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UZBEKISTAN: Will Nukus Medical Institute respect religious freedom or not?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

A Nukus medicine lecturer, Alima Urazova, has searched the accommodation of female Protestant students, confiscated Christian literature, and forced the students to move to university accommodation so as to monitor their religious activities. Referring to the Christian literature, Urazova told the students that "It would be better for you to work as prostitutes than to read those dreadful books." The university rector, Oral Ataniyazova, has admitted to Forum 18 News Service that Urazova had no right to do this, and has claimed that students' religious freedom will in future be respected. But before claiming that religious freedom would be respected, Ataniyazova alleged that the students were exploiting their faith to avoid being expelled, telling Forum 18 that "Protestant students have understood that they have the support of western organisations and have begun to take advantage of this." This is not the first attack on Protestants at the university, and attacks on religious freedom continue elsewhere in Uzbekistan.

In the wake of Forum 18 News Service's investigation into continuing pressure on Protestant students at the Nukus branch of the Tashkent Paediatric Medical Institute, in the Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] autonomous republic in north-western Uzbekistan, the university rector Oral Ataniyazova admitted to Forum 18 that a teacher had no right to search the lodgings of a group of female Protestant students and force them to move from their private lodgings to a hall of residence, where their religious activity could be more closely supervised. She also pledged that teachers would not restrict the students' freedom of religion any more.

A Protestant who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 on 25 May that Alima Urazova, a teacher at the university, organised the search of the private apartment that the students Shirin Artykbayeva, Maksuda Bekniyazova, Zukhra Muriyeva and Aliya Sherimbetova had rented. Urazova confiscated Christian literature they owned and made them leave the apartment and move to a students' hall of residence, warning them they would be watched there to ensure they did not read Protestant literature. "It would be better for you to work as prostitutes than to read those dreadful books," Urazova reportedly told them.

It is not the first time that Protestant students have faced pressure at the medical university. On 1 April the city prosecutor wrote to Ataniyazova as rector to inform her that final year student Iklas Aldungarov was taking part in "an illegal religious sect", the Church of Christ, and asking for him to be removed from the university by 10 April. Ataniyazova told Forum 18 she had rejected such pressure, but at the same time claimed that Aldungarov was a very poor student (see F18News 21 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=303) Following Forum 18's coverage of the case, the pressure on Aldungarov ceased completely, a Protestant source told Forum 18.

However, speaking to Forum 18 on 26 May, Ataniyazova initially adopted a sharper tone than she had previously. She claimed that the young women had been moved to the hall of residence at the request of their parents unhappy that their children were preaching Christianity. Ataniyazova effectively admitted that the students had been searched. "It is true that during the young women's move, their teacher found that they had Protestant literature, even though the students had denied earlier that they were preaching Christianity."

When Forum 18 commented that students, like all Uzbek citizens, have the right to freedom of religion and that the teachers had no right to restrict this, Ataniyazova responded: "The young women's parents asked us to exert influence on them. This is not Europe, and parents do interfere in their children's affairs right into old age." She claimed that the young women are very poor students and that "their parents have persuaded us that this is related to their unexpected involvement with Christianity".

Ataniyazova alleged that the Protestant students were exploiting their faith. "Protestant students have understood that they have the support of western organisations and have begun to take advantage of this. For example, although most of them are very unsatisfactory students, we are afraid to exclude them because they claim straight away that they are suffering because of their religious beliefs!" But she then issued the pledge to respect their freedom to worship as they choose.

These are the latest incidents in the ongoing anti-Protestant crackdown being carried out by the authorities in Karakalpakstan (see F18News 30 April)

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=310).

Pressure on Protestants also continues in other parts of Uzbekistan (see F18News 4 March http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=267). On 23 April, the Yaksarai district court in Tashkent sentenced 10 Protestants to fines of 5,440 soms each (approximately 37 Norwegian Kroner, 5 Euros or 5 US Dollars) under Article 240 of the code of administrative offences, which punishes violations of the law on religious organisations. The police had earlier caught the Protestants holding a religious meeting in a private apartment.

On 13 May, ordinary police and National Security Service secret police burst into a private home where six Protestants were meeting in the village of Gagarino, close to the Afghan border in the southern Surkhandarya region. They seized the Protestants' Christian literature and warned them they would soon be fined under Article 240 of the code of administrative offences.

Uzbekistan, like Turkmenistan and Belarus, specifically outlaws unregistered religious activity, in defiance of international human rights agreements.

For more background, see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>

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