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UZBEKISTAN: Sir Walter Scott & Ivan Turgenev sent for "religious expert analysis"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Uzbekistan continues to target unregistered religious activity by Baptists, as well as followers of the approach to Islam of Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The head of the Sports and Culture Division of Namangan local authority, Shokir Koraboyev, has reportedly been arrested by the NSS secret police for Nursi involvement and is apparently being tried with three others. Forum 18 was told that Koraboyev left his post for "health reasons". Also, members of an unregistered Baptist Church in Mubarek have been fined, and threatened by a Public Prosecutor with criminal prosecution if their church does not register within a year. Against international human rights standards, unregistered religious activity is a criminal offence in the country. In another case, after a police raid on a Baptist's home his library has been confiscated and sent for "religious expert analysis", local police told Forum 18. Amongst the books are works by Sir Walter Scott and Ivan Turgenev, a sign language book, a Koran translated into Russian, and a Russian Orthodox prayer book. The books' owner, Pyotr Zvonov, faces charges of "illegally producing, storing, importing and distributing of materials of a religious nature."

Uzbekistan continues to take action against both Baptists who refuse to register with the state, and Muslims who follow the approach to Islam of Said Nursi, Forum 18 News Service has learnt.

More Nursi arrests and trials

The authorities have recently been targeting followers of the Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi, with at least 25 people receiving jail sentences in the past year totalling some 200 years (see F18News 4 June 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1306).

The most recent series of trials have been in Namangan, where earlier trials have also been held (see F18News 29 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1289). A trial started in the Regional Criminal Court on 26 June of four people suspected being Nursi followers. The harakat.net Uzbek agency reported on 30 June that "Shokir Koraboyev, Head of Culture and Sports Division of Namangan City Hokimat [local authority] was arrested by Namangan Regional Department of the National Security Service (NSS) secret police. He is suspected of sponsoring some sportsmen who were Nursi followers."

An official in Namangan city Culture and Sport's Division told Forum 18 on 31 July that Shokir Koraboyev left his position for "health reasons", and that the new Head of the Division is Shukhrat Akralov. Strangely, Akralov said he did not know when he was appointed as the new Head of the Division. "I think Koraboyev resigned possibly on 7 May or something," he told Forum 18. "I am not sure when I was appointed, in May or June."

Asked if the resignation of Koraboyev had anything to do with his alleged involvement with Nursi followers, Akralov said, "The investigation has not finished yet, and so we cannot say anything on his involvement."

An official of the Regional Court's Chancellery, who did not give his name, told Forum 18 on 31 July that "he cannot give any information over the phone." Similarly, Namangan's NSS secret police asked Forum 18 on 31 July to call back later. "It's a wrong number," the officer on duty told Forum 18 when called back.

The state Religious Affairs Committee also refused to talk to Forum 18 on any of the issues on 31 July. Begzod Kodyrov of the Committee hung up the phone before Forum 18 was able to finish the question.

Unregistered Baptists pressured to register

Uzbekistan – in defiance of the international human rights agreements it has signed – has made unregistered religious activity a criminal offence. The most recent known prosecutions for this "offence" were in southern Uzbekistan, in Kashkadarya Region. Judge Shukhrat Rajabov of Mubarek District Criminal Court on 9 July fined Said Tursunov and Vladimir Khanyukov – who belong to the local unregistered Baptist Church – the equivalent of ten times the minimum monthly salary, 280,400 Soms (1,150 Norwegian

Kroner, 130 Euros, or 185 US Dollars) each. They two men were charged under Uzbekistan's Administrative Code's article 240 part 1 and article 241. Article 240 punishes violation of the Religion Law, and article 241 punishes teaching religious doctrines without state permission.

Mubarek's unregistered Baptist church belongs to the Council of Churches Baptists, whose congregations on principle refuse to seek state registration, fearing this would lead to interference by the state.

