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UZBEKISTAN: "Legal" repression of Protestants and Muslims continues

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

As restrictions on Muslim prayers in the month of Ramadan are stepped up, Protestants in Uzbekistan are coming under continued repression Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Amongst the most recent attacks on freedom of thought, conscience and belief are: a suspended jail sentence imposed on Sharofat Allamova after police confiscated Christian literature from her; a Protestant pastor, Pastor Khyn-Mun Kim, being fined about one year's average salary for "illegal" religious activity, as well as a fine being imposed on a colleague, Me Vol Kim; and continuing state efforts to close down the Grace Presbyterian Church and confiscate its building. Twelve Protestants also face charges under the Administrative Code, after they "illegally" met for worship and police confiscated Christian literature from them. Asked by Forum 18 why religious believers face raids and punishment for meeting for worship, Klara Alasheva, Karakalpakstan's First Deputy Justice Minister, completely denied that any religious communities face difficulties.

In a new crackdown on Protestant churches across Uzbekistan, Sharofat Allamova was given a suspended prison sentence of six months in the central city of Bukhara [Bukhoro] in late August. The sentence was imposed after police confiscated Christian literature from her, Protestant sources have told Forum 18 News Service. The day after she was sentenced, a Protestant pastor and a colleague were fined for "illegal" religious activity in Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston], a region in north-western Uzbekistan where all non-Muslim and non-Russian Orthodox activity is banned. The pastor received a fine of about one year's average salary.

Several different state agencies in the capital Tashkent are engaged in simultaneous moves to close down a Presbyterian congregation and confiscate its church building. Meanwhile a group of Protestants in the south of the country were detained in mid-September and had religious literature confiscated. Twelve face charges under the Administrative Code.

The crackdown comes as the authorities are reported to have stepped up restrictions over Muslim prayers during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which officially began in Uzbekistan on 13 September (see F18News 20 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1020).

No official of the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent was available to explain to Forum 18 why believers cannot practice their faith freely and why new crackdowns and restrictions on Muslim and Protestant communities have been unleashed. "I'm just a trainee and all the Committee's officials are at a meeting," the man who answered the phone told Forum 18 on 17 September.

Ikrom Saipov, an official at the government's National Human Rights Centre involved in religious issues, declined to comment on these recent cases. He stressed that he had no information about them. "But if believers feel their rights are not respected, let them write to us and I'll deal with it personally," he insisted to Forum 18 from Tashkent on 17 September. "If they come in we can discuss this face to face." Saipov declined to discuss in general why Uzbekistan does not respect its commitments to religious freedom under its Constitution and under international human rights instruments that it has acceded to. "I don't have the right to respond on these questions."

Allamova, a member of a Protestant church in Urgench, was detained at 11 pm on 10 June after the bus on which she was returning to her home town was stopped for an inspection at a control post near the small town of Gijduvan [Gizhduvan] near Bukhara. Christian books – including copies of the New Testament - and discs were confiscated. She was held by Gijduvan police for four days with no arrest warrant or other documentation. More books, magazines and CDs were seized when Nusrat Jahonov of the Anti-terrorist Department of the Criminal Investigation Directorate in Bukhara led a raid on her Urgench home on 14 June (see F18News 4 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=988).

Protestants, who preferred not to be identified for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that Allamova was handed the six-month suspended jail sentence on 27 August by Bukhara Criminal Court. She was prosecuted under Article 244-3 of the Criminal Code, which punishes "illegal production, storage, import or distribution of religious materials" with punishment for those already convicted under the parallel article of the Administrative Code of a fine of 100 to 200 times the minimum monthly wage or "corrective labour" of up to three years.

This article was one of a number of changes to the Criminal and the Administrative Codes introduced in June 2006 which increased penalties for "illegal" religious publishing (see F18News 29 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=805). The government insists that it must approve all religious literature published in or imported into Uzbekistan.

