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UZBEKISTAN: Enormous fines for religious activity continue

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Uzbekistan continues to impose enormous fines on people exercising their freedom of religion or belief, Forum 18 News Service has learned. In total, 33 people are known to have each been fined up to 100 times the minimum monthly salary in April and May. Fines have been imposed by courts throughout the country, and in some cases appeals against fines have resulted in a reduction. An example was a reduction of fines against six Baptists from 50 times to five times the minimum monthly salary. However in most other cases reductions have not been as significant, for example fine reductions from 80 times to 60, 50 or 40 times the minimum monthly salary. Official hostility continues towards religious literature, in one case literature was ordered to be destroyed after an "expert analysis" from the state Religious Affairs Committee stated that religious books can "only" be used within the confines of the registered religious communities. "Believers are deprived of their right to hold any Christian literature in their homes," Baptists complained to Forum 18. No state officials were willing to discuss the cases.

Courts in Uzbekistan have continued giving enormous fines to religious believers, Forum 18 News Service has learned. In total, 33 people are known to have each been fined up to 100 times the minimum monthly salary in April and May. The fines were imposed by courts in Tashkent, Uzbekistan's capital, Nukus, the central city of the north-western Karakalpakstan [Qorolpoghiston] region, and Samarkand [Samarqand] in south-central Uzbekistan. However, in one case a court near Tashkent substantially reduced - by a factor of ten - fines given to six members of an unregistered Baptist congregation down to five times the minimum monthly salary. Attacks on people possessing religious literature have also continued. Protestants, whose Bibles were ordered to be destroyed by a court in Samarkand, complained to Forum 18 that they "felt insulted" by the Judge's order.

Begzot Kadyrov, Deputy Head of the state Religious Affairs Committee refused to comment on any of the cases. "There's no point in calling us," he told Forum 18 on 3 June. "We will not answer you. No one from the Committee will answer you either. You need to get accreditation from the Foreign Ministry." All other numbers at the Committee went unanswered on 3 June.

The latest court actions come amid a growing crackdown on people exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. Recent appeals by nine Muslim prisoners of conscience against their harsh jail terms have been rejected, Ikrom Merajov and eight others having been sentenced to jail terms of between nine and five and a half years (see F18News 4 June 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1306).

Enormous fines

Courts in Samarkand and Tashkent have imposed heavy fines on Protestants in three cases, the latest known to Forum 18 being on 29 May. Judge Nizamiddin Ernazarov of Samarkand City Criminal Court on 1 May fined three unregistered Protestant Christians. They were charged the Administrative Code's Article 184-2, which punishes illegal production, storage, import or dissemination of religious materials and Article 241, which punishes violation of the procedure for teaching religious doctrines.

The three were: Leysan Jurayeva and Khursid Umurzakov who were each fined 1,402,000 Soms (6,600 Norwegian Kroner, 745 Euros or 990 US Dollars), fifty times the minimum monthly salary, and Anzhela Daminova ten times the minimum monthly salary, or 280,400 Soms (1,320 Norwegian Kroner, 149 Euros or 198 US Dollars).

The minimum monthly salary in Uzbekistan is, from 16 November 2008, 28,040 Soms (128 Norwegian Kroner, 15 Euros or 20 US Dollars). Most of the population is poor, and has to exist on incomes that are very low, so these fines are an enormous burden.

Judge Ernazarov's assistant, who would not give his name, said he knew of the case but could not comment. "Judge Ernazarov is busy hearing a case and cannot talk to you," he told Forum 18 on 3 June.

In another recent case, Tashkent City Criminal Court on 15 May fined Ilgiz Bikinin ten times the minimum monthly salary, or 280,400 Soms (1,320 Norwegian Kroner, 150 Euros or 198 US Dollars) and Vera Prokhorova five times the minimum monthly salary, 140,200 Soms respectively, local Council of Churches Baptists told Forum 18. Council of Churches congregations refuse state registration as they believe it leads to unwarranted state interference in their activity.

It was not clear what the Baptists were charged with. The Head of Tashkent City Court's Chancellery told Forum 18 on 3 June that "everything is clearly written on their [Prokhorova and Bikinin's] copy of the court decision," and then refused to talk further.

In yet another case, nine Baptists were fined by Tashkent Region's Ahangaran District Criminal Court on 29 May. Judge A. Kadyrov fined Alexandr Brislavsky, Eynulla Mekhtiyev, Zoya Denisova and Valentina Muratova 80 times the minimum monthly salary each, and Yelena Starovoit, Larisa Shepelenko, Zoya Kuzmenyok, Tatyana Kuzmenyok and Larisa Krivobok were each fined the minimum monthly salary under the Administrative Code's Article 202-1, which punishes "inclination to participate in the activity of illegal social and religious organisations".

The court decision did not state what would become of confiscated literature, including one New Testament, a Gospel of Luke and several other Christian books.

