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UZBEKISTAN: "We treat everybody equally"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

The day after a "brutal" raid by Uzbekistan's ordinary police and NSS secret police on two homes of Jehovah's Witnesses in the capital Tashkent, three Jehovah's Witness men were each given 15-day prison terms and fined. Jehovah's Witnesses noted to Forum 18 News Service that this is the first time people have been both given short-term prison sentences and fined in the same case. Four women detained in the raids were each given heavy fines. Also, police and the NSS secret police raided the Sunday morning service of a Baptist congregation in Chirchik. Charges are being prepared against some Baptists. Mahalla Chair Nurmina Askarova, who took part in the raid, told Forum 18 that "we told them to attend another church in Chirchik, which is registered." She also claimed that "we treat everybody equally, both Christians and Muslims", stating that "we closed a mosque in our mahalla, for instance, and asked worshippers to attend a mosque which is both bigger and registered in the neighbouring district".

The day after a "brutal" raid by Uzbekistan's ordinary police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police on two homes of Jehovah's Witnesses in the capital Tashkent, three Jehovah's Witness men were each given 15-day terms of imprisonment for meeting to discuss the Bible and fined. The three short-term prisoners of conscience were freed on 9 February at the end of their sentences, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 News Service. Four women detained in the raids were each given heavy fines. Meanwhile, police and the NSS secret police raided the Sunday morning service of a Baptist congregation in Chirchik [Chirchik] near Tashkent on 5 February, Baptists told Forum 18. An official of the local mahalla (district) told Forum 18 that in the same mahalla, officials had closed down an unregistered mosque.

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that short-term detentions of up to 15 days are currently imposed on their fellow-believers in different parts of the country "perhaps once or twice a month". But they added that this is the first time individuals have been both given short-term prison sentences and fined in the same case.

"Brutal" police raid

Trouble began for the seven Tashkent Jehovah's Witnesses on 26 January, when officers of the Sergeli District Police and the Tashkent NSS secret police simultaneously raided the homes of the Toporov and Kozlov families. Each home had one visitor who was also present for joint Bible reading. Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18 that during the raids, police officers used physical violence and were "brutal".

Asked why the two homes had been raided, Sergeli Police officials on 10 February referred Forum 18 to Police Officer Sherzod Aliyev of Sergeli Police's Criminal Investigation Department, who oversees religious organisations. The officer took down Forum 18's name, but when asked why police raided the Toporovs' and Kozlovs' homes and what they discovered there that led to the arrest of the seven, he put the phone down. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

Uzbekistan imposes perhaps the harshest state controls on religious communities of all faiths of any former Soviet republic. State registration is compulsory before any religious community is allowed to conduct any religious activity – in defiance of Uzbekistan's international human rights obligations (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1170).

In 2006 Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that "our organisation has so many members that if the authorities had not prevented us, we could have established dozens of registered communities". Their community in Tashkent, for example, had tried to register eight times. But only two – in Fergana [Farghona] and Chirchik – were ever allowed to gain state registration. However, officials stripped the Fergana community of its registration in August 2006 (see F18News 5 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=837).

15-day imprisonments and fines for Bible reading

On 27 January, the day after the two homes were raided, Tashkent City's Sergeli District Court tried the five Jehovah's Witnesses, all of whom are members of the same family, and two acquaintances, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

All seven were found guilty of violating the Code of Administrative Offences Article 240 ("violating the law on religious organisations"); Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan with a purpose to distribute or distribution of religious materials by physical persons"); Article 201, Part 2 ("Violation of the procedure for holding religious meetings, street processions or other religious ceremonies"); and Article 202 ("creating the conditions for conducting unapproved meetings").

Judge Shamsuddin Tojiyev imposed 15-day jail sentences on Pavel Toporov and his son-in-law Dmitri Kozlov, as well as on Ivan Lebedev, an acquaintance of the family. The three were also each fined fifty times the minimum monthly wage, 3,146,000 Soms (9,840 Norwegian Kroner, 1,298 Euros or 1,721 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

Svetlana Toporova (Toporov's wife) as well as his two daughters – Lyudmila Kozlova (Kozlov's wife) and Anna Toporova – each received fines of 100 times the minimum monthly wage, 6,292,000 Soms (19,682 Norwegian Kroner, 2,597 Euros or 3,442 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). The Judge also imposed the same fine on Svetlana Dyachkova, another acquaintance of the family.

Fellow-Jehovah's Witnesses Lebedev and Dyachkova happened to be visiting the Toporovs' and Kozlovs' homes during the raids.

A man who was sentenced at the same court as the seven Jehovah's Witnesses "could not help showing his surprise that he got only five days for attacking a police Inspector but they got 15 days for Bible reading," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Those given 15-day jail terms were all released on 9 February, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Court officials refuse to comment

Judge Tojiyev on 8 February refused to comment to Forum 18 on his decision. "Please call through official channels," he said, before putting the phone down. Calls to other Court officials on 9 February went unanswered.

Prisoners of conscience

Short-term jail sentences of up to 15 days have been frequently used for people who exercise their freedom of religion or belief in ways the government dislikes. Forum 18 knows of 25 people - Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses and Baha'is - who received prison terms of up to 15 days in 2009, and a further 22 in 2010 (see F18News 23 September 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1491).

