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UZBEKISTAN: "Believers are not even allowed to visit each other"

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Members of the Full Gospel Church in Jizak, at an informal meal to celebrate the harvest festival last Tuesday (25 October), had their meal broken up the ordinary police, the National Security Service (NSS) secret police and officials from the Public Prosecutor's office, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "I think the actions of the law enforcement officers in Jizak were a gross infringement of the law," Iskander Najafov, the church's lawyer, told Forum 18. "It turns out that believers are not even allowed to visit each other." Najafov believes that an anti-Christian campaign is underway, with less violence than in the past but using other methods to pressure churches and individual believers. Religious minorities face continuing official pressure, including the Subbotniki – a Christian movement founded in the eighteenth century who follow many Jewish laws and customs, who were forbidden from holding a religious ritual for one of the community's members who had just died.

On Tuesday 25 October, the ordinary police, the National Security Service (NSS) secret police and officials from the Public Prosecutor's office broke up a meeting of members of the Full Gospel Pentecostal Church in the town of Jizak [Jizzakh] 200 kilometres (125 miles) south-west of the capital Tashkent, one of the Church's pastors Aleksandr Kuznetsov told Forum 18 News Service from Tashkent on 26 October.

According to Kuznetsov, he and the Full Gospel bishop Sergei Nechitailo were visiting church members in Jizak. The congregation in the town has not been able to obtain state registration. Some 40 people had gathered together for a meal in the house of a local church member. "I would stress that this was not a formal religious service, just an informal gathering of believers to celebrate the harvest festival," Kuznetsov told Forum 18. He reports that around 10 officials from the NSS secret police, the ordinary police and the Public Prosecutor's office suddenly burst into the house. They cordoned off the premises and ordered those present to write statements. Church members complain that the officials made threats during the raid. "Women and children were crying and shouting," one church member told Forum 18.

Nechitailo, who identified himself to the officials as the Full Gospel bishop, pointed out that believers were allowed to visit each other and therefore demanded that the law enforcement officials stop their unlawful actions, but they did not respond to Nechitailo's demand. The police recorded the names of all those present and allowed them to go to their homes two hours after the raid began.

"I think the actions of the law enforcement officers in Jizak were a gross infringement of the law," Iskander Najafov, a lawyer for the Tashkent Full Gospel church, told Forum 18 on 26 October. "It turns out that believers are not even allowed to visit each other." He also complained that the police briefly detained Nechitailo, "the head of the registered Full Gospel Christian community".

Begzot Kadyrov, chief specialist at the government's Committee for Religious Affairs in Tashkent, said he had not heard about the police raid on the Full Gospel meeting in Jizak. But he insisted that "Harvest festival is an official Pentecostal festival – they themselves wrote of this themselves when they lodged their registration application," he told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 27 October. "So you can't regard the meeting in Jizak as simply a gathering of friends – it was a religious meeting. And as the Pentecostals are not registered in Jizak, the meeting was therefore illegal." He said Nechitailo, as the leader of the Full Gospel Church in the country, "knows Uzbek laws very well. That's why I find it strange he allowed such a violation."

Najafov, the Church's lawyer, believes that an official anti-Christian campaign is underway, with less violence than in the past but using other methods to pressure churches and individual believers. He said his Church has received reports from various parts of the country that the police are visiting church members' apartments and conducting "so-called preventative discussions in which they question people about their faith". He also told Forum 18 that registration of churches has long since come to a halt, and police are trying to halt all meetings of religious believers in private homes. Uzbek law – in defiance of international human rights standards – bans all unregistered religious activity.

Other religious minorities also continue to face official pressure. Najafov told Forum 18 that the authorities are persecuting a community of Subbotniki – a Christian movement dating back to the eighteenth century of non-Jewish Christians who hold services on Saturday, and follow many but not all Jewish laws and customs. (Subbotniki should not be confused with Seventh-day Adventists.) The Subbotniki live in the Kibrai district of Tashkent region, 15 kilometres (10 miles) north-east of the capital, and every week police come to community members and warn them that it is illegal to hold meetings in private apartments. On 9 August

the police even forbade the Subbotniki from holding a religious ritual for one of the community's members who had just died.

Kadyrov of the state Religious Affairs Committee said that he had not heard of the Subbotniki's problems. However, he insisted to Forum 18 that if police officers had in fact obstructed religious rituals for the deceased that would be a violation of the law.

Religious communities throughout Uzbekistan are currently facing attempts by the authorities to isolate them from support (see F18News 3 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=665). (END)

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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