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UZBEKISTAN: Punished for signing a failed registration application

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

On 1 June a court in the western town of Navoi found Jehovah's Witness Tatyana Briguntsova guilty of membership of an unregistered religious organisation, solely because she put herself down as a founding member of the community in a failed registration application some years ago. She told Forum 18 News Service that police had never recorded her as attending an unregistered meeting. As unregistered religious activity is illegal in Uzbekistan, in defiance of international agreements, this precedent means that any believer who signs a religious community's registration application that is then rejected could lay themselves open to punishment.

In the first instance of its kind in Uzbekistan, a citizen has been found guilty of an administrative offence simply for belonging to an unregistered religious community. Tatyana Briguntsova, a member of a Jehovah's Witness community in the western town of Navoi whose application for state registration was rejected, was found guilty solely for having listed herself several years ago as a founding member on the registration application, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. As unregistered religious activity is illegal in Uzbekistan, in defiance of international agreements the country has signed, this precedent could mean that any believer who puts their name to a community's registration application that is then rejected could lay themselves open to punishment.

On 1 June, the Navoi town criminal court, presided over by Judge Rakhulo Khudoiberdiyeva, found Briguntsova guilty under Article 240 of the code of administrative offences, which punishes breaking the law on religious organisations. In passing sentence, the court took into account the fact that Briguntsova is a pensioner and a second-grade invalid, and so restricted itself to issuing a warning.

Uzbekistan's law on religion and Article 240 of the administrative code forbid the activity of unregistered religious organisations. Believers of a variety of faiths are often fined after police have found them attending a religious meeting or preaching in public, but this is the first time a citizen has been held to administrative account simply for their religious beliefs.

Judge Khudoiberdiyeva refused to discuss the case with Forum 18. "Briguntsova is a member of an unregistered religious organisation and that is against Uzbekistan's laws," she told Forum 18 on 10 June from Navoi. "I am not going to say anything more to you - I don't have time to talk to you."

"The most interesting thing is that the law enforcement agencies have not once recorded my presence at a religious meeting," Briguntsova told Forum 18 on 10 June from Navoi. "I can infer from this that the court realised I was a Jehovah's Witness because my name was on a list of founding members seeking registration of a Jehovah's Witness community which was submitted to the local justice ministry several years ago. We were refused registration, but evidently they decided to keep the list of Jehovah's Witnesses 'until better times'."

Briguntsova maintains that Judge Khudoiberdiyeva initially wanted to fine her ten times the minimum monthly wage, equivalent to 54,400 sums (367 Norwegian kroner, 44 Euros or 53 US dollars), but when she realised the accused was a pensioner and disabled, she decided to limit herself to a warning.

"Although Briguntsova was not fined, she has nevertheless been held to account under Uzbek law," Andrei Shirobokov, spokesperson for the Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan, told Forum 18 on 10 June in the capital Tashkent. "This will effectively be a stain on her record for the rest of her life."

In addition to Briguntsova, three other Jehovah's Witnesses have been prosecuted under the administrative code in Navoi. Zuhra Khabirova, Azimjon Klichev and Nuriya Fakhriddinova were all fined after police found religious literature during searches. The court fined Khabirova and Klichev ten times the minimum monthly wage (equivalent to 54,400 sums) under Article 241 of the administrative code, which punishes "breaking the law on teaching religious doctrine", while Fakhriddinova was fined twice the minimum wage (10,800 sums) under Article 240. The average wage in Navoi is less than 30 US dollars per month, and to the three Jehovah's Witnesses the fines represent a large sum of money.

Shirobokov reports that the secret police, the National Security Service, have recently started to deploy a new tactic in their campaign against Jehovah's Witnesses. "My neighbours told me in strict confidence that not long ago some people from the NSS came to ask them about me and ended the conversation by telling them, as if in passing, that I was a member of a 'dreadful sect'." He said NSS officers made similar visits to the neighbours of other Jehovah's Witnesses.

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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