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UZBEKISTAN: Repression continues in Andijan uprising's aftermath

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Following the Andijan uprising, the unjustified deportation of Forum 18 News Service's Central Asia Correspondent suggests that Tashkent may have, along with an ongoing crackdown on the independent media, tightened its repressive religion policy. One human rights activist told Forum 18 that "the authorities are persecuting Muslims just as much as they did before the events in Andijan." This is denied by the state Religious Affairs Committee. After the uprising, Muslims from throughout the country told Forum 18 that the situation was worsening. Protestants from a number of churches and Jehovah's Witnesses agree with this assessment. Catholic, Orthodox and Hare Krishna representatives have told Forum 18 that they had not noticed any change since the Andijan events. Protestants in north-west Uzbekistan – whose activities in the region are banned – are under great pressure, as are Hare Krishna devotees in that region.

Following the Andijan uprising, the unjustified deportation of Forum 18 News Service's Central Asia Correspondent from Uzbekistan suggests that Tashkent may have, along with its ongoing crackdown on the independent media, also continued to tighten its repressive religion policy (see F18News 16 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=631). Forum 18 has therefore investigated the current situation of religious believers in Uzbekistan.

In the aftermath of the Andijan uprising, Forum 18 learnt of worsening repression across the country against devout peaceful Muslims, the majority religious community (see F18News 15 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=585). However, Surat Ikramov, an independent human rights activist, told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 23 August that "in general, the authorities are persecuting Muslims just as much as they did before the events in Andijan." Ikramov noted though that "we have recorded some harsher treatment of believers in prison."

Begzot Kadyrov, chief specialist of the Uzbek government's Religious Affairs Committee, categorically denied that religious policy had been tightened since the events in Andijan. "On the contrary, we have been even more considerate towards the needs of Muslims," he told Forum 18 on 23 August. "Today, for example, the number of mosques being allowed to open has risen significantly compared to the period before the events in Andijan," he said.

Protestants from a number of churches have told Forum 18 that they have noticed a tightening up of policy since Andijan. "The authorities have started to keep a more careful eye on our meetings since the events in Andijan. They are tracking our activities more intently than before," Pavel Peichev, head of the Baptist Union of Uzbekistan, told Forum 18 on 23 August.

Members of the Full Gospel Church in the capital Tashkent have frequently faced questions about their church's activities. One member of the congregation was even held for over a month in jail by police. In this instance, the police made that person write a statement saying that they were only detained for three days, the longest length of time someone can legally be detained without being accused of a crime.

Tatyana Nazhafova, assistant to the lawyer for the Full Gospel Church, told Forum 18 on 23 August from Tashkent that "just a few days ago, the police telephoned the pastor of our Uzbek church and warned him that he and other members of the congregation would soon be called in for questioning about the murdered American. Pressure on us has intensified since the Andijan events. The authorities have used the tragic death of an American Protestant woman in Tashkent as a pretext for questioning believers" (see F18News 14 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=606). "That's just the way the authorities are putting pressure on us."

Members of another church in the capital, Bethany Protestant Church, have recently been imprisoned and fined, in an ongoing campaign that the authorities have conducted against the church, which has repeatedly tried to register with the authorities (see F18News 17 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=588). Protestants involved in charitable work have also attracted hostile attention from the authorities, the main reason for the harassment seeming to be that they are Protestant (see F18News 19 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=610).

Representatives of the Catholic, Orthodox and Hare Krishna communities, who spoke to Forum 18 on 23 August, said that they had not noticed any change in religious policy since the Andijan events.

The situation of Jehovah's Witnesses continues to be bad. Andrei Shirobokov, a spokesman for the Jehovah's Witnesses, told Forum 18 on 24 August that "after the Andijan events a number of criminal cases were brought against our believers almost simultaneously. That clearly demonstrates that the authorities have tightened up their policy," Andrei Shirobokov told Forum 18.

On 10 August 2005 a Jehovah's Witness from the town of Prigovor, in the central region of Navoi [Nawoiy], was found guilty at the Navbokhor district court of committing a crime under Article 229 (2) (breaking the law on teaching religious beliefs) of the Criminal Code. He was sentenced to a fine of 50,000 Som (286 Norwegian Kroner, 36 Euros, or 44 US Dollars), Shirobokov told Forum 18.

A criminal case is also currently under way, in the southern town of Karshi [Qarshi], against Feruza Mamatova and Bakhrom Pulatov, who are accused of operating an unregistered religious organisation under Article 216 (2) of the Criminal Code. It is unusual for this article to be used against religious minorities, but previous victims have included both Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostal Christians (see F18News 10 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=626). Mamatova and Pulatov are specifically accused, as members of the Jehovah's Witnesses, of attending a religious meeting on 26 January 2005 and of talking to Uzbek citizens – with their agreement - about religious matters in May and June 2005. Attempting to convert someone to another faith is illegal in Uzbekistan.

Under article 216 (2), repeat offences for illegal religious activity are punishable by a fine of between fifty and hundred times the minimum monthly wage, detention for up to six months or imprisonment for up to three years. Both Pulatov and Mamatova have already been fined for their religious activity, the fines being imposed two days after widespread raids on Jehovah's Witness meetings across Uzbekistan (see F18News 1 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=536).

Unreasonable conditions for the registration of congregations and hence the legal right to meet for worship continue to be imposed on Jehovah's Witnesses. "Both in Navoi and Karshi, the Jehovah's Witnesses are being accused of operating an unregistered religious organisation. But it's effectively impossible to register the Navoi and Karshi Jehovah's Witness communities because each organisation has fewer than the 100 members required for registration," Shirobokov lamented to Forum 18 (see F18News 10 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=626).

Shirobokov also reported that, on 5 August 2005, seven law enforcement officials made an unauthorised search of an apartment belonging to a Tashkent Jehovah's Witness, Nadezhda Miryaeva. The officials seized all of Miryaeva's Jehovah's Witness literature, which is the usual official practice (see F18News 12 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=604).

In the aftermath of the uprising, the authorities have also continued their normal harsh repression of Protestants in Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] in north-west Uzbekistan, where all Protestant activities have been banned. Hare Krishna devotees are also under pressure in this region (see F18News 11 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=602), as well as the usual intensive attempts to hunt down and destroy religious literature (see F18News 12 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=604).

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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

For an outline of the repression immediately following the Andijan uprising, see F18News 23 May http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567 and for an outline of what is known about Akramia and the uprising see 16 June http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586

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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