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UZBEKISTAN: Police assault Baptist, Imams fired, gift to Children's Home a "violation"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Uzbekistan has levied a large fine on a Baptist in the capital Tashkent – who was physically assaulted by police – for giving a children's Bible to a work colleague, Forum 18 News Service has learned. The policeman who assaulted Galina Shemetova denied to Forum 18 that he had done anything wrong. Possibly fuelled by the authorities concerns about the impact of the Arab Spring uprisings for freedom, three Tashkent Muslim clerics who studied in Arab countries have been dismissed from their posts. No reasons have been given for the dismissals, and officials refused to answer when asked by Forum 18 whether the dismissals had anything to do with where the clergymen studied. And the officially registered Zarafshan Baptist Church has been raided and given an official warning for making a financial gift to a local children's home. The raid followed the Church's required filing of its financial statements with the regional Justice Department, who then ordered the raid. Among a list of – disputed – violations found by officials is that a tap did not have a notice with the personal data of the person responsible for the Church's use of water. No officials would tell Forum 18 what will happen to the funds the Church gave the Happiness Children's Home.

Uzbekistan has levied a large fine on a Baptist in the capital Tashkent – who was physically assaulted by police – for giving a children's Bible to a work colleague, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Possibly fuelled by the authorities' concerns about the impact of the Arab Spring uprisings for freedom, three Tashkent Muslim clerics who studied in Arab countries have been dismissed from their posts. And an officially registered Baptist Church has been given an official warning for making a financial gift to a local Children's Home.

Baptist physically attacked by police...

Galina Shemetova, a female member of an officially registered Baptist Church, gave a children's Bible in the summer 2010 to one of her work colleagues at the Tashkent Metro. She was subsequently charged under the Code of Administrative Offences' Article 240 Part 2 ("Attracting believers of one confession to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity"). The existence of this "offence" breaks the international human rights standards Uzbekistan has formally committed itself to implement.

On 1 April Shemetova was leaving a Tashkent hospital after medical treatment, for which she had been granted sick leave from her work. Then, in the sight of medical personnel, "police officer Vadim Kim of the Metro Police struck Shemetova on the head, and dragged her by her hair into a police car", a person who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 14 April.

Officer Kim categorically denied to Forum 18 on 14 April that he had done anything wrong. "She is a provocateur. In fact, she was yelling and calling for help for nothing", he claimed. "She was hiding from the police for one week pretending to be ill, and we needed to bring her to the court." Asked what Shemetova had done wrong, Kim replied that "she is a missionary and violated the law". He then hung up the phone.

As is usual in cases of police violence and brutality, no investigation has been launched by the authorities. Violence and torture, or threats of this, is "routine" the UN Committee Against Torture has found. Women in particular are often targeted by such assaults (see eg. F18News 29 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1438).

..and then fined

Judge I. Muhammedova of Tashkent City Hamza District Criminal Court on 1 April fined Shemetova fifty times the minimum monthly salary, 2,486,750 Soms (7,930 Norwegian Kroner, 1,015 Euros, or 1,465 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). He also ordered that the children's Bible be confiscated. The verdict, which Forum 18 has seen, states that "the Court finds that Shemetova's actions can be described as missionary activity and an attempt to convert believers of one confession to another".

Officials of the District Court would not put Forum 18 through to Judge Muhammedova on 14 April. Court Secretary A. Abdusalyamov (who did not give his first name), who also participated in Shemetova's trial, insisted that she "did violate the law".

Asked how presenting a children's Bible to a colleague merited such a large fine, he told Forum 18, "Look, I am not going to explain the Court's decision over the phone."

Fired for fear of the Arab Spring?

In February and March Tashkent Islamic Institute has dismissed Vice-Rector Saidjamol Masayidov, and the Spiritual Administration of Muslims or Muftiate has fired Najmiddin Hasanov, Imam of Tashkent's Jurabek Mosque, and Jabborali Nurmatov, Imam of the capital's Yalangach district Mosque from their positions.

Central Asian dictatorships have been worried by the impact on their populations of the Arab Spring uprisings for freedom, human rights and democracy. This has led some within Uzbekistan to suggest that the dismissals are related to the fact that all three religious teachers have studied in Arab countries. No reason has been given by the authorities for the dismissals.