Attacks on religious literature

In the first two cases, Uzbekistan demonstrated its continued hostility to people found with religious literature (see eg. F18News 4 June 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1306). In the cases of the massive Samarkand fines, Judge Ernazarov of Samarkand Criminal Court also ordered the destruction of four Bibles, one New Testament and Psalms, a book titled "Prayer Is Key to Awakening" in the Uzbek language, as well as 91 DVD and CD disks seized from the Protestants.

The Tashkent City Criminal Court also ordered the destruction of literature. Seven booklets were ordered to be destroyed, and 54 books and booklets were ordered to be handed to the state Religious Affairs Committee. The seven booklets were ordered to be destroyed as the Committee's "expert analysis" found that they "contained material of a missionary nature, because of which their import into and dissemination in Uzbekistan is banned." Such "expert analyses" are a routine part of Uzbekistan's extremely severe religious censorship regime (see F18News 1 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1153).

Baptists complained to Forum 18 that the Religious Affairs Committee's "experts" stated that religious books can "only" be used within the confines of the registered religious communities. "Our believers are deprived of their right to hold any Christian literature in their homes," the Baptists complained.

Some fines reduced or cancelled

Despite the continuing imposition of heavy fines, in some cases appeals against fines have resulted in a reduction – although the reduced fines are still large. Judge Mansur Musaev of Tashkent City's Mirzo-Ulugbek District Criminal Court heard several appeal cases in late April and May filed by Protestant Christians given very large fines by the same court. The fines varied between 50 and 100 times the minimal monthly salary, and were imposed on 14 people. Judge Musaev reduced one fine and cancelled another, but upheld the other twelve fines. Forum 18 tried to find out the reasons for the fines, but Judge Musaev said through his secretary Timur (who did not give his last name) that he did not want to comment on any of those cases.

Asked by Forum 18 on 2 June how people could afford to pay such huge fines, Timur responded: "The Court fined them according to the law." Asked why one of the fines was reduced and another cancelled, he said: "We took into account the individuals' financial status and age." Timur then declined to speak further to Forum 18.

Six members of the officially registered Baptist Church of Mirzo-Ulugbek District were given large fines under the Administrative Code's Article 201 part 1, which punishes violation of the procedure of arranging, holding of meetings, gatherings, street marches or demonstrations (see F18News 18 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1270). On 13 May Judge Musaev reduced the fine given to Tatyana Kim from 80 times the minimum monthly salary to 50 times the minimum monthly salary.

Three Protestants were on 13 April fined 100 times the minimum monthly salary (see F18News 24 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1286). Judge Musaev on 30 April cancelled the fine given to Kibriyo Kamilova, and returned the case for a further hearing in the same court.

On 29 May the same Judge Masaev halved the fine imposed on Anastasia Yudina of a registered Baptist congregation from 80 times the minimum monthly wage to 40 times. Yudina had been given the original fine on 27 April under Article 201 part 2 of the Code of Administrative Offences. The same day he halved the fine imposed on another Protestant Natalya Kim on the same charge from 80 to 40 times the minimum monthly wage. Artur Kim had his fine reduced from 80 to 60 times the minimum monthly wage.

On 5 May, the Criminal Court of Almalyk [Olmaliq] heard appeals against fines of fifty times the minimum monthly wage imposed on 13 members of an unregistered Council of Churches Baptist church (see F18News 8 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1282). Fines imposed on six of the Baptists - Akhmedov, Shopova, Danilevsky, Shirayev, Guseva and Struchaeva – were reduced to five times the minimum monthly salary "taking into account their marital and financial status and their age."

However, not all appeals are successful. Judge Sagdulla Ashirmatov of Mirzo-Ulugbek District Court imposed fines on five

charismatic Protestants in two different cases on 13 April, under the Administrative Code's Article 201 part 1 and Article 240, which punishes violation of the Religion Law. Andrey Kim was fined ten times the minimum monthly salary, and Herman Tsoy, Tamara Magay, Yuliya Mun and Sanobar Khydyrova were fined 80 times the minimum monthly salary, a Protestant who wanted to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. On 5 May, Judge Musaev upheld the fines in an appeal case lodged by Kim and Khydyrova.

All the judges in these cases refused to discuss the cases with Forum 18. Judge Noyobov, for example, told Forum 18 on 3 June that "If you came to my office I could talk to you," but then put the phone down. Judge Bazarov's secretary, who did not give his name, repeatedly asked Forum 18 to call back later for two days on 3 and 4 June. Finally, he claimed that "the Judge is busy, and cannot talk to you" on 4 June.

One exit denial overturned

While a number of active religious believers of a number of faiths have been denied the exit visa they need every two years to be allowed to leave Uzbekistan, Natalya Kadyrova, the wife of the pastor of a Protestant congregation in Tashkent, finally received her exit visa in April, Forum 18 has learnt. Kadyrova lodged her application at the Department of Entry, Exit and Legalisation of Citizenship in December 2008 and lodged official protests after her application was denied (see F18News 6 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1264). (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>.

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