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UZBEKISTAN: Protestants face guns, beatings, fines and deportation

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

After a massive armed police and secret police raid on a Protestant summer camp near the southern town of Termez on 24 August, some 20 church members were detained and many of them systematically beaten, Protestant sources who preferred not to be identified for fear of reprisals told Forum 18 News Service. Most were freed within 24 hours but five were held until 4 September and one, Husan Primbetov, remains in detention. Some of those held were fined, while one – a Ukrainian visitor Yuri Stefanko – is being prepared for deportation. Deported on 5 September in a separate case was Viktoria Khripunova of Tashkent's embattled Bethany Baptist church. Protestants told Forum 18 they believe the move was targeted at her husband, the church's pastor and an Uzbek citizen, who left voluntarily with his wife. Stefanko's deportation will bring to seven the number of deportations from Uzbekistan known to Forum 18 in retaliation for religious activity this year.

One Protestant, Husan Primbetov, remains in detention after a massive 24 August raid by armed police and secret police officers on a Protestant church's summer camp in a village near Termez in the southern Surkhandarya region, Protestant sources told Forum 18 News Service on 5 September. More than a dozen others were freed within 24 hours while a further five were freed on 4 September after many were tortured. A Ukrainian guest of the camp, among those freed on 4 September, is being prepared for deportation. Deported in a separate case yesterday (5 September) was the wife of the pastor of the Bethany Protestant church in the capital Tashkent, which has long faced pressure from the authorities.

Forum 18 has been unable to find out from the government's Religious Affairs Committee why Protestant churches and other religious minorities are being subjected to such pressure. Only the committee spokesperson Aziz Abidov (who is based at the Supreme Court) is authorised to speak to the media on behalf of the committee and Forum 18 has been unable to reach him at his office.

The crackdown on Protestant activity comes at the same time as registration was stripped from one of only two Jehovah's Witness communities which had been allowed to register and thus to conduct any religious activity which the authorities did not regard as illegal (see F18News 5 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=837).

According to Forum 18's sources, at 10pm on 24 August around 20 officers of the police and the National Security Service secret police wearing bullet-proof vests and wielding automatic guns burst into the Uztelekom holiday camp in the village of Uch-kizil in the Termez district, where 20 Protestants had gathered for a religious meeting. Police confiscated Bibles and New Testaments. All those present were taken to the police station in Termez, where the men were subjected to systematic beatings.

"I was taken to a separate room and ordered to undress and kneel," Vitaly Suvorov, a Protestant from the Termez suburb of Jarkurgan reported after his 25 August release. "A gas mask was put on me and the air supply cut off. The police swore unrestrainedly at us and forced us to confess that we had been holding an unlawful meeting." He said police had given those detained no food. Following his "meeting" with the police, on 27 August Tashkent's accident and emergency hospital department found that Suvorov had sustained the following injuries: "two scratches on his left cheek, bruises to the top of his head, a scratch to his right elbow, abrasions to both calves, and concussion". Suvorov has been fined in the past for his religious activity.

Although the police released most of the church members on 25 August, six of them remained under arrest. Five of these were freed on 4 September, leaving Husan Primbetov, a Protestant from Kokand in the Fergana [Farghona] valley in eastern Uzbekistan, the last church member still in detention. Some of those freed were fined, while others still face charges under the Code of Administrative Offences. Protestant sources told Forum 18 that police stole valuable items including digital cameras and mobile phones from a number of those detained.

One of those detained on 24 August was a Ukrainian citizen from Kiev, Yuri Stefanko, who was held at the police station until 4 September, where he was subjected to systematic beatings. The Uzbek authorities are now drawing up documentation for Stefanko's deportation.

Meanwhile, the authorities are stepping up their moves against the Bethany Baptist church in the Mirzo-Ulugbek district of Tashkent, which has long been denied official registration and therefore the right to function. On 5 September church member Viktoria Khripunova – who has no citizenship - was deported. Her passport was stamped with the words "Deported from Uzbekistan".

"In fact the authorities wanted primarily to get rid of Viktoria's husband, the Bethany church's pastor Sergei Khripunov. But as Sergei is an Uzbek citizen they decided to deal with him through his wife," a Tashkent Protestant, who preferred not to be named for fear of reprisals, told Forum 18 on 5 September. "The authorities got what they wanted and Khripunov has left Uzbekistan with his wife."

Khripunov is among many Bethany church members to have been fined in recent years for "unlawful" religious activity (see F18News 17 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=588). On 25 June this year his Daewoo Nexia car was taken by unidentified people and smashed up.

Khripunova's deportation is the second of a Bethany church member in as many months. Ivan Bychkov, leader of the church's youth group, was deported to Russia on 11 August. A Russian citizen, Bychkov was born in Kazakhstan but brought up in Tashkent, where his family still lives (see F18News 21 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=833).

It appears that deportation is becoming one the authorities' favoured tactics in their battle with religious minorities. Jehovah's Witness Yevgeny Li, a Ukrainian citizen who held a temporary residence permit in Tashkent, was deported from Uzbekistan over the border to Kazakhstan. Li's home was in Tashkent and his elderly parents and wife – who are Uzbek citizens – remain in the capital. The Jehovah's Witnesses fear that other residents of Uzbekistan who are not Uzbek citizens could also suffer deportation. In May the Uzbek authorities deported Russian Jehovah's Witness lawyer Kirill Kulikov, who was visiting the country to defend fellow believers who were being persecuted by the authorities. In April, three Turkmen Protestants were deported back to their homeland (see F18News 23 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=804).

Another Protestant pastor in Tashkent, who also preferred not to be named for fear of reprisals, told Forum 18 in late August that in the previous week "all" church leaders were summoned to the secret police.

Pentecostals have also come under severe pressure. A Tashkent source who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18 that in July the police blockaded a Pentecostal Full Gospel Church holiday camp in the village of Avangard in Yangiyul district (a Tashkent suburb). The police questioned all the church members present. A local businessman and director of the Sion Trade company A. Shishkin, who had been teaching the children, was sentenced in July to a fine of 47,000 Soms (243 Norwegian Kroner, 30 Euros or 38 US Dollars) by the Yangiyul district court under Article 241 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes "failing to observe the correct procedure for teaching religious beliefs". The authorities maintain that as Shishkin did not have a licence to teach religion his teaching constituted a crime.

A hostile news article on the Full Gospel camp was published on 24 July by the local news agency gorizont.uz and was widely reproduced by other web news agencies. Uzbek Protestants have described the article to Forum 18 as "libellous".

The Full Gospel camp faced problems as soon as it started in May. Police raided the camp, beat the watchman and used force to take all those present to the local police station, where they were threatened about involvement in what officers claimed was an "illegal religious meeting" (see F18News 20 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=803). (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=777.

For an analysis of whether the May 2005 Andijan events changed state religious policy in the year following, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=778. For an outline of what is known about Akramia itself, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586, and for a May 2005 analysis of what happened in Andijan see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

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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