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UZBEKISTAN: 15-day jail term for teaching Baptist beliefs

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

A court in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent has given a 15-day prison term to Pavel Nenno, a deacon of a registered Baptist Church, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Nenno was prosecuted after a raid involving the NSS secret police on his home, where he was "feeding neglected children from poor families" Protestants told Forum 18. In a separate case, 17 people associated with a registered Bukhara Full Gospel church were each fined 100 times the minimum monthly salary, following a raid on a birthday party for a church member. The church had previously been warned for religious activity away from its legal address. In both cases, children's religious activity was identified by the authorities as a factor in their harsh sentences. Asked by Forum 18 why she was opposed to children attending church, one Bukhara headteacher replied that "I want our children to develop." Pavel Peichev, General Secretary of the Uzbek Baptist Union, has published an open letter condemning "increased persecution of believers in all regions" and "a wave of arrests and searches".

A court in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent on 8 April has given a 15-day prison term to Pavel Nenno, a deacon of an officially registered Baptist Church, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The main reason for Nenno's sentence was that he taught Baptist beliefs to children. Condemning Nenno's jailing and other recent raids and arrests of believers peacefully practising their faith, Pavel Peichev, General Secretary of the Uzbek Baptist Union, complains in an open letter of "increased persecution of believers in all regions" and "a wave of arrests and searches". He also states that the Uzbek government wants most Christian churches "to cease to exist". In a separate case, 17 people associated with a Bukhara [Bukhoro] Full Gospel church have each been fined 100 times the minimum monthly salary, for meeting together at a birthday party for a church member.

In both Nenno's jailing and the Bukhara case, children's religious activity has been identified by the authorities as a factor in their harsh sentences.

Peichev of the Baptist Union writes that "the government and authorities are undertaking everything in their power that Christianity would only be represented in the territory of the republic by the Russian Orthodox Church, and that the other Christian denominations would cease to exist. In this connection persecution of believers has intensified, and a wave of searches and arrests has overwhelmed all the regions." His open letter was published on 13 April on the website of the Russian Baptist Union.

As well as Protestant Christians, Muslim followers of the theologian Said Nursi, Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees are also being persecuted (see eg. F18News 6 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1280).

15-day jail sentence

Baptist deacon Nenno was charged with teaching children religion. The authorities raided his house in Tashkent's Sergeli District on 27 March while he was "feeding neglected children from poor families" there, Protestants told Forum 18 from Tashkent. Eight National Security Service (NSS) secret police officers took part in the raid, along with other Sergeli District officials, the Protestants told Forum 18. After a first short detention on 27 March Nenno was released (see F18News 2 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1278).

On 8 April, Nenno was summoned for additional questioning, taken to Sergeli District Criminal Court and sentenced under the Code of Administrative Offences to 15 days in jail. The Court also ordered materials seized from Nenno - which included 77 Christian books and magazines, 33 CDs and DVD discs, 28 video-tapes of Christian films, 40 children's posters on Christian themes, a laptop computer and other computer equipment - to be destroyed, Protestants complained to Forum 18 from Tashkent. Nenno is due to be freed on 23 April.

Sergeli District Criminal Court's phones went unanswered on 14 and 15 April.

A deacon under "special control"

"No one is being admitted to the building where Nenno is held, to give him food or warm clothes," Protestants complained to Forum 18. "He sleeps on the wooden floor in the clothes he was arrested in." A guard at the detention centre told those who wanted to give

Nenno food and clothes that his file records him as being under "special control", and that he is banned from receiving anything. He is fed just one meal a day.

Deputy Hokim Shayislamov said he "would see" that Nenno would receive clothes and food but did not want to discuss the court decision. "I don't have time, I am in an important meeting," he told Forum 18 on 14 April when asked if the court's decision was justified.

17 people fined 100 times minimum monthly wage

In the central city of Bukhara, Judge Mahtob Khaitova of the Regional Criminal Court on 24 March upheld a 3 February court decision to fine 17 persons – 13 members of the registered Sun Bokym Full Gospel Church of Bukhara and four other "non-members" – 100 times the minimum monthly salary. The minimum monthly salary is, from 16 November 2008, 28,040 Soms (128 Norwegian Kroner, 15 Euros or 20 US Dollars). The majority of Uzbekistan's population exist on very low incomes.

