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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

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UZBEKISTAN: Headscarf ban continuing

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

A devout Muslim, Nigora Jalilova, is the latest woman to be pressurised by local authorities in Karshi (Qarshi) to stop wearing the hijab, the Islamic headscarf, in public, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The mahalla committee's secretary for women's affairs, Mukarram Kurbanova, questioned Jalilova closely about her religious beliefs and when she became a Muslim, but claims that "I didn't order her, I simply recommended her to dress in a more modern style." This claim is disputed, and pressure on women who wear the hijab continues in Karshi and elsewhere.

Devout Muslim Nigora Jalilova is the latest victim of pressure on Muslim women by mahalla (district) committees in the southern Uzbek town of Karshi (Qarshi) not to wear the hijab, the Islamic headscarf, in public, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Jalilova, who lives in the town's Nasaf mahalla, was summoned on 30 September to the mahalla committee (the local administrative body).

The mahalla committee's secretary for women's affairs, Mukarram Kurbanova, began to question her about her religious beliefs, local human rights activist Tulkin Karayev told Forum 18 News Service from Karshi on 6 October. Kurbanova was particularly interested in when she became a practising Muslim and who taught her religion. Kurbanova specifically asked Jalilova when she began wearing the hijab and who taught her to do this. In concluding their conversation Kurbanova told Jalilova that she should stop wearing the hijab so that people would not take her for a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir or a Wahhabi.

Hizb ut-Tahir, an international Islamic organisation which is banned in Uzbekistan, seeks, amongst other things, to unite Muslims throughout the world into a single caliphate (see F18News 29 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170). Wahhabis are, strictly speaking, followers of the purist brand of Sunni Islam followed in Saudi Arabia, but the term is widely and inaccurately used in Central Asia to describe not just supporters of the salafiya (pure Islam) movement but also Muslims who do not attend mosques controlled by the government, as well as by Uzbek officials to describe Jehovah's Witnesses (see F18News 8 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=358).

Mahallas are the smallest administrative unit in Uzbekistan. (See F18News 20 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=58 for explanation of the role of mahallas). Mahalla officials are used by the police in actions against religious believers (see 16 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=395).

Challenged by Karayev about the case on 5 October, Kurbanova denied that she had demanded that Jalilova should not wear the hijab. "I didn't order her, I simply recommended her to dress in a more modern style," she insisted to Karayev. This is not the first case of women being pressured in Karshi for wearing the hijab. In August the administration in the town's Lagman mahalla forbade two local women, Gavkhar Sharipova and Dirofruz Baikhanova, from wearing the hijab in public and pressure has continued since then on all women who wear the hijab (see F18News 30 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=402).

In August the head of the secretariat for social and economic affairs of Karshi town administration, Abdurakhman Erkayev, admitted that the town administration had instructed the mahalla committees to conduct educational work among local people, though he denied that the authorities had ever tried to dictate how people should dress (see F18News 30 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=402).

Karayev disputes his claims not to have tried to pressure local people. "The town administration really did give the mahalla committees a secret instruction to try to convince women not to wear the hijab," he told Forum 18 from Karshi. "On the other hand, as a rule the mahalla committee chairmen don't try to pressurise woman as hard as in the Lagman and Nasaf mahallas. However, after the April terrorist incidents many women have complained to me that wearing the hijab in public is being perceived as a kind of challenge to the policy of the authorities."

After the March and April terrorist incidents the authorities in other regions of Uzbekistan also began to put pressure on women wearing the hijab. There were similar cases in Tashkent and also in Pskent, a town near Almalyk (Olmaliq) about 100 kilometres (62 miles) east of Tashkent, where police detained 25 women for more than 24 hours for wearing the hijab (see F18News 13 April 2004

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http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=298).

For more background information see Forum 18's Uzbekistan 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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