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UZBEKISTAN: Repression of Muslim and Christian religious activity continues

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Mekhrinisso Hamdamova, a Muslim holding a state appointment, has been arrested for holding unauthorised religious meetings in her home, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Over 30 of her family and others have been arrested, human rights defender Surat Ikramov told Forum 18. The official overseeing religious issues in Hamdamova's city told Forum 18 "probably she did something unlawful so she was arrested." 11 Protestants have been fined because they were together for a meal in a friend's house, the fines ranging between 50 and 10 times the minimum monthly wage. Similarly 17 Protestants have been fined for possessing "illegal" religious literature. The judge in the latter case, asked why he ordered a copy of the New Testament in Uzbek and other literature to be destroyed, angrily told Forum 18 that "it was all kept illegally." Finally an appeal following the conviction of Baptists for running a children's holiday camp is due on 4 December. A mysterious "burglary" of a relative of one of the Baptists has also taken place.

Mekhrinisso Hamdamova, a Muslim woman in the south-western city of Karshi [Qarshi], has been arrested for holding unauthorised religious meetings in her home, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Surat Ikramov, a human rights defender, told Forum 18 that 12 officials from the National Security Service (NSS) secret police and the ordinary police broke into her home at 6 am on the morning of 5 November. They searched her home, based on a warrant issued by Khudaygul Turdiboyev, Kashkadarya Regional Prosecutor. Two Uzbek films and a book given to Hamdamova as a gift by Uzbekistan's Muslim Board were confiscated.

The search warrant, a copy of which Forum 18 has seen, states that Hamdamova's arrest and the search were authorised because "Hamdamova and others have held unauthorised religious meetings in their homes with the purpose to unite people in jamoat [a term used in Uzbekistan for the Muslim community], attract youth to jamoat, and broaden their ranks."

Muslim religious activity has been particularly targeted by the authorities during 2009, with 47 known prisoners of conscience, who are followers of the approach of Turkish theologian Said Nursi, being sentenced to long prison terms this year (see F18News 31 August 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1344).

Hamdamova graduated from Khodja Bukhoriy Islamic College in 2006 with excellent marks and attended specialised courses in Islamic studies in 2007. She was in 2008 appointed by Kashkadarya regional authorities to be responsible for work with youth and solving conflicts in mahallas (local residential areas). Her appointment was on the recommendation of Usman Alimov, Uzbekistan's Chief Mufti, and Forum 18 has seen a copy of the recommendation dated 8 April 2008.

Her role would have involved her in controlling freedom of religion or belief. A document from Andijan [Andijon] regional administrations has revealed the extent to which the authorities issue orders to religious communities – which they are expected to obey (see F18News 21 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=959). Chief Mufti Alimov is himself closely involved in repressing religious freedom, for example limiting the numbers of people who make the haj pilgrimage (see F18News 5 December 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1226). The state authorities already control all leading Muslim appointments, from the Chief Mufti downwards. This is the only religious community where its leaders are nominated directly by the state (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1170).

Prosecutor Turdiboyev told Forum 18 on 17 November that he could "only" talk about the case "in his office." "I cannot say anything concrete now," he said and hung up the phone.

The Assistant to Mamatkul Rajabov, Deputy Hokim (Head of Administration) of Kashkadarya Region, who oversees religious issues, told Forum 18 on 18 November that Rajabov was not available to talk on the case. He also refused to talk and hung up the phone.

Gulchohra Shukurova, the official overseeing religious issues at Karshi City Hokimat (Administration) said that she did not personally know Hamdamova but "probably she did something unlawful so she was arrested." Told that she taught Islam to women and youth by a recommendation given by the Mufti of Uzbekistan, Shukurova told Forum 18 on 18 November, "I will look into the

matter and talk to you later."

Arrests of other Muslim women in various parts of Kashkadarya region followed. Zulhumor Hamdamova (Mekhrinisso's sister), mother of 4 children, as well as her daughter Nigora Nasirova, mother of 3 children, the youngest of whom is only 2 months old, Nodira Buriyeva (Mekhrinisso's niece), mother of 3 children, the youngest of whom is 6 months-old, Rahima Buriyeva (Mekhrinisso's niece), mother of 3 young children, Hikoyat Imomova (Mekhrinisso's daughter-in-law), mother of 3 young children, Bahtishod Khujayeva and Yulduz Tukhtayeva were all arrested on 5 November, Forum 18 was told by human rights defender Ikramov.

"Based on the words of witnesses, at least 30 Muslim women have been arrested in this case, who are all kept in the isolation wards of Karshi city," Ikramov told Forum 18. "These women are subjected to psychological torture and intimidation so they will give testimonies against Mekhrinisso Hamdamova."

A state Religious Affairs Committee official, who did not give his name, told Forum 18 on 18 November that all the responsible officials are away from the capital Tashkent. He refused to make any comments on this or any other cases.

Fined for being together

On 23 October Judge Oydin Normakhmatov of the southern Surkhandarya region's Jarkurgan District Criminal Court fined eleven local Protestants. They were fined under the Administrative Code's articles 240 ("breaking the Religion Law") and 241 ("teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately"), for allegedly holding an unauthorised religious meeting. The prosecutions follow a raid by police on the home of Zoya Kogay, when she and the other fined Protestants were present.

