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UZBEKISTAN: Court confirms all Protestants banned in north-west

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

The last legal Protestant church in north-western Uzbekistan has had its appeal against a regional Justice Ministry ban turned down in court, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. All Protestant activities in north-west Uzbekistan are now banned after a Nukus court rejected the Emmanuel Full Gospel Church's appeal. Separately, another example of official condoning of kangaroo courts staged by local residents against Muslim-born converts to other faiths has come to light. An Uzbek Protestant, who preferred to be anonymous, told Forum 18 of the case of Daniyara Ibaidulayev, a Protestant convert who was on 29 June beaten up by his brother and another villager, who cut his lips with a knife, telling him he must return to Islam. The district public prosecutor's office told Ibaidulayev that "his problems would cease as soon as he returned to Islam". Also, a Hare Krishna devotee has been threatened with losing her job as a schoolteacher, if she does not stop sharing her beliefs.

Members of the last legal Protestant church in the autonomous Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] republic in north-western Uzbekistan have failed in their last-ditch attempt to fight off an official ban on their activities, Protestant sources have told Forum 18 News Service. On 5 July, the economic court in the regional capital Nukus rejected the Emmanuel Full Gospel Church's appeal against the Karakalpakstan Justice Ministry's decision to close it down. As the Karakalpakstan Justice Ministry closed down several other Protestant organisations after a revised religion law was adopted in 1998 and it is illegal for unregistered religious communities to hold worship services or other religious activities, all Protestant activities in Karakalpakstan are now banned (see F18News 2 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=575).

Nurula Jamolov, an official of Karakalpakstan's regional state Religious Affairs Committee, insisted that the decision to close down the Nukus-based church was perfectly legal. "Cases have come to light where Christians from this church have promoted their views outside the premises occupied by the religious organisation," he told Forum 18 on 7 July. "This is not allowed under Uzbek law."

Protestant sources have insisted to Forum 18 that the Justice Ministry has acted outside Uzbek law. The reason the ministry gave for the Emmanuel Church's closure was a general meeting of church members held in a private house in Kungrad, 200 kilometres (125 miles) north of Nukus. However, even though church members claim this meeting did not break any law, police suddenly burst into the house and started to photograph the church members, then took everyone present by bus to a police station where they were told to make written statements. The following day a court fined the church members for holding what the court claimed was an illegal religious meeting.

This is the latest development in a long-running anti-Protestant campaign by the Karakalpakstan authorities, which have also been encouraging kangaroo courts staged by local residents against Muslim-born converts to other faiths. An Uzbek Protestant, who preferred not to be named, told Forum 18 on 5 July of one recent example, the case of Daniyara Ibaidulayev, a Protestant convert from Yanboshkala village in Tartkul district, on the outskirts of Nukus. On 29 June he was beaten up by his brother and another villager, who cut his lips with a knife, telling him he must return to Islam. Additionally, the Yanboshkala village administration cut off Ibaidulayev's gas supply and forbade him to use water for growing food on his own plot of land. Ibaidulayev appealed in vain for help from the authorities, but the public prosecutor's office for Tartkul district told Ibaidulayev that "his problems would cease as soon as he returned to Islam".

Christians in Tartkul district have previously come under pressure from such kangaroo courts condoned by the authorities. Another Protestant from Yanboshkala, Khaldibek Primbetov, was beaten up several times by villagers, who told him to return to Islam or leave Yanboshkala. The Karakalpakstan procuracy investigator told Primbetov that he had "betrayed" the faith of his ancestors and threatened to imprison him after he refused to withdraw his complaint (see F18News 11 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=557).

The public prosecutor for Tartkul district, Rustam Atajanov told Forum 18 on 7 July that "we did send an investigator to Yanboshkala, but he did not threaten local Christians. He just investigated Primbetov's complaint. The events cited by Primbetov have not been confirmed. I don't know anything about what happened to Ibaidulayev."

The chief specialist at the central state Religious Affairs Committee, Begzot Kadyrov, denied that anyone was putting pressure on Muslims who converted to other faiths. "Our laws do outlaw proselytism – actions intended to turn believers from one faith to

another," he told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 8 July. "But if a person changes his faith in spite of this, then that is his personal business and no-one has the right to stop him." He said that "unfortunately" his committee knows nothing about the cases of Primbetov or Ibaidulayev as they had not appealed to it. "If they were to write a statement for our committee, we would certainly look into this case and would not permit the persecution of Primbetov or other Christians in the village."

Hare Krishna devotees are also facing pressure in Karakalpakstan. Khaitbai Yakubov, a human rights activist from Khiva, told Forum 18 in Tashkent on 5 July that on 16 June, the procuracy, the National Security Service secret police and the ordinary police searched an apartment belonging to a Hare Krishna devotee and local schoolteacher Asa Bekabayeva in Bostan, a town on the outskirts of Nukus. Ninety Hare Krishna books were confiscated from her. Galyb Kadyrov, an assistant to the public prosecutor for Bostan, threatened Bekabayeva that she would be sacked from her school if she did not stop promoting the beliefs of the Hare Krishna movement. Reached by Forum 18 on 7 July, Galyb Kadyrov totally refused to tell Forum 18 why Bekabayeva had been threatened.

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all faiths as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=546

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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