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UZBEKISTAN: Police beating, axe threat, beating threat

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Police officers assaulted a woman at her home while her parents were being interrogated over their religious activity at the local police station, sources who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 News Service. Officers "kicked the woman and hit her on the head, giving her severe concussion". Police refused to discuss the incident with Forum 18. A Tashkent police officer threatened local Protestant Anvar Rajapov if he continued to challenge a fine of 80 times the minimum monthly wage handed down to punish him for his religious activity. "I have prepared an axe for you, which will be flying after you, observing you, and if need be get you," sources quoted Major Zufar Rashidov as telling him. Police refused to discuss the threats with Forum 18. Tashkent Investigator Aleksandr Ten threatened the son of a Baptist church member that he would "beat him up and put him in prison for three months" if he did not sign statements against the church's pastor and bookkeeper who Ten is seeking to prosecute.

Uzbekistan continues to persecute people exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. One woman in eastern Uzbekistan was beaten into concussion by police while her parents were being questioned in a police station, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Elsewhere a Protestant has been threatened with possible use of an axe by a police officer, and a Baptist in the capital Tashkent, who was physically assaulted by police, was fined. Physical violence and even torture by the authorities is often experienced by people of all faiths in Uzbekistan, but many do not wish to speak of this publicly for fear of state reprisals.

Police in eastern Uzbekistan in the second half of May summoned members of a local religious community for questioning, a relative of some of those questioned has told Forum 18. For fear of state reprisals, the faith, location, names involved and dates are not given.

While members of the community were being questioned at a police station, including the parents of a woman, police came to the home of some of those questioned and searched it. A daughter of the family was present, and when police wanted to examine the car she tried to stop them as she feared that evidence might be planted against her parents. Victims frequently state that evidence is planted by police (see eg. F18News 27 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1399).

The police officers then "kicked the woman and hit her on the head, giving her severe concussion", Forum 18 was told. Several hospitals in a number of places refused to treat her, "under pressure from the police". The woman has since made a mild recovery, but "she sometimes has headaches and vomits".

The parents hope that the authorities will eventually allow their daughter to be treated in a hospital.

Forum 18, while enquiring into a number of incidents, spoke to the relevant police station in June. Police refused to speak to Forum 18, a senior police officer asking Forum 18 to call back later the same day. He then refused to answer his phone, until a subordinate claimed that the superior officer was too busy to come to the phone.

Violence and torture by the authorities, or threats of this, are "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).

Assault victim's appeal against fine rejected

In Tashkent the appeal of a victim of a police assault against a fine has been rejected. Judge A. Shamsutdinova of Tashkent City Criminal Court on 25 April upheld a fine imposed by the city's Hamza District Court on Galina Shemetova. She was fined 2,486,750 Soms (7,930 Norwegian Kroner, 1,015 Euros, or 1,465 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate), or 50 times the monthly minimum wage.

Shemetova, a member of an officially registered Baptist Church, gave a children's Bible to one of her work colleagues at the Tashkent Metro. This led to her being fined under the Code of Administrative Offences' Article 240 Part 2 ("Attracting believers of one confession to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity"). As she was leaving a Tashkent hospital after medical treatment, police assaulted her and dragged her to the original court hearing (see F18News 15 April 2011

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1563).

During the appeal hearing, no notice was taken of the assault by police. Baptists told Forum 18 that Shemetova received the appeal verdict late, on 15 May.

"If need be get you"

Following the failure of an appeal by a Protestant in Tashkent against a fine of 80 times the minimum monthly wage, police have threatened him if he continues to challenge the sentence. Anvar Rajapov was fined on 14 April after a police raid, and literature taken from the home was ordered to be destroyed (see F18News 12 May 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1569).

On 20 May Judge Alymova of the City Criminal Court upheld the fine, a Tashkent Protestant who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 14 June. Rajapov was not notified of the appeal hearing and only learnt of it when given the written decision on 30 May.

Police still hold Rajapov's passport. The Uchtepe District Bailiffs have warned him that unless the fine is paid by 15 June, he will be fined again for not paying the original fine. He was summoned in writing to the Bailiffs' office today (15 June).

In attempt to stop Rajapov from appealing against the police actions and court decisions, Yakkasaray District Police on 25 May summoned Rajapov to the police station. Police Major Sunnat Adylov – who led the original raid on Rajapov's home - and his colleagues Major Zufar Rashidov, Major Shavkat Mirsafarov and Inspector Obid Mukhamedov all spoke to Rajapov.

Major Rashidov told Rajapov: "I have prepared an axe for you, which will be flying after you, observing you, and if need be get you."

Major Adylov refused to return Rajapov's passport, and told him: "No one has the right in Uzbekistan to challenge court decisions".

The other policemen present also threatened Rajapov, with comments such as: "How dare you complain?"; and "Other countries cannot help you, so you should stop complaining".

An officer of Yakkasaray District Police (who would not give his name) on 9 June refused to explain why Rajapov was raided, fined, had literature destroyed, and threatened. Major Adylov on 9 June through an assistant (who also did not give his name) told Forum 18 that he did not want to discuss Rajapov's case, or when Rajapov's passport will be returned.

Rajapov himself has, since the police threats, made written complaints about his treatment to President Islam Karimov, the Supreme Court, and other state agencies.

Prosecutor's Office attempt to extort false statements

The authorities in Tashkent are still attempting to find "evidence" that can be used against a registered Baptist church in the city, a Protestant who did not wish to be named for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 14 June.

