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UZBEKISTAN: Five days in prison, then pressured to renounce his faith

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Freed with a fellow Jehovah's Witness at the end of February after five days in prison on charges of "disruptive behaviour", Oleg Umarov was again summoned by police in the Uzbek capital Tashkent on 4 March. Two secret police officers then pressured him to renounce his faith, Jehovah's Witness spokesman Andrei Shirobokov told Forum 18 News Service. They warned they would soon seize other Jehovah's Witnesses and pointed out to Umarov articles of the criminal and administrative codes under which they could be prosecuted. Police and secret police officers have a history of trying to pressure Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and believers of other minority faiths who come from a traditionally Muslim background to convert to their "historic" faith.

On 4 March, just days after completing a five-day prison sentence with a fellow-Jehovah's Witness on charges the community insists were fabricated, Oleg Umarov was again summoned to the local police station in the Yunusabad district of the Uzbek capital Tashkent. There, two secret police officers pressured him to renounce his faith, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Jehovah's Witness spokesman Andrei Shirobokov told Forum 18 on 6 March from Tashkent that he believes the two were arrested and sentenced and Umarov subsequently pressured to renounce his faith in a bid to frighten fellow Jehovah's Witnesses in this district of the city.

Begzot Kadyrov, chief specialist at the government's committee for religious affairs, told Forum 18 from Tashkent he was "not aware" of the detention and sentencing of the two Jehovah's Witnesses or the secret police pressure on Umarov to renounce his faith. "If they appeal to us, we will sort it out," he declared.

Trouble began for Umarov and fellow-Jehovah's Witness Dmitri Plashchev, both from Tashkent, on 23 February, when they were detained by police outside their home, Shirobokov reported. The two men were taken to the Yunusabad district police station, where they were beaten up and then thrown into a cell. The following day the two were sentenced to five days' imprisonment under Article 183 of the code of administrative offences, which punishes "disruptive behaviour". "Our brothers were accused of apparently approaching women in public while drunk, but that's pure fabrication," Shirobokov told Forum 18. "Remarkably, there wasn't even a lawyer in court."

He said the men's parents have appealed against the sentences to the public prosecutor's office, but have so far had no response.

Then, on 4 March, the divisional inspector summoned Umarov to his office, "supposedly for questioning", Shirobokov told Forum 18. Fearing for his safety, Umarov brought his parents when he came to see the inspector. Present were two national security officers, one of whom presented his identity card in the name of senior national security lieutenant Lapshev. Shirobokov reported that the two secret police officers tried to force Umarov to sign a statement written under dictation that he was renouncing his religious beliefs. The officers also said they would soon seize other Jehovah's Witnesses and pointed out to Umarov articles of the criminal and administrative codes under which they could be prosecuted.

The secret police officers also tried to turn Umarov's father against his son, calling on his Muslim background. "This clearly shows that the arrest of the two Jehovah's Witnesses for disruptive behaviour was pure fabrication," Shirobokov insisted. "Interestingly, the two national security officers who spoke to Umarov did not try to hide the fact that both the arrest and the court case were engineered by their organisation."

Police and secret police officers in Uzbekistan have a history of trying to pressure Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and believers of other minority faiths who come from a traditionally Muslim background to convert to their "historic" faith.

For 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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