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UZBEKISTAN: Spies and videotape

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

As well as overtly cracking down on religious activity the authorities do not like, Uzbekistan's National Security Service (NSS) secret police has stepped up its covert surveillance of religious communities in recent years. Members of a variety of religious communities have told Forum 18 News Service of hidden microphones in places of worship, the presence of NSS agents during worship and the recruitment of spies within communities. NSS agents "have a vehicle with tinted windows, and ten minutes before the end of the service they wind down the window enough to allow them to film everyone leaving," one Christian reported. "The NSS especially tries to recruit among the leaders, trying to find out how what's going on within each community, who is going where, how much money each gets, where the community gets its money from," another source told Forum 18. "As in Soviet times the secret police want to know," a third source told Forum 18, "not just to smash religious communities but simply to know." NSS press spokesperson Olimjan Turakulov refused to tell Forum 18 why the NSS spies on religious communities.

"Two secret police officers sit in each church across the country – but not just churches, they are there in mosques and in other places of worship," one Protestant who preferred not to be identified for fear of reprisals told Forum 18 News Service. "I'm not worried, but it makes us think about everything we do."

While in the past, the officers assigned to this Protestant's church merely sat and observed, now they walk around during services. "They want to frighten people, to let them know they are being watched," the Protestant explained. "We don't touch them or intervene."

Leaders of a Christian Church which the government regards as traditional echoed this, reporting that in each parish the authorities have people to "help them".

As in the Soviet period, Uzbekistan's National Security Service (NSS) secret police is overtly involved in enforcing the country's repressive controls on all religious activity and cracking down on religious activity the authorities do not like. Religious believers have identified the NSS Department to Fight Terrorism as the main branch controlling religious activity within the secret police.

NSS officers frequently take part in raids on religious communities, and arrest, detain and question members of these communities. In a typical case, Pentecostal pastor Dmitry Shestakov – who is now serving a four-year labour camp sentence to punish him for his activity with his congregation – was arrested by the NSS after frequent NSS visits to his and to an associated congregation in his home town of Andijan [Andijon] in the Fergana [Farghona] Valley of eastern Uzbekistan (see F18News 12 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=973).

But the NSS has also stepped up its covert spying on and within religious communities of all faiths in recent years as the climate in the country has grown more repressive. Few religious leaders are prepared to talk to outsiders about such spying, fearing reprisals if they do so.

Also refusing to discuss NSS spying on religious communities were the NSS and the government's Religious Affairs Committee. Reached on 5 September at his office in the capital Tashkent, NSS press spokesperson Olimjan Turakulov refused to answer any of Forum 18's questions about why the NSS spies on religious communities and what aims it has in doing so. "I can't answer your questions as you are not accredited here," he told Forum 18. "There is a procedure. If you publish any false information it will be on your conscience." Turakulov then referred Forum 18 to the Muslim Board, although Forum 18 insisted that its questions related to the activity of the NSS, not of the Muslim Board. He then put the phone down.

Also reached on 5 September, the Religious Affairs Committee told Forum 18 that its chairman, Artyk Yusupov, was on a work trip to Fergana. The man who answered the phone of committee specialist Begzot Kadyrov told Forum 18 that he was away for another week, even though the receptionist had told Forum 18 Kadyrov was in the office. No other officials were available.

NSS surveillance of religious communities is believed to be extensive, using both human and electronic intelligence. Microphones, videocameras and spies are routinely used. Both places of worship and religious leaders are targeted for surveillance.

A registered Protestant church in a town away from the capital rented a place to meet for worship each Sunday. One source told Forum 18 that the NSS bored through a thick concrete wall to install a microphone, which the church believes lay undetected for some time. However, after the church discovered and removed it last year, the pastor was warned. This is one of several cases known to Forum 18 of hidden microphones being discovered in places of worship.

Another Christian told Forum 18 that their church in one of Uzbekistan's bigger cities not only has NSS officers present in services, but an NSS car is regularly parked outside the main entrance. "Although they change the cars frequently, we see the same drivers sitting at the wheel – and we often recognise them from police duty in senior uniforms."

Various Christians have told Forum 18 of NSS videorecording of those entering and leaving churches. "They have a vehicle with tinted windows, and ten minutes before the end of the service they wind down the window enough to allow them to film everyone leaving," one Christian reported. "We can see quite clearly that they have a camera."

This NSS surveillance of worship services has led religious leaders automatically to scan their congregation silently to check who might be observing. One visitor to a mosque in the Fergana Valley told Forum 18 that after Friday prayers he approached the imam. Although a thousand people were present for the prayers, the imam had already singled him out as an unknown visitor.

One member of a religious minority told Forum 18 that it is far easier for the NSS to find agents who can monitor prayers at mosques than services in minority communities as it is easier for such agents to blend into the congregation at the mosque and pretend to be normal community members.

Religious believers of several faiths have told Forum 18 that they believe the secret police monitor all their communications, whether home phones, mobiles, emails or text messages. Although this is standard practice for those the NSS suspects of any kind of political, social, human rights or religious activity the government disapproves of, sources within religious communities insist that prominent religious activists are routinely monitored.

