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UZBEKISTAN: Fresh eviction threat and more media intolerance incitement

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Uzbekistan has dropped criminal charges against members of Grace Church, after the authorities' claim that a cough medicine was psychotropic (mind-altering) were proved to be false. However, church members have told Forum 18 News Service that they face fresh official threats to evict them from their church building. The latest threats have caused fears that "[Protestant] churches' right to property will be reviewed," Forum 18 was told. A major state-run newspaper, "Narodnoe Slovo", has resumed the authorities' periodic campaigns to incite intolerance, by reprinting articles on Grace Church. Amongst false accusations are that it is "hypnotising" people, that "when false preachers run out of words and dollars to attract credulous parishioners (...) they turn to psychotropic substances," and that "greedy pastors tried to stupefy the minds of our children." An article ended "giving a decisive 'No' to the creeping aggression of an alien influence is our and your civil duty!" Previous state intolerance campaigns have coincided with increased suppression of freedom of thought, conscience and belief. Challenged by Forum 18 on why the government newspaper is inciting intolerance, Salam Daniyarov, assistant Editor-in-Chief, claimed "we have freedom of speech" and put the phone down.

Although members of the embattled Grace Presbyterian Church in the capital Tashkent say criminal charges against their leaders have now been dropped, they told Forum 18 News Service on 17 January they fear they will soon be thrown out of their church building. They also complain of a media campaign against the church which one local activist close to Protestant Churches described to Forum 18 as "Stalinist". "Many religious organisations are now frightened," the activist told Forum 18 on 16 January. "Everyone believes the Grace Church case is a trial balloon. Everyone is afraid that churches' right to property will be reviewed."

Forum 18 was told that the Grace Church continues to meet at the former cinema it bought back in 1999, even though its rights to the property were stripped away from it in late 2007 by Tashkent city Economic Court (see F18News 12 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1046).

Officials have already demanded that the church vacate the property in Tashkent's Khamza District. "We are in imminent danger of a visit by the bailiffs and being thrown out of the building," one church member who did not give his name out of fear of reprisals told Forum 18.

Begzot Kadyrov, the leading specialist of the government's Religious Affairs Committee, refused to discuss the Grace Church's problems. "The new official rule is that all the foreign correspondents should contact the Jahon public relations department of the Foreign Ministry with their questions," he told Forum 18 on 18 January. "The Ministry then passes them on to the committee."

One source close to the Grace Church told Forum 18 that through the church's ministry over the years, many desperate people in the community have received help and have recovered from addictions. But now because of the problems, the 400 church members are being scattered. "This is particularly sad because two of our missionaries have died in Uzbekistan while serving the Lord," the source told Forum 18 on 17 January. "One of the missionary widows is one of those people that have remained there and is now being forced out of the country." He said the grave of her deceased husband is in Tashkent at his request "because of his love for the Uzbek people".

On 15 January the Russian news agency Interfax cited Tashkent city Justice Department officials as declaring that criminal charges had been laid against the church's 32-year-old senior pastor, Felix Li, the 65-year-old chairman of the organisation Il Kim, and against an American woman who has already left the country. They were accused over drugs held by the church which the authorities claimed were psychotropic (mind-altering). Investigators particularly focused on one called SYN-Rx DM, which is a commonly-used medicine for treating coughs.

Grace church members told Forum 18 on 17 January that the criminal charges brought against Pastor Li and Kim were dropped after the police established that the cough medicine belonged to one individual.

The media campaign against the Grace church and Pastor Li began last year but has now intensified. The Russian-language

newspaper "Gorizont" published articles slandering the church on 22 October and on 11 January of this year (which was also published in Uzbek). The major government newspaper "Narodnoe Slovo" republished on 15 January the second "Gorizont" article, written by an unknown author but published under the pseudonym Anvar Katalov.

In these articles the authors detail the activity of the Grace Church, claim that church members are conducting "illegal" missionary work and are "hypnotising" people. Then abruptly discussion transfers to the topic of how the church "illegally acquired their building". Katalov's article also claims the church had stores of psychotropic drugs. "It turns out that when false preachers run out of words and dollars to attract credulous parishioners into their network they turn to psychotropic substances," he alleged.

"Recently the Uzbek law-enforcement agencies have put a stop to the dangerous, pernicious activity of the community with the sonorous title 'Grace'," Katalov wrote. "What is most terrible is that the greedy pastors tried to stupefy the minds of our children." The author cited alleged popular discontent when, he claimed, the church turned its attention from converting ethnic Koreans and Russians to Christianity to converting ethnic Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Tatars "and other Asiatics".

Katalov alleged that like a "hydra", new congregations of the Grace Church were now applying for state registration in Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, Navoi, Khorezm and Surkhandarya regions. Church members told Forum 18 that these are independent congregations not under the Tashkent Grace Church.

"The crushed head of the 'hydra' tries to resurrect itself through individual pieces," he told readers in conclusion. "Not allowing that to happen and giving a decisive 'No' to the creeping aggression of an alien influence is our and your civil duty!"

Asked the reason for the series of articles on the Grace Church by his and other papers, Salam Daniyarov, the assistant Editor-in-Chief of "Narodnoe Slovo", said they did not single out the Grace Church. "We have freedom of speech", he claimed to Forum 18 on 18 January.

Daniyarov was unable to explain the logic of the article where the author discusses how it is illegal for the church to talk about their faith to others and all of a sudden turns to how the church "illegally" acquired its building. "I don't know what the logic is, you should ask the author himself," he insisted. However, he refused to give Forum 18 the real identity of the pseudonymous author and how to contact him or her. Daniyarov declined to talk to Forum 18 further and put down the phone.

Members of religious minorities in Uzbekistan note that media attacks often go in parallel with increased persecution and more social intolerance experienced by members of minorities. Protestants were particularly concerned in December 2006 by a prime-time national television attack on Protestant churches, screened in two parts two nights running. The programme coincided with raids and fines on Protestant communities (see F18News 19 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=890). The programmes were repeated later, while newspaper attacks on religious minorities have continued intermittently.

Uzbekistan has the harshest controls on religious activity of all the former Soviet republics. All unregistered religious activity is illegal – in defiance of Uzbekistan's international human rights commitments – and registration is all but impossible for religious communities the government does not like. Religious literature is subject to censorship. Among religious minorities, Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses face the greatest difficulties.

One Pentecostal pastor, Dmitry Shestakov, and two Jehovah's Witnesses, Irfon Khamidov and Dilafruz Arziyeva, are serving criminal sentences to punish them for their peaceful religious activity. None was freed in the recent prisoner amnesty, though a Baptist and another Jehovah's Witness were (see F18News 16 January 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1071).

The majority Islamic community's religious freedom also suffers from the authorities' repression, such as strict controls on the numbers of Muslims allowed to go on the haj or the umra pilgrimages (see F18News 19 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1064). (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 on freedom of thought, conscience and belief 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>.

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY