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UZBEKISTAN: Physical assaults by police on Jehovah's Witnesses

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Uzbek police have threatened and physically assaulted members of the Jehovah's Witness religious minority, following raids on homes in Samarkand, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. In one case, a young female Jehovah's Witness was taken to a police station, stripped and touched inappropriately by an apparently drunk police officer, Akmal Tilyavov. Asked by Forum 18 why he needed to question her alone and search her, he responded: "I cannot give you any information on that since we are a closed organisation." Asked directly whether he had touched her inappropriately, Tilyavov's tone of voice changed in apparent embarrassment. He refused to answer directly. "Why don't you talk to the Chief of the Division," he eventually said. Jehovah's Witnesses complain that no warrants were provided to justify the raids, nor was legal protocol adhered to. Various personal belongings disappeared from the homes searched. The raids were a week after a Jehovah's Witness student was expelled from a Samarkand school.

Police officers and local officials in the central Uzbek city of Samarkand [Samarqand] raided the homes of local Jehovah's Witnesses and took 18 congregation members to the police station, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 News Service on 11 March. About 18 different homes of adherents were searched in the raids, most of which took place on 17 February, Jehovah's Witnesses stated. They say that during questioning at the police station, one young female Jehovah's Witness was stripped and touched inappropriately by an intoxicated police officer. The police officer concerned refused to answer Forum 18's question about whether he did so or not. The raids came a week after a Jehovah's Witness student was expelled from a local college.

The Jehovah's Witness community in Samarkand is one of more than 30 Jehovah's Witness communities in Uzbekistan – and many more of other faiths - that have been unable to gain state registration (see F18News 21 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1009). In defiance of international human rights conventions, Uzbekistan bans all activity by unregistered religious communities.

One Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18 on 12 March that the young female Jehovah's Witness was taken to Samarkand Regional Police Department at 6 pm on 7 February. She was taken to the Investigations Division of the police Anti-terrorism Department, and was questioned by an apparently drunk officer named Akmal Tilyavov. The Jehovah's Witness said that in the absence of witnesses, the officer searched her and touched "intimate parts of her body". She was released from the police station only at 10 pm.

Forum 18 reached Tilyavov on 13 March to ask about the questioning of the young female Jehovah's Witness. Asked why he needed to question her alone and why he needed to search her, he responded: "I cannot give you any information on that since we are a closed organisation." Asked directly whether he had touched her inappropriately, Tilyavov's tone of voice changed in apparent embarrassment. He refused to answer directly. "Why don't you talk to the Chief of the Division," he eventually said.

Forum 18's call on 13 March to Bahadyr Kazakov, the Chief of the Investigations Division, was directed to Serzod Hakverdiev, the Assistant Chief. He confirmed that Tilyavov had conducted the questioning of the young female Jehovah's Witness but would not comment on whether Tilyavov had acted inappropriately. "I think you should talk to Kazakov about it," he said. Forum 18 tried to reach Kazakov of the district police several times, but the phone went unanswered.

Between 12 and 14 March, Forum 18 unsuccessfully tried to reach Akabir Kurbanov, who participated in and assisted the Regional Police Department with the raids. Three times Forum 18 was asked to call back, and each time given different reasons why Kurbanov was not there to answer the call.

Members of religious minorities have often complained to Forum 18 about physical assaults and threats by Uzbek officials (see eg. F18News 4 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1029).

The raids on the Jehovah's Witnesses in Samarkand coincided with attacks on other religious communities elsewhere in Uzbekistan. A Baptist in the eastern city of Fergana [Farghona] was fined the equivalent of nine months' average wages, a Pentecostal pastor near the capital Tashkent fined over two months' average wages and Grace Presbyterian Church in Tashkent was forced to halt all its

activities (see F18News 12 March 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1099).

Jehovah's Witnesses also reported on other victims of the mid-February raids. A 17-year-old boy, had his hair pulled and was hit repeatedly on the head, they said. Also a 14-year-old girl was interrogated alone and was threatened with being beaten. All of the victims faced extreme pressure to incriminate fellow members and disclose private information. All were severely verbally abused and threatened with physical assault. The Jehovah's Witnesses insist that the "obvious intent" of the police was to intimidate and pressure all involved to deny their faith. Some of the officers participating in these raids were drunk, as were "eye-witnesses" called on to serve as search witnesses.

In many of the cases, Jehovah's Witnesses complain that no warrants were provided to justify the raids, nor was legal protocol adhered to. Various personal belongings disappeared from the homes of the individuals searched, including identification papers and employment documents. An infirm 86-year-old woman was not able to move as the police searched her son's home and confiscated both their belongings.

One Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18 that the community filed a complaint on 21 February with the Prosecutor of Samarkand region Bakhtiyor Nurmukhamedov, a copy of which was also sent to Uzbekistan's General Prosecutor, Rashidjon Kodirov. He told that they also filed a complaint, a copy of which Forum 18 has seen, with the Uzbek Parliament's Human Rights Ombudsperson, Sayora Rashidova. "Since the matter concerns religion, the Ombudsperson forwarded our complaint to the Committee of Religious Affairs," the Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18.

The person who answered the phone at the Human Rights Ombudsperson's office in Tashkent on 13 March identified himself as Jamshid Yusupov, the Assistant of the Ombudsman. But he was unwilling to answer Forum 18's questions about the raids, molestation and aggressive questioning. "Send us an email and we'll answer you promptly." Forum 18 sent emailed questions on 13 March, but by the end of 17 March had received no response.

Meanwhile, a Jehovah's Witness student was expelled from the Academic Lyceum No.2 of Samarkand's Institute of Economics and Service, Forum 18 was told on 12 March. "The director of the Lyceum was summoned to the Samarkand Regional Police Department on 7 February, and three days later the student was expelled from the school," the source told. Five weeks later, the student has still not been reinstated.

Forum 18 reached the Academic Lyceum No.2 on 17 March to ask why the Jehovah's Witness student had been expelled. Oktam Temirov, the Deputy Director, categorically denied that any student was recently expelled from the school. "Why don't you call back in 20 minutes, and I will check into that once again and assure you that no one was expelled." But when Forum 18 called back neither Temirov nor Bakhitdin Tokhliev, the Director of the school, were there to answer the call.

Ilham Usmonov, the Pro-Rector of the Samarkand Institute of Economics and Service, told Forum 18 on 14 March that students in Uzbekistan are never expelled from schools or higher education institutions for their religious beliefs. "Maybe this student was slack in attendance and academic performance," he said.

Forum 18 tried to reach officials of the government's Religious Affairs Committee on 13 and 14 March to ask why the Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious communities are being harassed, but the phones went unanswered.

Students have in previous years faced expulsion in retaliation for their religious affiliation. Protestant university students in the north-western region of Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston], where all non-Russian Orthodox and non state-controlled Muslim activity is a criminal offence, have long been targeted by the authorities (see F18News 26 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=719). Hare Krishna students in Khorezm region, also in north-western Uzbekistan, have been targeted as well (see F18News 22 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=368).

Uzbekistan has recently stepped up pressure on Jehovah's Witnesses, alongside many other religious communities. Jehovah's Witnesses have been handed heavy fines, one has been imprisoned and another is serving a criminal sentence at home, with 20 percent of her wages being docked (see F18News 16 January 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1071). (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>.

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