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UZBEKISTAN: Baptists forced to pay for own imprisonment

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Judge Bahtierjon Batyrov, who sentenced five Baptist men to ten days' imprisonment on 16 August for attending a service in a private home in a village near Namangan, has defended his decision. "It is true that the courts generally hand down more lenient sentences to such offenders," he told Forum 18 News Service. "But in our Pap district the number of such cases has increased lately and for this reason I decided to sentence the offenders to a harsher punishment." He also fined three Baptist women. He ordered the men to pay for their own imprisonment.

Five Baptist men sentenced to ten days' imprisonment on 16 August for attending a service in a private home have been ordered to pay for their own detention. The five – E. Kim, S. Stanislavsky, Aleksandr Tyan, Nikolai Zulfikarov, and Odiljon Solijonov – were sentenced under Article 240 of the Criminal Code, which punishes "breaking the law on religious organisations", according to a 17 August report from local Baptists reaching Forum 18 News Service. The judge strongly defended his decision to imprison the five, telling Forum 18 he had to make an example of the Baptists as "illegal" religious activity in the district was rising.

The five men, together with three Baptist women, were arrested on 15 August during a service in a home in the village of Khalkabad in the Pap district of Namangan region, in Uzbekistan's section of the Fergana valley. The 16 August hearing, chaired by the head of the Pap district criminal court Bahtierjon Batyrov, was held in Uzbek, even though of those accused only Solijonov understands the language. All five men were sentenced to 10 days' imprisonment, with each being ordered to pay 816 sums for each day of detention in temporary cells in Namangan (63 Norwegian kroner, 8 Euros or 8 US dollars for 10 days). The women Baptists, Irina Boiko, N. Stanislavskaya and the owner of the apartment A. Osnovina, were each handed down a fine under Article 240 of 6,440 sums (51 Norwegian kroner, 6 Euros or 7 US dollars).

The Khalkabad congregation belongs to the Council of Churches (or unregistered Baptists), which split from the All-Union Council of Baptists in 1961, when further state-sponsored controls were introduced by the then Baptist leadership. It has refused state registration ever since, believing that such registration leads to unwarranted state interference. According to one of its pastors in Moscow, it has 3,705 congregations throughout the former Soviet Union.

Judge Batyrov insisted his decision to fine and imprison the Baptists was correct. "I have acted strictly in accordance with the law," he told Forum 18 from Pap on 21 August. "The law on religion in Uzbekistan forbids the activity of unregistered religious organisations. The punishment for this law-breaking is set out both in the administrative code and the criminal code."

When Forum 18 commented that Uzbek courts customarily only hand down fines in such cases without resorting to detention, Batyrov responded: "It is true that the courts generally hand down more lenient sentences to such offenders. But in our Pap district the number of such cases has increased lately and for this reason I decided to sentence the offenders to a harsher punishment."

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