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UZBEKISTAN: Latest official harassment of Protestant students

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Following the banning of Protestant activity in north-western Uzbekistan, a higher educational institute in the regional capital, Nukus, has resumed its harassment of Protestant students. Four female medical students came close to being expelled from their institute in the regional capital Nukus this month, and were removed from their student residence. However, the rector of the Nukus branch of the Tashkent Paediatric Medical Institute, Oral Ataniyazova, categorically denied that the four students were to be expelled, telling Forum 18 that "the only thing we are concerned about is the students' knowledge, certainly not their religious beliefs." Students at both the medical institute and the Berdah Karakalpak State University have long faced official hostility from university authorities due to their religious beliefs, at times at the behest of the National Security Service secret police. The only Christian activity permitted in the region is at the Russian Orthodox parish in Nukus.

Amid the continuing crackdown on Protestant activity in the autonomous region of Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] in north-western Uzbekistan, four Protestant medical students came close to being expelled from their institute in the regional capital Nukus in January because of their religious affiliation, a local church member who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 News Service in mid-January. The authorities went ahead and expelled the four women from their student residence.

On 8 January, the rector's office of the Nukus branch of the Tashkent Paediatric Medical Institute drafted an order for the expulsion of the students, Ainur Tajikova, Aliya Sherimbetova, Shirin Artykbayeva and Sofia Mambetniyazova. Two of the four, Sherimbetova and Artykbayeva, had already been expelled in September 2004 because of their membership of a local Protestant church but were reinstated after international coverage of their case (see F18News 13 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=476).

But the Nukus medical institute's rector, Oral Ataniyazova, categorically denied that the four students were to be expelled. "As for the students you asked about, I can tell you with authority that they are students here and no-one has plans to expel them," she told Forum 18 from Nukus on 25 January. "The only thing we are concerned about is the students' knowledge, certainly not their religious beliefs. Unfortunately, students who have been expelled for their poor performance sometimes try to interpret that as religious persecution."

Ataniyazova, whose colleague Forum 18 interviewed about the expulsion of a final year medical student, Ilkas Aldungarov, in November 2004, insisted that his expulsion was not because of his Protestant faith. "Around a year ago you also expressed an interest in a student who had been expelled. He had actually been expelled because of his poor performance, but he started telling foreign human rights organisations that he had been turned away because of his religious beliefs," she claimed to Forum 18 (see F18News 13 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=476).

Khalima Tajikova, one of the students' mothers, insisted that her daughter and three other Christian students were going to be expelled from the medical institute because of their religious convictions. "However, in the end the institute's management decided not to expel the women and instead made them leave the student lodgings because they had been promoting Christianity among the students," she told Forum 18 from Nukus on 25 January.

Makset Almuratov, the director of the Nukus medical institute's student accommodation, confirmed that Tajikova, Artykbayeva, Sherimbetova and Mambetniyazova have been told to leave their student lodgings, but was unable to give a reason for this. "I was on leave and I haven't heard about any disagreement in the student house," he told Forum 18 from Nukus on 25 January. "If the students really were doing missionary work, then that is forbidden under Uzbek law, and the administration had every right to refuse them a place in the student house."

Students at both the Nukus branch of the Tashkent Paediatric Medical Institute and also at Berdah Karakalpak State University have faced official hostility due to their beliefs, in some cases at the behest of the National Security Service (NSS) secret police. Incidents have included expulsion threats (see F18News 21 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=303 and 9 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=359), flat searches, religious literature seizures, and compulsory moves to university-controlled accommodation (see F18News 27 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=329) and expulsion for openly discussing the incidents (see F18News 16 September 2004

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=412).

Meanwhile, the local authorities are continuing their crackdown on other Protestant activity in Karakalpakstan, where all Protestant activity has been banned (see F18News 11 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=686). Police detained Pastor Ongar Jalimov on the street in Nukus on 3 January, took him to the police station for questioning and finally released him only at half past midnight, Protestant sources told Forum 18. They also confiscated his laptop, telling him they would return it only once they had "studied it thoroughly".

The only Christian activity permitted in Karakalpakstan is at the Russian Orthodox parish in Nukus, which began building its own church in summer 2005. The Russian Orthodox presence has been boosted by the influx of Russian workers connected with projects run by the Lukoil company.

Meanwhile in the town of Termez in the southern Surkhandarya region, bordering Afghanistan, the police are putting new pressure on Pentecostal pastor Bakhrom Nazarov. On 4 January police came to his home and seized his car, saying that it will not be returned until he pays a fine imposed on him for his religious activity. Nazarov has frequently faced harassment for leading his Pentecostal congregation (see eg. F18News 17 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=455).

Pressure has also reportedly increased on Protestants in Chirchik [Chirchiq], about 30 km [19 miles] north east of Tashkent. One church which runs house groups in the town was warned in December 2005 to halt such home meetings. Representatives of the house committees which oversee blocks of flats were reportedly used to convey the message to individual home owners.

This is part of a pattern of state oppression of religious minorities, which has been increasing in recent months (see F18News eg. 21 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=692 and 11 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=714).

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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 what is known about Akramia and the Andijan uprising see F18News 16 June 2005 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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