All officially-permitted Islamic institutions, mosques, clergy and other personnel are under total state control (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1170).

The Islamic Institute official who answered the Rector's phone on 14 April introduced himself as the Rector's Assistant and gave his first name as Davron. He would not give his last name. Asked what the reason for the firing of Masayidov was, he told Forum 18 that: "Only the Rector could tell you why Vice-Rector Masayidov was dismissed. The Rector is not present to talk to you". He hung up the phone when Forum 18 asked whether the dismissal had to do with Masayidov's education abroad.

Abduhamit Tursunov of the Muftiate, the Assistant to its head Usmonhon Alimov, said that he did "not know why the Imams were dismissed". When asked whether the dismissals had anything to do with where the imams studied, he replied "please send your questions in writing to us" and refused to say more.

Faxriddin (who would not give his last name) at the Jurabek Mosque, said that he worked as the Assistant of the Mosque's Imam for a long time, and knew Imam Hasanov well. "He left his job two months ago voluntarily," he told Forum 18 on 14 April. Asked why the Imam left, he said, "I do not know". He declined to talk further and hung up the phone.

Gift to a children's home leads to raid and warning

In the central Navoi [Nawoiy] Region, an officially registered Baptist church's gift to a Children's Home has led to the church being raided and its pastor being given an official warning. Zarafshan Baptist Church decided at its 15 August 2010 general meeting to transfer 400,000 Soms (1,275 Norwegian Kroner, 160 Euros, or 235 US Dollars) to the bank account of the local Children's Home, which is called "Happiness".

The Church – as it is required to do - sends its quarterly financial statements to the regional Justice Department. This led to a raid on 12 March 2011 and a formal written warning from Khudayberdy Norkobilov, Zarafshan's Public Prosecutor, and other officials on 28 March. Zarafshan city officials were reluctant to explain the raid and the warning, but Norkobilov and Nizomiddin Ergashev, head of the city Tax Department, told Forum 18 on 31 March that the order to do this "came from the Justice Department".

Other officials who took part in the raid were O. Sultonov and A. Kahromonov (first names not given) of the city Justice Department, Khurshid Normurodov of the city Tax Department, and Kh. Ergashev (first name not given) of the Public Prosecutor's Office.

The written warning from Public Prosecutor Norkobilov, which Forum 18 has seen, tells Pastor Dmitriy Butov that the Church needs to correct "violations" found by the Zarafshan officials on 12 March, and that the transfer of funds to the Happiness Children's Home breaks the Administrative Code's Article 175 ("Violation of order of cash transactions and financial discipline"). The warning states that "if you violate the same article of the law in future, you may be liable to an administrative punishment".

No official would tell Forum 18 what will happen to the funds the Church gave the Children's Home.

A source from Zarafshan, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that the alleged "violations" were:

- the Church did not have a protocol of the Church's Board appointing Dmitriy Butov as its pastor;
- the Church did not have written regulations on when, where and what time events will be held;
- there was no notice over a water tap giving the personal data of the person responsible for regulating the Church's use of water;
- the Church without a decision of its Board, illegally transferred from its bank account 400,000 Soms to the account of the Happiness Children's Home;

- and that there were no records of the Church's Audit Committee.

The source stated that all these claims are without foundation, noting for example that the decision to give money was made by a church general meeting, and added that "all the other claims by the authorities are based on neither the Charter of the Church nor Uzbekistan's law".

Forum 18 is aware that Pastor Butov already has written a complaint to the Public Prosecutor's Office, challenging the lawfulness of the warning.

The Zarafshan Justice Department's Kahromonov (who refused to give his first name) told Forum 18 on 31 March that he does not understand Forum 18's question, when asked what is wrong with donating money to a Children's Home. He hung up the phone when asked questions about the raid.

"There is nothing wrong with giving gifts to the Children's Home, and you need to pose your questions, to the Justice Department," head of the Tax Department Ergashev told Forum 18 on 31 March. He said that he did not know what decision will be made about the money transferred by the Church. (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://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Uzbekistan>.

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