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UZBEKISTAN: Jehovah's Witnesses pledge to combat police beatings

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Jehovah's Witnesses are to step up their attempts to end what they claim are regular police beatings of their members in Uzbekistan. In the latest incident, Tulkun Khankeldiyev and Oleg Zagibin were detained on 17 June for "illegal" street preaching in the town of Uchkuduk. Jehovah's Witnesses claim they were severely beaten at the police station before being fined. "The police acted very craftily. They beat our brothers so as to cause severe pain, but in such a way as to leave no bruises on their bodies," Jehovah's Witness spokesman Andrei Shirobokov told Forum 18 News Service. Uchkuduk's deputy police chief denied this absolutely, but insisted to Forum 18 the police were right to detain them.

In the wake of what they claim was the severe beating meted out by police to two of their members detained in the north-western town of Uchkuduk, Uzbekistan's Jehovah's Witnesses insist they will take action to try to stop such police beatings. "We don't intend to let the police beat our brothers with impunity - we are going to give this the widest possible publicity," Jehovah's Witness spokesman Andrei Shirobokov told Forum 18 News Service in the capital Tashkent. "Besides, this is far from being the first time." The two, Tulkun Khankeldiyev and Oleg Zagibin, were detained on 17 June and later fined for "illegal" preaching. But the deputy district police chief denied point blank they had been beaten. "No-one beat Khankeldiyev or Zagibin," Abdurgam Khakimov told Forum 18 from Uchkuduk on 18 June. "Our lads may have got a bit angry and spoken to the believers in raised voices. But there are no scars or bruises on them."

After Khankeldiyev and Zagibin were detained by police in Uchkuduk they were taken to the police station. There officers confiscated their religious literature and identity documents, and severely beat the two, Shirobokov claimed. "The police acted very craftily. They beat our brothers so as to cause severe pain, but in such a way as to leave no bruises on their bodies," he told Forum 18. When the Jehovah's Witnesses came to retrieve their identity documents the following day, they were detained for a further five hours at the police station and questioned about their activities in Uchkuduk.

Khakimov insisted to Forum 18 that the police were right to detain the two. "Zagibin and Khankeldiyev were preaching on the town's streets, which is forbidden under our law." He pointed out that the Jehovah's Witnesses are registered in the town of Fergana in eastern Uzbekistan and Chirchik, a suburb of Tashkent, but not in "our town". He said the two would be fined. "We'll confine ourselves to that, and I appeal to you not to sensationalise this incident."

Forum 18 has learned that on 21 June the Uchkuduk district court fined Zagibin and Khankeldiyev the minimum monthly wage - 5,540 sums (37 Norwegian kroner, 4 Euros or 5 US dollars) under Article 240 of the code of administrative offences, which punishes unregistered religious activity. The average local wage is less than 30 US dollars per month. "We will definitely lodge an appeal," Shirobokov commented on the court's decision.

Of all Uzbekistan's religious minorities, the Jehovah's Witnesses most frequently suffer harassment from the authorities, primarily because they engage most actively in street preaching. The religion law forbids proselytising and the authorities are particularly hostile towards the promotion of religions that are non-traditional in Uzbekistan.

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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