"Often when we talk on the phone for a long time about Christianity, another voice comes on the line and warns us that we have to talk, summoning us to their department," one Protestant activist told Forum 18. "On other occasions a voice just tells us to stop talking and put the phone down. This is one more way of frightening us." The activist added that sometimes calls to prominent fellow believers' numbers are automatically diverted to another number where a recording device is installed.

The NSS not only spies on religious communities from outside, it also seeks to recruit members of these communities, often through intimidation and fear. "The NSS especially tries to recruit among the leaders, trying to find out how what's going on within each community, who is going where, how much money each gets, where the community gets its money from," one source told Forum 18.

The NSS secret police has for some years kept a very close eye on imams and future imams (see F18News 11 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=318 and 20 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=58). As the independent news website Uznews.net reported on 1 February, the NSS still keeps the Islamic University in Tashkent under close scrutiny. The university was opened with great ceremony by President Islam Karimov in April 1999 and is the flagship educational institution for Muslim students, some of whom go on to become imams.

Uznews said that students complain that the authorities regard them with mistrust. They know that each one is being closely monitored by the NSS. One first-year student was quoted by Uznews as reporting that as soon as they join the university, all students without exception face meetings with NSS officers. "During the meetings, you are given to understand that from now on we are under the constant surveillance of this service," the student reported, "and they have to approve all the steps we take in advance."

Students that are too pious, too devoted to their studies or who question any aspects of the teaching they are being given are regarded with the most suspicion and face "serious problems". Those who questioned the teachers' approach, citing the hadiths (oral traditions attributed to the Muslim prophet Muhammed), faced pressure not only from senior university officials but from NSS officers, Uznews reported.

Uznews notes that this NSS surveillance and intimidation leaves students as "frightened shadows" who have received only a superficial Islamic education.

But ordinary members of religious communities are also targeted. One Christian told Forum 18 that NSS officers tried to recruit members of a Tashkent church as they walked to the metro after the Sunday service. Another Christian in a town away from Tashkent reported that NSS officers even wait outside the church to pounce on church members popping out to the toilet during the service.

Another source highlighted the way NSS recruitment attempts zero in on people known to be vulnerable. "People are in great material need, so they ask community members about what needs they have," the source told Forum 18. "They especially go for people with a criminal past. I know several such people who were summoned, threatened and asked for information. They were

asked if they were willing to spy. They were told that otherwise a reason will be found to reimprison them."

One religious minority leader told Forum 18 that he has been told the NSS and police have a "big dossier" on him. "Much of the information in it is apparently from informers. Officers warn me it will soon be time for it to be unveiled."

Several religious believers have been prepared to identify to Forum 18 the NSS officers that are involved in many of the spying incidents in Tashkent. Curiously, many of these officers are local ethnic Russians, including the most senior officer, who works for the anti-terrorist department of the NSS Main Directorate.

This senior officer is believed to be in his early thirties. "Wherever the secret police raided in Tashkent, he was there," one victim told Forum 18. Several sources have told Forum 18 that he does not wear uniform or the NSS shoulder straps. "He is always in civilian clothes," another source told Forum 18. "He's usually smartly turned out." However, some victims report that when drunk he is sometimes known to assault religious believers. Two of the officer's subordinates who are also often involved in questioning detained religious believers are ethnic Uzbeks.

One religious activist set out what he believed to be the aim of the NSS surveillance. "As in Soviet times the secret police want to know," he told Forum 18, "not just to smash religious communities but simply to know." However, he stressed the link between knowing and moving on to take action to "destroy" religious communities.

Several religious communities have stressed to Forum 18 the harm the intimidation and surveillance does to them. They cite the mutual suspicion caused when members of the community do not know whether to trust one another. Some communities have told Forum 18 that the NSS has conducted raids after communities or their leaders have been reported by real or infiltrated community members.

But a few members of religious communities have defended NSS surveillance to Forum 18. They claim that as law-abiding institutions, such communities have nothing to fear if the state authorities know intimately about every single activity the community undertakes and the identity of every single member.

Uzbekistan has the tightest controls over religious life of all the former Soviet republics. Unregistered religious activity is banned (in defiance of Uzbekistan's international human rights commitments), while criminal and administrative law provide harsh punishments for offenders. Unapproved religious teaching and publishing is banned with harsh penalties for offenders. Foreigners involved in religious activity have been deported while a number of local religious leaders have had exit permission denied. Religious-affiliated charities have been closed down.

Control is exercised on a national level by the NSS, the ordinary police and the Religious Affairs Committee. The Justice Ministry, which is supposed to register religious communities, often arbitrarily rejects such applications for communities it does not like, forcing them to function illegally (see F18News 21 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1009). On a local level, control is exercised by local town administrations and by committees of mahallas (urban districts) at the lowest level (see F18News 27 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936).

Despite the professed separation of the state from religion, officials have no compunction about issuing orders to religious communities (see F18News 21 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=959). (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.

Full reports of the religious freedom situation in Uzbekistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>.

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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