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UZBEKISTAN: Chief Rabbi faces expulsion

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

After days of allegations in the state-run media and a check-up by Justice Ministry and Religious Affairs Committee officials, the Justice Ministry wrote to Uzbekistan's Chief Rabbi Abe David Gurevich on 10 April refusing his and a colleague's application for renewal of accreditation. Neither Forum 18 News Service nor the Chief Rabbi have been able to reach the Justice Ministry official who signed the letter, Jalol Abdusattarov, to find out why the decision was taken. "Each time I call the Ministry someone picks up the phone and says he is not there," Gurevich told Forum 18. The community is now concerned that their Chief Rabbi might be forced to leave Uzbekistan. Gurevich pointed out to Forum 18 that the same thing happened to him in 1998, but the decision was later revoked and he received an apology. The Justice Ministry has also threatened to revoke the legal status of the local branch of the Jewish charity, the Joint Distribution Committee.

The Justice Ministry has refused to renew the accreditation of Uzbekistan's Chief Rabbi, Abe David Gurevich, and one of his colleagues, Forum 18 News Service has learned. The rejection of the accreditation renewal for him and for Malka Gurevich, who also works for the Tashkent branch of the Hasidic World Lubavitch Movement, came in a 10 April letter from the Justice Ministry. "Today I received the letter saying that I was not qualified to get the renewal of my accreditation," the Chief Rabbi told Forum 18 from the Uzbek capital on 10 April. He complained that the letter did not specify exactly what the reasons for the denial were. The community is now concerned that their Chief Rabbi might be forced to leave Uzbekistan.

The move against Gurevich comes in the midst of harassment of other faiths in Uzbekistan, including Muslims, Protestant Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses. Forum 18 tried to find out from the government's Religious Affairs Committee why so many religious communities are facing harassment, but Committee official Begzot Kadyrov told Forum 18 not to "disturb us with stupid questions about religious liberties" (see F18News 10 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1112).

The one-page Ministry of Justice letter, of which Forum 18 has seen a copy, states that Gurevich and his colleague exceeded their authority during their work in Uzbekistan, and that their activities went beyond the framework of the purpose and tasks of their organisation as indicated in its charter. The letter was signed by Jalol Abdusattarov, the head of the Ministry's Department for Public Associations and Religious Organisations.

Forum 18 tried to reach Abdusattarov on 10 April to find out why Gurevich and his colleague were being denied accreditation. Abdusattarov's assistant, who would not give his name, said Abdusattarov was not in the office and asked Forum 18 to call back. However, each time Forum 18 did so, Abdusattarov was not there to answer the call.

Gurevich told Forum 18 that Abdusattarov had confirmed to him on 4 April that the Ministry was considering his request to renew the accreditation. However, the Chief Rabbi added that since receiving the rejection letter, he has had no success trying to discuss the issue with the Ministry. "I have not been able to reach Abdusattarov to ask him about the reasons," Gurevich told Forum 18. "Each time I call the Ministry someone picks up the phone and says he is not there."

Gurevich told Forum 18 that he went through the same process in 1998, when the authorities would not renew his accreditation. "They did the same things with me 10 years ago," he told Forum 18. "But then they came back and apologised for the mistake which was made by not renewing my accreditation."

Asked why he thought he was being denied accreditation now, Gurevich pointed to articles about him in the news media alleging that he had misused finances donated for the community. The articles appeared shortly before the Ministry refused to renew his accreditation.

"I have checked up and could not find the authors of some of the articles, and I believe that these were made-up names," Gurevich said. "The Ministry knows very well that I receive funds for charity from Jewish organisations in the US and Russia." The authorities have means to check up on their bank account in Uzbekistan and do so regularly, Gurevich pointed out. "What has happened now that all of a sudden there is a talk about the finances?"

The problems for Gurevich first surfaced in an article in the government-supported website Gorizont.uz on 3 April. The article

accuses Gurevich of embezzling funds entrusted to him, violating Uzbekistan's laws by the fact that his organisation's premises are not at the officially-registered address, and hindering Jews of Uzbek nationality from becoming new leaders of the Jewish community. "Why can't an Uzbek national become the new leader of the Jewish community?" the article asks rhetorically.

A follow-up article on the government-sponsored press-uz.info website on 6 April quoted an anonymous Justice Ministry source as declaring that Gurevich had not corrected "crude violations of the law", despite "repeated demands" by the Ministry. It also said Gurevich uses an official stamp claiming to represent the Rabbinate, even though no such entity is legally recognised in Uzbekistan. "He declares that the laws of the Republic of Uzbekistan don't apply to him," the article quoted the anonymous official as declaring.

Gurevich said the articles were followed by a visit from the Religious Affairs Committee and Justice Ministry officials for a check-up on 7 April. "The officials told us that it was part of planned check-ups," he reported. "But we were not warned about it and no check-ups were planned." The officials checked the accounts and the school, found everything was in order and left, he said.

Russian-born Gurevich, who carries a United States and an Israeli passport, has worked in Uzbekistan since 1990. He has been instrumental in reviving Jewish life in the country, opening a yeshivah, a kolel where the Torah can be studied, and a day school for 350 students, the only Jewish school in Tashkent. He has also organised summer camps, youth clubs and humanitarian aid for the poor. The community estimates the number of Jews in Tashkent at more than 20,000.

The Rabbinate was abolished when Uzbekistan's Religion Law changed in 1998. Since then the Justice Ministry has refused to re-register it, despite the request of the Jewish community (see F18News 16 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=364).

In recent years the Uzbek authorities have deported a number of foreign citizens to curtail their activities in local religious communities. Among recent cases, in June 2007 a Tajik citizen who had lived in Uzbekistan for ten years was deported to punish her for her involvement in a Pentecostal Christian congregation (see F18News 26 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=980).

Speaking to press-uz.info on 2 April, Abdusattarov of the Justice Ministry also threatened to revoke the legal status of another Jewish charity, the local branch of the Joint Distribution Committee. He warned that "violations" in its activity needed to be corrected.

In recent years the Uzbek authorities have closed down a whole range of local and foreign charities and NGOs that were religiously-affiliated or which the government suspected of being religiously-affiliated (see F18News 10 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=852). (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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