In the short-term jailings in 2011 known to Forum 18, two Baptists were given seven-day jail terms in January for distributing Christian literature (see F18News 9 February 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1538). Three Protestants were given 15-day jail terms in February, and also fined 50 times the minimum monthly wage. Their "offence" was to hold an "illegal" religious meeting (see F18News 23 February 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1545).

Currently, there are also many long-term Muslim, Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestant prisoners of conscience, who have been jailed for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief.

Two Jehovah's Witnesses who are coming to the end of four-year prison terms are expecting trial imminently at Gazalkent City Criminal Court in Tashkent Region. They are accused of violating the prison regime and are facing further prison terms of between three and five years if convicted. In summer 2011 officials told them – and one other prisoner of conscience – that unless they renounced their beliefs they would not be released (see F18News 10 February 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1664).

Raid

Police and NSS secret police officers, with other officials, raided the Sunday worship service on 5 February of an unregistered ethnic Korean Baptist Church in the town of Chirchik in Tashkent Region. Unregistered religious activity is a criminal offence, against international human rights law. Ten officials, who did not identify themselves, broke in at 9 am as the Baptists were beginning the service, Baptists who wished to remain unnamed for fear of the state reprisals told Forum 18 on 9 February.

Baptists said they later learned that Police Inspector Otabek Alimov from Urtachirchik District (where Chirchik is situated) and Nurmina Askarova, Chair of the local mahalla committee (residential district administration), were among the officials raiding the worship.

Mahalla committees, in theory locally-elected but in practice state-appointed, are a key part of Uzbekistan's structures of control and oppression (see eg. F18News 27 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936). They are for example used as part of the state apparatus to restrict the numbers of Muslims allowed to make the haj pilgrimage to Mecca, as part of the total control the state has over all aspects of officially-permitted Islam (see F18News 7 November 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1634).

Confiscations

The worship, led by Vyacheslav Kim, was attended by ten church members. Officials confiscated a sound amplifier, microphone, key-board, projector, eight Christian theology study books, a song-book, eight audio cassette-tapes, and six DVD discs.

The officials told the Baptists that the confiscated items would be sent to the state Religious Affairs Committee for "expert analysis". They then stated that after this charges under Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan with a purpose to distribute or distribution of religious materials by physical persons") and Article 240, Part 2 will be brought against Kim.

"We told them to attend another church"

Inspector Alimov told Forum 18 on 9 February that the Baptists led "illegal activity". He refused to discuss the details of the case with Forum 18. "Please, you or your representative, come to the Police Station, and we will talk there," he said. Alimov refused to state why the Baptists cannot peacefully meet for worship in a private home without state registration. He also refused to state what measures police will take if the Baptists continue to meet for worship without registration.

Asked what will happen to the confiscated property, the Inspector told Forum 18: "The court will decide that."

Mahalla Chair Askarova defended the moves against the Baptist Church, complaining that it conducts unregistered activity. "We warned them many times that they should register with the state," she told Forum 18 from Chirchik on 9 February. Asked why they cannot meet peacefully in private homes for worship, and whether the raid violated the Baptists' human rights, she replied: "We told them to attend another church in Chirchik, which is registered."

Askarova did not identify the church she told the Baptists to go to. In the past, Baptists have been told by the authorities to go to a Russian Orthodox Church (see eg. F18News 31 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1276).

"We treat everybody equally"

"We treat everybody equally, both Christians and Muslims," mahalla Chair Askarova told Forum 18, when asked why Baptists should attend a different church. "We closed a mosque in our mahalla, for instance, and asked worshippers to attend a mosque which is both bigger and registered in the neighbouring district." She refused to give more details of the closure.

Askarova also refused to say what measures the authorities will take against the Baptists if they continue to meet.

Fined, books destroyed

Judge Y. Karshiyev of the Criminal Court of Jarkurgan City, a town north of Termez in Uzbekistan's southern Surkhandarya Region, on 24 January fined Lyudmila Suvorova, a Protestant Christian, ten times the minimum monthly salary, 629,200 Soms (1,968 Norwegian Kroner, 260 Euros or 344 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

The verdict, seen by Forum 18, states that she broke Administrative Code Articles 240, Part 2 ("Attracting believers of one confession to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity") 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"). Judge Karshiyev also ordered the destruction of Christian books and 25 DVD discs confiscated from Suvorova's home.

All religious literature of any kind in Uzbekistan is under tight state censorship. Courts frequently order that religious literature confiscated during raids - including Bibles - be destroyed (see eg. F18News 26 August 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1605).

The fine and confiscations followed a police raid on the homes of Suvorova and Shokir Rahmatullayev, her co-believer on 3 January. Police used physical violence and threats against Rahmatullayev they arrested during the raids, in a bid to force him to make statements against himself and his fellow Protestants (see F18News 24 January 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1659).

Forum 18 has been unable to find out whether a case in the Jarkurgan Court against Rahmatullayev was heard or when the hearing will take place.

Bahrom Karorov from the Chancellery of Jarkurgan Criminal Court had told Forum 18 on 23 January that an administrative case only against Rahmatullayev reached the Court and that the Chair of the Court will hear it (see F18News 24 January 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1659).

Both Karorov and Police Captain Ruzi Nazarov of Jarkurgan Police, which raided Rahmatullayev's home and arrested him, refused to speak to Forum 18 on 13 February. Karorov three times put the phone down as soon as he heard Forum 18's name. Captain Nazarov also said he could not speak, and put the phone down. (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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