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UZBEKISTAN: Police deny knifepoint threat to Protestant

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Police officer Djamshid Klychev from Jarkurgan near Termez has denied that a member of the Surkhandarya Protestant Church, who signed a statement accusing his own church leaders, was forced to do so at knifepoint. "What are you talking about?" he told Forum 18 News Service. "You should not mention things like that." Protestants have told Forum 18 that other church members detained when police raided a birthday party on 11 September were beaten in police custody. Klychev accused them of being "traitors" and threatened to break the legs of one if he returned to the town. Asked why the police detained and questioned them, Klychev told Forum 18: "They had a lot of religious books, which is illegal." Meanwhile, Tashkent's Economic Court has annulled the 1999 purchase of a former cinema by the city's Grace Presbyterian Church. "In the acquisition and maintenance of this church property, no laws were violated," church leaders insisted to Forum 18. "It seems as though there are people that desire to take away the property for other reasons and are trying to manufacture reasons to do so." The church also faces a Tax Police investigation and a threat to its legal status, without which it cannot conduct any legal activity.

Djamshid Klychev, a police officer from Jarkurgan near Termez in southern Uzbekistan involved in questioning a group of local Protestants detained at a birthday party in mid-September, has reluctantly admitted to Forum 18 News Service that he led the interrogations. He confirmed that one of those questioned, Shokir (last name unknown), signed a statement against the leaders of the Surkhandarya Protestant Church. But Klychev denied reports from church members reaching Forum 18 that Shokir was threatened with a knife to sign the statement. "What are you talking about?" he told Forum 18 on 3 October. "You should not mention things like that." Church members also told Forum 18 that Klychev accused them of being "traitors" and threatened to break the legs of one of them if he returned to the town.

Klychev had at first declined to talk to Forum 18, but did so when pressed about the continuing summonses being issued to Azamat Rajabov, a church leader from Termez who was among the original detainees. Klychev said he has instructed Rajabov to report to the police station for further questioning to which he has not yet responded. Asked what prompted the police to detain and question the church members, Klychev responded: "They had a lot of religious books, which is illegal." After a pause, during which he appeared to be consulting a colleague, Klychev put the phone down.

No official at the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent was able to explain to Forum 18 why members of the Surkhandarya church had been threatened merely for having copies of religious literature and why some had been beaten and called "traitors" and why one was threatened with a knife. On 3 October Forum 18 tried to reach committee chairman Artyk Yusupov, but the person who answered the phone said he was away on a work trip. He referred Forum 18 to Begzot Kadyrov, the committee's chief specialist. The man who answered Kadyrov's phone, who identified himself only as Mirzo, told Forum 18 that Kadyrov was away, but said he could answer questions. Asked about the threats against the Protestants in Jarkurgan, the man said he was just the committee's computer specialist and could not answer those questions.

Police questioning of members of the Surkhandarya Church began after officers raided a birthday party for church member Vitaly Suvorov and his friend Mansur Inyushev at Suvorov's house in Jarkurgan on 11 September. The party was organised by Suvorov's family members and friends from the church (see F18News 17 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1019).

The local police arrived an hour after the party began to check the identities of the 17 people present, who were close relatives, friends and some guests from Termez, 40 kms (25 miles) away. The police asked them to show their passports. When those at the party complained that the police were ruining the party and asked why they were being investigated, the police officer asked Rajabov, who had come from Termez, to open the boot of his car and show them what was inside. Police found Christian literature in the boot.

One Protestant – who asked not to be identified for fear of reprisals - told Forum 18 that the police officers told Rajabov to go with them to the police station for questioning. Rajabov then asked if Laziz Umarov, who was also from Termez, could go with him since he wanted Umarov as a witness. The officers did not object. The two were then taken to the Jarkurgan police station.

At the station police took away the literature, telling Rajabov and Umarov that the literature had been confiscated because it is

"illegal" to have so many religious books. Later Klychev the investigator took over questioning of Rajabov and Umarov. Among the many questions he asked were why they were propagating Christianity. Protestants told Forum 18 that he called them "traitors".

