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UZBEKISTAN: "Anti-terror" raid on Protestant worship, beatings, and fines

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Five Baptists in Uzbekistan have failed to have fines for taking part in an unregistered worship service overturned on appeal, local Baptists have told Forum 18 News Service. The fines, as well as beatings given to two Baptists by police, followed an "anti-terror" raid - as police described it - on the congregation as they met for worship. During the raid by 20 police officers, officers swore at church members and seized hymnbooks, personal Bibles and even handwritten notebooks from church members "using physical force, even tearing books from the hands of children". The duty officer at Samarkand police, who would not give his name, insisted to Forum 18 that "we do not beat believers". The state Religious Affairs Committee ruled that the confiscated literature including Bibles and hymns were illegal. The convicted Baptists told both courts they consider the fines unfounded, and a violation of their religious freedom. They have continued to lodge official protests, are pressing for confiscated religious literature to be returned – and for action to be taken against a police officer who beat two of them.

Five Baptists in Samarkand [Samarqand] in Uzbekistan have failed to have fines for taking part in an unregistered worship service overturned on appeal, local Baptists have told Forum 18 News Service. On 14 October Judge S. Ashurov of Samarkand Regional Criminal Court, in the centre of Uzbekistan, rejected the Baptist's appeals against the fines imposed on 21 September. The Baptists told both courts they consider the fines unfounded, and a violation of their religious freedom. They have continued to lodge official protests, are pressing for the confiscated religious literature to be returned – and for action to be taken against a police officer who beat two of them.

The fines and beatings followed a so-called "anti-terror" raid by 20 police officers on the congregation, while they were worshipping in August. They belong to the Baptist Council of Churches, which rejects state registration in all the former Soviet states where it operates. Witnesses present described the raid as being conducted "using physical force, even tearing books from the hands of children"

"No-one has been beaten"

Forum 18 tried to reach Senior Lieutenant Lutfullo Pardaev, who the Baptists say beat two of them during the raid, but local police refused to give his telephone number. The duty officer at police station 17 in Samarkand, who did not give his name, told Forum 18 on 25 October that Pardaev was not at the station, and he could not pass on a mobile number. "If he beat someone, you'll have to come and talk to him," the policeman said.

The telephone in the office of Anvar Ikramov, head of Samarkand City Police, went unanswered when Forum 18 called on 25 October.

The duty officer at Samarkand police, who would not give his name, insisted that "we do not beat believers". "No-one has been beaten," he told Forum 18 on 25 October. "If it does happen we take measures." He declined to discuss anything further, including why the police launched an "anti-terrorist" raid on the Baptist congregation.

No one at the government's Religious Affairs Committee was prepared to tell Forum 18 on 25 October why it ruled that the church's literature is banned simply because the congregation is not registered.

"Anti-terror" raid "using physical force"

Trouble began for the Baptists when 20 police officers, only three of them in uniform, raided the church's Sunday morning worship service on 15 August. Police claimed to people in the congregation that this was an "anti-terror" operation. Church members told Forum 18 that police filmed the congregation against its wishes with several cameras.

Officers swore at church members and seized hymnbooks, personal Bibles and even handwritten notebooks from church members "using physical force, even tearing books from the hands of children". Officers drew up a record of the confiscated books but refused

to hand over a copy of the record. "They seized a digital camera from one sister, forcing back her fingers," church members complained. "They took away one brother, having forced his hands behind his back."

Officers forced those present to write statements about their activity. In the presence of two official witnesses, both from the local Mahalla Committee, police also recorded the identity of all those present. Veniamin Nemirov, in whose home the church meets, had his passport confiscated. Police then refused to return it.

Church members managed to get the police to allow mothers of young children and disabled church members to leave, but officers took ten church members to the local police station. There they were questioned individually about why the church refuses to register, and officers tried to pressure individual church members to "co-operate" with them. Police accused one of the detained church members, Alisher Abdullaev, and his family of "betraying" their Muslim faith. Nemirov was threatened with criminal prosecution. However, all ten were freed after several hours.

The police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police seek to closely monitor religious communities, for example with the use of informers "co-operating" with the authorities (see F18News 5 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1014).

Certificate of conduct from Mahalla Committee demanded

On 16 August, local police officers telephoned church members, telling them to come to the local police posts with certificates about their conduct from the Mahalla Committee, the local official body in charge of city districts. Church members refused to do so without a written summons.

Mahalla Committees retain extensive records on local residents, especially on known active religious believers. These committees are used by the authorities as a key instrument in their attempts to control Uzbek society (see eg. F18News 1 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=698).

