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UZBEKISTAN: Fines to follow Protestant church closure

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

The deputy head of the Upper Chirchik district administration, Shukhrat Tursunbayev, has insisted he did nothing wrong in closing down an unregistered Protestant church in the village of Ahmad Yassavy on the outskirts of Tashkent. "We were acting within the law," he told Forum 18 News Service. "According to the Uzbek law on religion the activity of an unregistered religious community is forbidden." Police officers and local officials burst into the Sunday service of the Friendship Church on 7 September, took down the names of all those present, sealed the church and warned the Protestants they will be prosecuted under the Code of Administrative Offences.

Officials who broke up the Sunday service of an unregistered Protestant church in a village near the capital Tashkent have sealed the building to prevent further services from taking place and have threatened church members with fines for "illegal religious activity", Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The Friendship Church in the village of Ahmad Yassavy on the outskirts of Tashkent was holding its service on 7 September when a group of police officers and officials of the district authorities burst in, a local Protestant who preferred not to be named told Forum 18. The raid was led in person by the deputy head of the Upper Chirchik district administration, Shukhrat Tursunbayev. The officials took down the names of all those present at the church, sealed up the church and warned the believers that they would soon be prosecuted under the Code of Administrative Offences.

Tursunbayev strongly defended his closure of the church. "We were acting within the law," he told Forum 18 on 29 September. "According to the Uzbek law on religion the activity of an unregistered religious community is forbidden." He said he had handed a report of his investigation into the church's activity to the divisional police officer and "the church leadership is going to be fined soon for operating without registration".

Article 8 of Uzbekistan's law on religion bans the activity of any unregistered religious organisation, in violation of the country's international human rights commitments. Uzbekistan is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which includes a commitment for religious believers to meet freely. Additionally, Article 2 of Uzbekistan's religion law states that "if different rules are set out in an international agreement signed by the Republic of Uzbekistan from those contained in the Republic of Uzbekistan's legislation about freedom of conscience and religious organisations, then the rules of the international agreement will take precedence".

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