Later Lyudmila Suvorova – the hostess and mother of Vitaly Suvorov - and all the other guests were taken to the police station. The police questioned those detained until 4 o'clock the next morning. The officers insulted and beat some of the detainees. It was then that police made the first attempts to force Shokir to write a statement against Rajabov and Suvorov, since they are the leaders of the church. He refused, asking how he could ever write such a statement against his leaders. The officer then hit his Adam's apple so he could not talk.

The police told Rajabov and Umarov to leave and come back by 9 am. Rajabov had to pick up his small children - one of them a baby - from a friend's house and take them the 40 kms to Termez. This meant that he and Umarov could not even rest properly. To their amazement, when they returned as instructed Klychev was not even there. He received them only at 2 pm.

While Rajabov and Umarov were gone the officers told the rest of the group that they did not have good leaders, as they had deserted them. "What kind of leaders and Christians are they that they left you alone here?" the officers told the detained church members.

When Klychev, the investigator, resumed questioning Rajabov and Umarov later that day he asked many questions, including whether they met regularly and where they got the books from. They were held at the police station until 6.30 pm on 12 September. Klychev warned Umarov, who is from Termez, "don't come back to Jarkurgan again unless you want your legs broken".

Protestant sources told Forum18 that Shokir was again summoned to the Jarkurgan police on 25 September. There he was threatened with a knife to write a statement against the church leaders declaring that "they forced him to accept the Christian religion". The statement was already drawn up and he just had to sign it, which he did out of fear, and he told the church leaders about this after being released.

Meanwhile, the authorities in Tashkent are continuing their moves to strip the city's Grace Presbyterian Church of its church building, a former cinema in Tashkent's Khamza District it bought at auction in 1999. The auction had been initiated by the Tashkent city department of the State Property Committee. The church also faces an investigation by the Tax Police and a threat to its legal status (see F18News 30 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1012).

Tashkent's Economic Court ruled on 21 September to annul the 1999 purchase of the building, Irina Zorina, legal expert at the Tashkent city department of the State Property Committee, told Forum 18 on 4 October. The decision has not yet come into force as the church filed an appeal to a higher instance court, she said. She added that if the decision enters into force, the church will be compensated, including compensation for inflation. She claimed the church would be free to take part in any new auction when the building is resold. However, Forum 18 notes that, given the rise in property prices over eight years, it remains unclear if the church could still afford to buy back the same building.

Grace Church leaders insisted to Forum 18 back in August that the Tashkent church was "purchased legally" at the 1999 auction. "After preparing the building for church services, the opening service was held in October 2000, when an official of the Tashkent city religious department was in attendance and blessed the service," they told Forum 18. "In the acquisition and maintenance of this church property, no laws were violated. It seems as though there are people that desire to take away the property for other reasons and are trying to manufacture reasons to do so. Using government power, they are doing whatever needed to falsify documents and strip this church of its property." The leaders said that the entire church is now "fervently praying" for a favourable resolution.

Zorina of the State Property Committee complained to Forum 18 in mid-September that church members "are trying to present this as having a religious aspect, but it is nothing to do with religion". She insisted the Property Committee is solely guided by an examination of the documents. "We have examined a whole packet of documents. We have been looking at the legal basis for the purchase. If there are violations during privatisations we are obliged to investigate them and, if appropriate, initiate cases." Zorina told Forum 18 the impetus for the investigation of the Grace church had come from the national State Property Committee.

Zorina eventually admitted that the complaint the court has been examining relates to the apparent failure to advertise the sale of the Khamza cinema in the newspapers in 1999 properly, with an appropriate deadline before the actual sale. "They [church members] did nothing wrong," she told Forum 18. She was unable to say why the church should lose a building it had bought in good faith, because of an apparent failure by the authorities eight years ago.

Despite repeated attempts, Forum 18 has been unable to reach Akbarhon Nabiraev, head of a department within the Justice Ministry's Administration for Social and Religious Organisations, to find out if his department has taken further moves to strip the church of its legal status. Nabiraev led a Justice Ministry raid on the church on 13 August. Reached on 2 October, the officials who answered his phone said he was not there or that they did not know him. Finally one told Forum 18: "We are seriously busy and you keep bothering us with your petty questions."

Under Uzbekistan's harsh Religion Law, if the Grace Church loses its state registration all its religious activity will become illegal.

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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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