Officers of the Anti-terrorist Department of the Criminal Investigation Directorate in Bukhara Region were unable to explain to Forum 18 why the department was involved in investigating a member of a peaceful religious community. They were also unable to explain why Allamova was prosecuted. One official named Umid, who would not give his family name, told Forum 18 on 13 September that his colleague Jahonov was in hospital. However, Umid admitted that Allamova had been sentenced for possessing religious literature. He then referred Forum 18 to the head of the Bukhara regional Anti-terrorist Department, Bakhtiyor Ismailov. Reached the same day, Ismailov insisted to Forum 18 that the court decided Allamova's case and denied that he heads the Anti-terrorist Department. He then put the phone down.

In north-west Uzbekistan, two members of the Peace Protestant Church in Nukus, the capital of Karakalpakstan were fined on 29 August at Nukus Criminal Court to punish them for their activity with the unregistered congregation. The two – Pastor Khyn-Mun Kim and Me Vol Kim – were prosecuted under two articles of the Code of Administrative Offences: Article 240, which punishes "violation of the laws on religious organisations", and Article 241, which punishes "violation of the procedure for teaching religion".

Protestant sources told Forum 18 that Pastor Kim was fined 465,750 Sums (2,056 Norwegian Kroner, 264 Euros or 366 US Dollars), about a year's wages for an average worker. Me Vol Kim was fined one tenth of this amount.

The fines followed a 9 August raid on the church by fifteen officers of the police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police. The officers filmed the raid on videocamera. The NSS secret police puts great efforts into spying on religious activity, as well as trying to recruit agents among religious communities (see F18News 5 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1014).

Stripped of registration in 2000 after officials complained it was conducting "illegal" religious work with children, the Peace Church has tried several times since then to regain its registration, so far in vain. The last registered Protestant church in Karakalpakstan, Emmanuel Pentecostal Church, lost its legal status in June 2005. Over 20 Protestant congregations in the region, as well as Jehovah's Witness congregations, have been denied legal status (see F18News 2 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=575).

The government insists – in defiance of Uzbekistan's international human rights commitments – that religious communities must have registration before they can conduct any religious activity. Unapproved religious activity is subject to heavy penalties. In Karakalpakstan all non-Russian Orthodox and non state-controlled Muslim religious activity is banned.

Klara Alasheva, Karakalpakstan's First Deputy Justice Minister, has completely denied to Forum 18 that any religious communities face difficulties. "No-one has any problem registering," she claimed to Forum 18 from Nukus on 17 September. She made similar comments to Forum 18 in 2005, after the Emmanuel Church lost its legal status (see F18News 2 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=575). Told that Peace Church has been trying to regain its lost legal status since 2000 and that Protestant and Jehovah's Witness communities have repeatedly been denied legal status she retorted: "You have been wrongly informed. If registration was taken away it was a decision of a court. If they were denied registration it was for a valid reason. We have the Constitution, but we also have the law."

Asked why – given that the Constitution guarantees religious freedom regardless of whether communities have registration or not – religious believers face raids and punishment for meeting for worship, Alasheva claimed: "Believers can meet in their own home without registration." Told that in the latest attack on peaceful religious believers the Peace Church was raided on 9 August, she again retorted: "You have been wrongly informed." She then put the phone down.

The raid on the Peace Church came about the same time as a raid on the Nukus home of Makset Djabbarbergenov, a Protestant who is also facing criminal charges to punish him for his religious activity. Police have been stepping up their hunt for Djabbarbergenov (see F18News 30 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1012).

On 11 September police raided a birthday party for local Protestant Vitaly Suvorov in Jarkurgan, a suburb of the southern town of Termez. The police took all those present to the police station, Protestant sources told Forum 18. Police reportedly told the Protestants they had to arrest someone as they have a "work plan". One of those detained was reportedly beaten by police. They were not freed until 5 o'clock the next morning. Twelve of those present are facing prosecution under the Code of Administrative Offences, accused of meeting illegally for worship and illegal distribution of religious literature. Books confiscated from them have been sent for "expert analysis".

Suvorov was among local Protestants attacked by police and secret police in August 2006 when they raided a church summer camp. He sustained injuries requiring hospital treatment (see F18News 6 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=838)

Meanwhile, the tax police have joined the concerted attempts to crush the Grace Presbyterian Church in Tashkent (see F18News 4 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1029). The church is also facing the stripping of its legal status and the confiscation of its building (see F18News 30 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1012). (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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