Beatings by police go unpunished

On 17 August, Senior Lieutenant Pardaev took Vladimir Abramov to police station 17. When Abramov refused to write a statement, Pardaev "hit him several times in such a way as not to leave a mark", church members told Forum 18. Pardaev then went to Abdullaev's home, but Alisher was not present. Instead he took Abdullaev's wife Oksana and their 20-day-old baby to the police station. There he threatened to send Oksana to a special reception centre and her baby to a children's home. After three hours he let her leave with her baby.

The following day, 18 August, Senior Lieutenant Pardaev returned to the Abdullaev home and took Alisher to the police post. When Alisher refused to sign a statement, Pardaev hit him in the chest and the face, leaving visible bruises. "Witnesses to the swearing and the shouts of the police officer were Alisher's mother and church members, who were standing at that time near the police station," church members told Forum 18.

After Abdullaev complained to the Samarkand Prosecutor's Office about the beating, Alisher Zakirov of the Prosecutor's Office ordered that a medical examination be carried out. Although the medical examination took place on 20 August, no action was taken against Pardaev. Abdullaev complained about this inaction.

The Prosecutor's Office declined to put Forum 18 through to Zakirov on 25 October, insisting that Forum 18 should visit them in person. Abramov has declined to file a complaint against Pardaev.

The authorities often use violence and torture, or threats of this, against those they detain (see eg. F18News 5 August 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1476).

Pressure in Samarkand, and on unregistered activity elsewhere

In defiance of its international human rights commitments, Uzbekistan bans religious activity without state approval. Fines for unregistered worship are frequent, as are fines for possessing or offering others religious literature or films which the state Religious Affairs Committee has banned (see F18News 25 October 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1502).

Religious communities in Samarkand face particular pressure, with many Christian churches having been closed down by the authorities, usually by denying them state registration. Seven churches are known to have been stripped of registration in the past four years (see F18News 15 June 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1457). Amongst pressure on other faith communities in the city was the sentencing, in July 2009, of 11 readers of the Muslim theologian Said Nursi to between seven and eleven years' imprisonment (see F18News 31 August 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1344).

Bibles and hymnbooks illegal

After the raid, police sent the confiscated Christian literature to the Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent. In an 18 August assessment, it ruled that such literature – including Bibles and hymnbooks - can only be used within a religious organisation that has a centralised, registered body which can give such permission. It said that as the Samarkand Baptist congregation does not have such a body, such literature is illegal.

The assessment added that two of the fifteen items, a Russian-language children's Christian magazine 'Tropinka' (Path) and an Uzbek-language leaflet 'Iso Masih Kim Uzi' (Who is Jesus the Messiah), are banned for import or distribution within the country.

All religious literature - even texts such as the Bible and Koran – is under severe censorship administered by the state Religious Affairs Committee (see eg. F18News 1 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1153).

The trial

On 21 September, Judge J. Gaybullaev at Samarkand Criminal Court found the five Baptists - Nemirov, Abramov and Abdullaev, as well as Mikhail Lyubivy and Lyubov Lyubivaya – guilty of breaking the Administrative Code's Article 241, by holding a worship service in Nemirov's home. This Article bans "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".

The five Baptists told the court that they did not consider they had committed any "offence" by meeting "for joint prayer and worship of God" without state registration, which they said they did each Sunday. They referred to Article 29 of the Constitution and Article 3 of the Religion Law, which both guarantee freedom of conscience.

Article 29 of Uzbekistan's Constitution states that "everyone shall be guaranteed freedom of thought, speech, and convictions", and states that "everyone shall have the right to seek, obtain, and disseminate any information" - but with a significant diluting of the claim with an unspecific all-embracing phrase: "except that which is directed against the existing constitutional system and in some other instances specified by law". The vagueness of meaning of this additional phrase breaks the country's international human rights obligations.

Article 3 of the Religion Law includes the commitment that "freedom of conscience is the guaranteed, constitutional right of citizens to confess any religion or no religion." It adds that force cannot be used to force someone to conduct religious activity, or to prevent them from "taking part in services, religious rites and ceremonies or receiving religious education".

The verdict

Nemirov, Abramov and Abdullaev were each fined 452,150 Soms (1,600 Norwegian Kroner, 200 Euros, or 275 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). Lyubivy was fined 361,720 Soms (1,290 Norwegian Kroner, 160 Euros, or 220 US Dollars) and Lyubivaya 271,290 Soms (970 Norwegian Kroner, 120 Euros, or 165 US Dollars).

Since 1 August 2010, the minimum monthly salary has been 45,215 Soms (around 162 Norwegian Kroner, 20 Euros, or 28 US Dollars at the inflated official rates). Reliable economic data is a state secret in Uzbekistan, but it is known that much of the population is economically poor.

The verdict also ruled that all the confiscated literature – including personal Bibles and handwritten music – must be given to the state Religious Affairs Committee. The Court did not order that the literature must be destroyed, although this often happens (see eg. F18News 25 October 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1502). (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>.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY