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UZBEKISTAN: Wives demand freedom for imprisoned Muslim husbands

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Around 50 wives demonstrated in Namangan on 17 June calling for their husbands to be freed from prison. They claim the men are "prisoners of conscience", punished simply for being "faithful Muslims". "My husband was not a terrorist, he simply said prayers five times a day and attended the mosque regularly," one of the demonstrators Misor Ubaidulaeva told Forum 18 News Service. She says he has almost lost his hearing as a result of beatings in prison in Karshi, where inmates are not allowed to pray. The local police officer admitted to Forum 18 that he had pressured Ubaidulaeva and her mother-in-law to sign pledges undertaking not to take part in further "unlawful meetings".

Around 50 women have demonstrated in the city of Namangan in the Uzbek section of the Fergana Valley to demand the release of their imprisoned husbands whose only "crime", in their view, is to be "faithful Muslims". Local resident Misor Ubaidulaeva told Forum 18 News Service on 20 June that she and other wives of "prisoners of conscience" staged the demonstration on 17 June outside the regional administration. She said her husband, Shukhrat Askhujayev, was sentenced in 1999 under article 159 of the criminal code, which punishes undermining the constitutional basis of the republic of Uzbekistan. "But my husband was not a terrorist, he simply said prayers five times a day and attended the mosque regularly," Ubaidulaeva told Forum 18. "The husbands of the other women who took part in the demonstration with me also committed no crime, but simply prayed to God."

Ubaidulaeva also complained about conditions in the prison in the southern town of Karshi where her husband is being held. She maintains that Muslim inmates are not allowed to perform their prayers. Ubaidulaeva also declared that her husband is regularly beaten and that he has virtually lost his hearing because of the beatings.

The press officer for Namangan regional administration, Azbek Abdulaev, confirmed to Forum 18 on 20 June that the demonstration had taken place, but claimed that it had consisted only of "around 15 people". He insisted that the police had not dispersed the demonstrators.

However, the head of the Namangan regional branch of the Independent Society of Human Rights of Uzbekistan, Gulyamzhon Khalmatov, told Forum 18 on 21 June that the local police are demanding a written pledge from the women that they will not take part in any more demonstrations.

When Forum 18 met the local police officer for Namangan's Istikol district where Ubaidulaeva lives, Lieutenant Omajon Juraev, on 21 June, he did not deny that he had made Ubaidulaeva and her mother-in-law Habiba Sadykova write pledges. In the pledges, which he showed to Forum 18, the women undertake "not to take part in unlawful meetings and to apply on all issues to the authorities of the district".

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY