum punishment is ten years' imprisonment. (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Crimea
(<http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=86>)

For more background, see Forum 18's Crimea religious freedom survey (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2051)

Forum 18's reports and analyses on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia within its internationally-recognised territory (<http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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