Judge Rajabov during the trial accused Tursunov and Khanyukov of refusing to register their church, Forum 18 was told by Baptist sources on 30 July. Abdurauf Temirov, the Deputy Prosecutor of Mubarek, warned them saying "if within a year the church does not officially register, we will open a criminal case against you."

The two Baptists were fined for the same "offence" in May 2008, appealed unsuccessfully against this, and have not paid the fines. As the previous fines have not been paid for more than a year, under Uzbek law the fines have lapsed a local legal source told Forum 18 on 29 July. The Baptist congregation has only 10 adult members, and has faced many raids and fines. In 2008 they were warned that children who attended would be imprisoned (see F18News 8 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1169).

The authorities consistently bully children and their parents involved in religious activity, most recently attacking a Baptist children's holiday camp (see F18News 28 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1332).

Judge Rajabov refused on 29 July to answer questions from Forum 18 on what would happen if the latest fines were not paid. "The case is in the Regional Court now because they appealed against our decision," he responded. "Please talk to the Regional Court."

Officials at the Kashkadarya Regional Court on 30 July were unwilling to discuss the case with Forum 18, stating only that the appeal case will be heard on 7 August. Similarly, Mubarek's Prosecutor's Officials would not make comments on the case. Deputy Prosecutor Temirov's number went unanswered on 29 and 30 July.

Library – including Sir Walter Scott & Ivan Turgenev – sent for "expert analysis"

During a raid close to the capital Tashkent, on 17 July at 10 am, a group of 10 officials broke into the home of Pyotr Zvonov, a member of an unregistered Baptist church. The raid – by police and local authority officials – was followed by the confiscation of Zvonov's personal library, Forum 18 was told on 29 July by Baptists who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals. The library consisted of 120 books, several DVDs and CDs, and his personal photo album. Most of the books were Christian and some of them Bibles in different sizes, but there were also works by Sir Walter Scott and Ivan Turgenev, a sign language book, a Koran translated into Russian, and a Russian Orthodox prayer book.

Bekabad District Police are preparing to bring charges against Zvonov for "illegally producing, storing, importing and distributing of materials of a religious nature" under the Administrative Code's article 184-1," the source said. Very strict censorship and literature bans are imposed in Uzbekistan (see F18News 1 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1153).

Bahrom Tajimatov of Bekabad police, who took part in the raid, claimed that the authorities acted on a tip-off from a "friend" of Zvonov that he stored religious literature in his home. "We have sent the books for religious expert analysis," he told Forum 18 on 24 July. "It will depend of the results of the analysis whether or not we open a case against Zvonov."

Asked why people are not allowed hold Bibles or Korans in their homes, Tajimatov said, "He [Zvonov] held Bibles in the Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Tajik languages." He did not want to further discuss the issue and ended the call.

Officials reprimanded

In Almalyk [Olmalik], Tashkent Region, the Brislavski family – Sergei, Olga and Yekaterina – have received two official letters stating that officials have been reprimanded for actions against the family. G. Mukhamedov, Almalyk Prosecutor, stated on 26 June that administrative action will be taken against S. Zhumabayev, Almalyk Bailiff. On 23 June, O. Norov, Chief of Internal Security Unit of Almalyk Bailiffs, wrote saying that Bailiff Zhumabayev was reprimanded on 18 June for procedural violations when he took action against members of the Brislavski family. Forum 18 has seen copies of both letters.

The Brislavskis were earlier harassed on several occasions by Almalyk Bailiffs trying to force them to pay the fines imposed on them by the Almalyk City Criminal Court on 3 April, Baptists have told Forum 18. The Brislavskis along with 10 other members of the local unregistered Baptist church were fined fifty times the minimum monthly wage (see F18News 8 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1282).

The Brislavskis also, in response to their complaint against the Court decision, received a letter from S. Parpiyev, Chairman of Almalyk City Court saying that the Court made a decision to uphold the fines imposed on them, the unregistered Baptists have told Forum 18. (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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