The church in April suffered two large-scale raids by the National Security Service (NSS) secret police and the ordinary police. These led to the confiscation of thousands of Christian books, the taking of money that was the personal property of a church member, and fines of between 50 and 100 times the minimum monthly wage (see F18News 19 April 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1564).

Hamza District Tax authorities alleged a claimed non-payment of tax. This led on 28 April to the Church being fined 6,988,500 Soms (22,620 Norwegian Kroner, 2,880 Euros, or 4,090 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). If this fine is not paid, the church has been threatened with criminal charges (see F18News 12 May 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1569).

In another case, Investigator Aleksandr Ten of Hamza District Prosecutor's office is leading a pre-trial investigation in a criminal case brought in Tashkent City's Economic Court against Pastor Konstantin Malchikovskiy and Anna Portova, the church bookkeeper. On 24 June the Economic Court is due to hear the case.

Threat to beat up son and jail him for three months

On 5 and 7 June, Investigator Ten attempted to force church members to write statements that Malchikovskiy and Portova sold religious books, and did not pay taxes on this, church members who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 7 June. In particular, Ten is seeking to acquire "evidence" that the two accused broke Criminal Code Article 189 Part 2 ("Violation of the regulations for trade or delivery of services"). If convicted, the Baptists face up to two years' imprisonment.

On 5 June, Aleksey Bochkarev, and wife and husband Angelina and Sarvar Seytshayev were detained as they were leaving a Baptist Sunday morning worship service. Hamza District police Senior Lieutenants Nabijon Abdurakhmanov and Senior Lieutenant Ulugbek Badalov were described by witnesses as "without any authorisation and forcibly" taking the three to the Public Prosecutor's Office. "Despite psychological pressure" from Investigator Ten, the Baptists refused to sign any statements, Baptists told Forum 18. The three were released later the same day.

Similarly on 7 June the same two police officers brought Bochkarev's son, Vasily Bochkarev, to Investigator Ten's office for questioning. Ten threatened the son that he would "beat him up and put him in prison for three months" if he did not sign statements against Malchikovskiy and Portova. Bochkarev refused to do this and was released the same day, Baptists said.

Officials refuse to comment

A Public Prosecution official, who would not give his name, told Forum 18 on 14 June that he did not know whether the investigation was still going on. (Baptists insisted the same day that it is continuing.) He then referred Forum 18 to Investigator Ten. Told that Ten is not answering his phone, he said that the Investigator "did not come to work today." The official also did not know when Ten would be at work.

Ten had similarly been unavailable or not in work when Forum 18 had called earlier. Hamza District Police did not answer their phone when Forum 18 rang on 9 June.

Bibles and other literature confiscated, charges pending

Also in Tashkent, two police officers who did not give their names on 26 May detained Sergey Shilnikov at Amir Temur metro station. The officers searched Shilnikov and confiscated one Bible, two Gospels of John, and two other Christian books, Baptists told Forum 18. Shilnikov refused to either write a statement or sign a report written by the police officers.

As of 14 June, Baptists understand that the Metro Police Force are preparing charges against Shilnikov under Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, import or distribution of religious materials"). Baptists complain that both the search and the confiscation of books are illegal under Uzbek law.

Unregistered Baptists fined

Courts in Tashkent and western Uzbekistan's Khorezm region have fined three Baptists and warned one for "illegally" distributing Christian literature, and inviting people on the street to visit their churches, Baptists who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. Their churches belong to the Baptist Council of Churches Baptists, who on principle refuse to seek state registration.

Unregistered religious activity is – against the international human rights standards Uzbekistan has committed to implement – illegal. The prosecutions were brought under Administrative Code Article 184-2.

On 10 April police found Vladimir and Larissa Permyakov, and Makhburata Kim, "illegally" distributing religious materials on the street in Tashkent's Mirza-Ulugbek District, and "illegally" trying to persuade citizens to take part in religious activity. The three state that they were giving out books sold in Christian bookshops to passers-by, and inviting people to their Easter service.

The Mirza-Ulugbek District Criminal Court on 27 April fined the Permyakovs 497,350 Soms (1,580 Norwegian Kroner, 200 Euros, or 290 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate) each, and gave a verbal warning to Kim. The court also ordered that confiscated Uzbek-language Christian literature be destroyed, and Russian-language literature be submitted to the state Religious Affairs Committee for "expert examination".

Fellow Baptists told Forum 18 on 15 June that the Russian-language literature has not been returned and no "expert analysis" of it has been given to the Baptists.

Such alleged "expert analyses" are routinely used as an excuse to confiscate any book the authorities decide to confiscate (see eg. F18News 20 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1298). A very strict censorship regime is applied against religious literature and other material of all faiths (see F18News 1 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1153).

In western Uzbekistan, Judge R. Kamalova of Khiva [Khiwa] District Court on 13 April fined Zoya Varakina, another member of the local unregistered Baptist Church 49,735 Soms (158 Norwegian Kroner, 20 Euros, or 29 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate) for "illegally" distributing Uzbek-language New Testaments. The Court also ordered the books to be destroyed. She too was punished under Administrative Code Article 184-2.

Varakina gave the books to two acquaintances, Ikram and Babajan Babajanov, who live in Khiva District. "Ikram came to Zoya's

home and asked her for New Testaments for his relatives," Baptists told Forum 18. "Then he took the books to the Police." Baptists suspect that the case was set up by the local authorities to prosecute Varakina.

The NSS secret police very closely monitors all religious activity, with a network of paid full-time officers and informers (see F18News 5 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1014). (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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