Zoya Kogay, Dmitri Inyushev, Yupiter Li, Shokir Rakhmatullayev, and Berdiyoy Mamadiyoyev were each fined the equivalent of 50 times the minimum monthly wage or 1,682,250 Soms (6,180 Norwegian Kroner, 740 Euros, or 1,100 US Dollars). Muhabbat Kobulova was fined the equivalent of 30 times the minimum monthly wage or 1,009,350 Soms (3,700 Norwegian Kroner, 445 Euros, or 660 US Dollars). Shopulat Khamrayev, Kamila Sattarova, Olesya Sharipova, Anton Chaplinski, Chori Kulkorayev were each fined the equivalent of 10 times the minimum monthly wage or 336,450 Soms (1,250 Norwegian Kroner, 150 Euros, or 220 US Dollars).

The minimum monthly wage from 1 August 2009 is 33,645 Soms (125 Norwegian Kroner, 15 Euros, or 22 US Dollars).

Forum 18 was told by local Protestants that they had just gathered for a meal together, and not for a religious meeting.

Judge Normakhmatov's assistant told Forum 18 on 18 November to call back after lunch. Called later, he said that Normakhmatov already left the office. He took down the name of Forum 18 but refused to say anything on the case.

The Police confiscated Christian books and CDs from Kogay's home, but nothing is said in the court decision – which Forum 18 has seen - about what will happen to the confiscated literature.

Fined for possessing religious literature

On 5 October, Judge Jakhonali Botyrov of the north-western Khorezm region's Urgench [Urganch] Criminal Court fined 17 local Protestants. They were prosecuted for possessing religious literature under the Administrative Code's article 184, which imposes fines and confiscation of religious literature, and the Criminal Code's article 33 ("repeat offences").

Uzbekistan imposes severe censorship on all religious literature, and frequently confiscates and destroys literature and related material in police and NSS secret police raids (see F18News 1 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1153).

Viktor Galaktionov, Anatoliy Stinskiy, Arkadi Belik, Viktor Denesov were each fined the equivalent of 20 times the minimum monthly wage or 560,800 Soms (2,060 Norwegian Kroner, 245 Euros, or 370 US Dollars). Alisher Erimov, Bashorat Djumaboyeva, Oleg Trifanov, Dono Matyokubova and Oksana Abdullayeva were each fined five times the minimum monthly wage or 140,200 Soms (515 Norwegian Kroner, 60 Euros, or 90 US Dollars). Maksuda Akhmedova was fined three times the minimum monthly wage or 84,120 Soms (310 Norwegian Kroner, 37 Euros, or 55 US Dollars). Yusufbay Narboyev, Parkhad Matyokubov, Zulaykho Matyokubova, Nigora Avazgeldiyeva, Ikrombek Bobozhonov, Bakhtiyor Yangiboyev and Yunusbek Khudaybergenov were each fined twice the minimum monthly wage or 56,080 Soms (250 Norwegian Kroner, 30 Euros, or 44 US Dollars).

The court decision – which Forum 18 has seen – states that on 17 May regional NSS secret police and Urgench ordinary police raided the home of Galaktionov and confiscated Christian literature. It is not clear from the court decision how the other Protestants were found guilty of violating the law. It merely states that the guilt of the other Protestants "was proved based on the testimonies of the witnesses in the administrative case, and other objective evidences in the case." No names of witnesses or "objective evidences" were given in the decision.

Judge Botyrov also ordered that "evidence" seized from the Protestants should be destroyed. This consisted of 41 Christian books and magazines, including an Injil or New Testament in Uzbek. 12 Christian films on video tapes were also ordered to be destroyed. He told Forum 18 on 17 November that the Protestants were fined for holding an unauthorised religious meeting in a private home. Asked why he ordered the Christian literature as well as the New Testament to be destroyed, he angrily replied that: "It was all kept illegally." He then terminated the call.

Appeal due on children's camp case, and a mysterious "burglary"

Dmitri Pitirimov, who ran the Joy Baptist Children's Camp, told Forum 18 on 12 November that an appeal case will be heard on 4 December in Tashkent City Criminal Court on the administrative punishment handed down to him and his colleagues, Pavel Peichev, Head of Uzbekistan's Baptist Union and Yelena Kurbatova, the Union's Accountant.

At the end of a high-profile trial all three Baptists were each fined 260 times the minimum monthly wage. They were also deprived of the right to lead an organisation's administrative and financial activity for three years. The Baptist Union was also order to pay allegedly unpaid taxes (see F18News 29 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1369). Tashkent City Criminal court refused to confirm to Forum 18 the date of the appeal hearing. "Please, talk to Yakkasaray Court, since they determined the appeal date," a chancellery official, who did not give his name, told Forum 18 on 18 November. However, Judge Akbarov's Assistant, who did not give his name, told Forum 18 on 17 November to ask the Baptists.

A mysterious "burglary" of Pitirimov's daughter's home took place on the night of 11 November, which he links to his and colleagues convictions. "Everything in her home was turned upside down. Money and valuables were not touched. However, documents on the "Joy" Children's Camp, which I had left in her kitchen, were spilled with kerosene," Pitirimov told Forum 18. The perpetrator had left the gas stove's burners open. Pitirimov said that on 12 November he informed police of the burglary.

Judge Akbarov's Assistant said that he does not link the "burglary" of Pitirimov's daughter's home to his prosecution. "I can also say that the death of my neighbour's cow is an attack against me," he told Forum 18. (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all 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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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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