

2 February 2006

UZBEKISTAN: Assault arranged by authorities?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

A Protestant pastor is convinced that a brutal assault he was subjected to, which left him unconscious and needing a week in hospital, was arranged by the Uzbek authorities. He thinks that this is the reason why the police do not want to open a criminal investigation. "In early January I saw my attackers on the street and now I even know where they live. But the police don't even want to talk to me," Bakhtier Tuichiev told Forum 18 News Service. Separately, sources from across Uzbekistan have told Forum 18 that recently the authorities have closed down many charitable organisations run by Christians. The closures include attempts to close down the charities "voluntarily," using similar tactics as have been ordered against religious communities in the capital, Tashkent. The authorities have refused to discuss either the assault on Pastor Tuichiev or the charity closures with Forum 18, but claim that there have recently been increased complaints about non-Muslim missionaries.

Bakhtier Tuichiev, a Protestant pastor based in Andijan [Andijon], a city in Uzbekistan's section of the Fergana [Farghona] Valley, complains that the local police have shown no interest in launching a criminal investigation into a brutal beating he was subjected to on 25 December 2005. "In early January I saw my attackers on the street and now I even know where they live. But the police don't even want to talk to me," Tuichiev told Forum 18 News Service on 30 January.

"All I remember is that before starting to beat me, my attackers told me I had betrayed the faith of their ancestors. When I regained consciousness, I was in resuscitation," Tuichiev told Forum 18. Tuichiev reports that he spent over a week in hospital and that he has a document issued by the doctors attesting to his injuries, including concussion. Independent sources have confirmed the beating to Forum 18.

The pastor is convinced that his beating was arranged by the authorities. "I've been called into police headquarters several times and told openly that if I don't stop what I'm doing, then there's a lot of trouble in store for me. I fear this attack was just a warning," Tuichiev told Forum 18.

Forum 18 tried unsuccessfully to find out from the 'Department for the Struggle against Religious Extremism and Terrorism' of the Andijan regional Internal Affairs Administration why it had taken no action to investigate the beating and identify the perpetrators. A person who said he was a policeman questioned Forum 18 closely about what we wanted to talk about with the department head, Ulugbek Taishmatov, and then hung up.

Tuichiev has been trying in vain to register his church since 2002 and has faced repeated harassment from the authorities. In mid-November 2005, he was taken in for questioning at the Internal Affairs Administration for Andijan region over four consecutive days, where he was questioned for nine hours a day. Tuichiev claims that the police officers were primarily interested in his links with overseas human rights organisations and whether he received financial aid from abroad. Ulugbek Taishmatov personally forced Tuichev to sign a statement stating that his church would not meet (see F18News 21 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=709).

In defiance of the country's international human rights commitments, Uzbek law bans religious communities from operating without registration.

Meanwhile, several sources from across Uzbekistan have told Forum 18 that over the past three months the authorities have closed down no fewer than 1,000 charitable organisations run by Christians. Iskander Najafov, a lawyer for the Tashkent Full Gospel Church, told Forum 18 that the authorities generally claimed that these organisations have been closed down for allegedly conducting missionary activity, which is forbidden under Uzbek law. Other excuses given are that they have failed to abide by regulations, such as by filing accounts late.

Najafov reported that initially the authorities tried to force the charity leaders to hand over their organisations' official documentation, stamps and letterheads "voluntarily." Any charitable organisation operating without these items is deemed to be working illegally. Organisations whose leaders refused to obey this verbal order were then closed down, after official inspections by one or more of a range of agencies, including the Justice Department, tax officials, the Fire Inspectorate or the Health and Sanitary Services.

Similar inspections have recently been ordered against religious communities in the Uzbek capital Tashkent, which some feared were attempts to close down the communities (see F18News 11 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=714).

Shoazim Minovarov, the chairman of the government's Committee for Religious Affairs, declined to comment on the closure of charities suspected of conducting religious activities. "Charitable organisations are not within the competence of our committee," he told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 2 February.

Asked by Forum 18 whether the tenfold increase in fines that can now be handed down for unregistered religious activity as well as the wide-ranging inspections of the activity of religious communities in Tashkent (see F18News 27 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=720) did not represent a harshening of the government's policy towards religious communities, Minovarov denied it. "I have just returned from the haj pilgrimage to Mecca, so I'm not yet fully up-to-date on the situation," he told Forum 18. "But I don't think one can speak of a harshening of the state's religious policy."

Minovarov also did not comment on the continuing crackdown on Protestant activity in the autonomous region of Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] in north-western Uzbekistan (see F18News 26 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=719).

But at the same time, Minovarov claimed that complaints from local people had recently increased about the activity of non-Muslim missionaries. "Preachers literally burst into private homes, which arouses anger among the population," he told Forum 18. "Of course, we must respond to citizens' complaints." Forum 18 is unaware of any such incidents of the kind claimed by Minovarov. (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 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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