Judge Shukhrat Yadgarov, of the Bukhara City Criminal Court, on 3 February fined the following members of the Sun Bokym Church: Eduard and Alla Kim (the pastor of the church and his wife); Gulbahor, Parviza and Feruza Barakayeva; Firaya Abrosimova; Zilola Kalandarova; Muboshira Avezova; Nigora Nafasova; Natalya Orlova; Malika Kobylva; Alisher and Khurshida Mamedov.

Four other "non-members" were also fined: Lola Kodyrova; Fotima Pshikhacheva; Elmira Khasanova; and Olga Yegorova. Protestants have insisted to Forum 18 that these four are "just friends and acquaintances" of church members. All four stated in both court hearings that they came to a birthday party, and that they were not members of the church. However both courts alleged that they are church members.

Significant numbers of the 17 sentenced people are on very low incomes, have other family members dependent on their low incomes, or suffer from serious illnesses.

The court verdict, seen by Forum 18, declares that the 17 were convicted under Administrative Code Article 240 Part 2, which punishes "proselytism", and Article 241, which punishes violating the procedure for teaching religion.

Judge Yadgarov claimed in his decision that on 8 January in Barakaeva's home Eduard Kim was engaged in privately teaching religious doctrines, violating the procedure for teaching religious doctrines, and in missionary activity, converting people of one faith to another. Police Inspector Anvar Fazilov and policeman Alisher Ondayev of Bukhara Police Officer both admit in the court decision that they raided Barakaeva's home on 8 January. "I saw a table laid for a celebration. We found religious materials and literature, which we confiscated," reports Inspector Fazilov.

The Protestants explained to Forum 18 that they had gathered in Barakaeva's home to celebrate Natalya Orlova's birthday. "We had a birthday party in Gulbahor's home. She offered her home since Natalya's daughter had a baby recently, and needed rest," they told Forum 18.

The court decision claims that, even though the people gathered in Barakaev's home told the court that they were celebrating a birthday, the court had reasons to conclude that it was a religious meeting. The reasons the court claims are the presence of religious literature, and Orlova's birthday party being held on 8 January, instead of her 7 January birthday.

Children's religious activity attacked

The court decision states that on 17 September 2008 Bukhara Regional Justice Department had, after a raid, warned the church for holding religious activity outside its legal address. It also claims that, on 3 January 2009, Shahodat Babaeva and Shahnoza Rakhmatova, the headteachers of Schools number 30 and 37 of Bukhara City had complained to the Regional Justice Department, about children attending the church inviting other children from their schools to church activities.

Pressure on school children who attend places of worship in other parts of Uzbekistan - including mosques and Christian churches - as well as on their parents has been increased (see F18News 12 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1239).

Headteacher Rakhmatova of School 37 said she had "no desire whatsoever" to talk about this to "anyone." "Please, understand, I cannot say anything about it," she insisted to Forum 18 on 15 April, when asked why she complained to the Justice Department. She gave the same answer when asked whether she had complained to the Justice Department.

Headteacher Babaeva of School 30 said she did not complain to the Regional Justice Department but "tried to convince" some parents not to take their children to church services in their free time. She suggested instead that the children be brought to sports activities arranged by her school. Told that the court decision specifies that she did complain to the Justice Department, Babaeva said, "It is not true. I never complained." Asked why she was against children attending a church, she responded: "I want our

children to develop."

Officials defend harsh sentences

Judge Khaitova of the Regional Court defended her decision. "I see no violation by the City Court," she insisted to Forum 18 on 14 April from Bukhara. She did not want to talk about the case and said, "Read the decision, I have said everything there."

Judge Yadgarov of the City Court told Forum 18 that if the church is "unhappy" with the decision they may challenge it in the higher courts. "It was my personal judgement," he told Forum 18 when asked why he gave the defendants the maximum possible fine. Asked whether church members may meet to celebrate anything, or for any reasons other than religion, Yadgarov said he could not "answer that question on the phone."

Bukhara Regional Justice Department referred Forum 18 to Kodyr Yuliev, the "Head of Unit" (the name of the Unit was not given) to talk about Sun Bokym Church. Yuliev claimed his Department had not raided Sun Bokym Church, despite the City Court stating that this had happened. Yuliev then referred Forum 18 to Shahzod Hikmatov to comment on whether the Justice Department would remove the church's state registration. "Shahzod is waiting for your call in his office now," he said. Called back and told Hikmatov's number did not respond, Yuliev this time said he is "probably in the region somewhere." (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=1170.

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