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UZBEKISTAN: Raid, beating, literature destruction – but fine annulled

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Police raided the Tashkent home of a Russian Orthodox mother Valentina Pleshakova and her disabled daughter Natalya, seizing their religious literature and beating Natalya, Forum 18 News Service learnt. Officers at the police station pressured Natalya to adopt Islam. Freed in the early hours of the following morning, they were each heavily fined later in the day and confiscated literature was ordered destroyed. After the intervention of the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Uzbekistan, Metropolitan Vikenty, the fine was changed into an official warning on appeal. No books were returned. A government-backed website attacked them and another Christian the Metropolitan had defended, Muhabbat Mamatkulova.

Fines on three religious believers have been overturned after the intervention of the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Uzbekistan, Metropolitan Vikenty (Morar), Forum 18 News Service has learnt. However, a mother and her disabled daughter in the Uzbek capital Tashkent, Valentina and Natalya Pleshakova, were still found guilty and received an official warning. Police have not returned confiscated Bibles and prayer books they seized in a raid (the court ordered them destroyed). Nor have police explained why officers beat Natalya Pleshakova, who is disabled, or tried to pressure her to adopt Islam. A hostile article about them and the third Christian, Muhabbat Mamatkulova, appeared on a state-backed website.

The Pleshakovas attend the Uspensky (Assumption) Orthodox cathedral in Tashkent, where Valentina Pleshakova "washes the bodies of the deceased, and reads psalms to earn a little extra to supplement her meagre 100,000 Soms monthly pension to take care of herself and her sick daughter who cannot work," sources told Forum 18.

State-backed local media also reported raids and fines in August on other religious communities - including personal attacks on named individuals exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. State television on 22 August also told viewers to read only state-authorized religious books, warning of the dangers of those who allegedly "misuse people's interest in reading books" (see F18News 18 September 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1744).

Raid

On 6 August, police raided the home in Tashkent's Mirabad District of Valentina Pleshakova, a 53-year-old pensioner, and her 26-year-old daughter Natalya Pleshakova, who is disabled since childhood, Uznews.net, an independent Uzbek news agency, reported on 23 August.

At 4 pm "six strong men with sticks and bats" in plain clothes led by the local Police officer "broke" the gate to the yard of Pleshakovas' home and broke into their home, they told Uznews. "When Natalya, who is disabled since childhood, and who walks with the help of crutches, asked them who these persons were, one of the men gave her a blow, and then the men dragged her to the kitchen in the flat."

While the men turned the home "upside-down, and collected icons, Bibles, Russian Orthodox calendars and prayer books into one pile," the local police officer "filmed Natalya and her mother Valentina, who were trying to fend off the shower of blows from the men, trying to catch them say something in reaction to the blows and foul language from the men," Uznews reported.

Then a minibus arrived at the Pleshakovas' home, with Officer Aziz (the last name was not given) and several others in military camouflage armed with machine-guns. In the presence of officials of the mahalla committee (local administration), who are the Pleshakovas' neighbours, the two women were "dragged" into the minibus and taken to Mirabad District Police station, where the mahalla committee members were also invited as witnesses.

Pressure to change faith

Uznews reports that at Mirabad Police Station, Officer Aziz and other officers pressured Natalya Pleshakova to accept Islam saying that the Muslim faith is "better than Christianity, that a married man can marry them, because men are allowed to have four wives."

When the Pleshakovas refused to write such statements the police officers threatened and beat them.

Then the police officers promised the Pleshakovas that they would be released, and compelled them to write a statement that "125 religious books were found in their home, the names of which were dictated by Officer Aziz". The Pleshakovas say they heard the titles "for the first time". The "exhausted" women were released at 1.30 am on 7 August, nearly ten hours after the police first arrived at their home.

Mirabad District Police on 4 September referred Forum 18 to police officer Elbeg Khayrullayev, who heads the Police's Department for the Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism. Asked why his colleagues conducted the raid and beat the Pleshakovas, officer Khayrullayev took down Forum 18's name, and then said: "Who are you, are you their lawyer or something?" He then put the phone down. Subsequent calls to his phone went unanswered. No one else from Mirabad Police wished to discuss the case with Forum 18.

Fines

After being freed in the early hours of 7 August, the two women were summoned later that day to Tashkent's Mirabad District Court. Judge Begzot Ermatov found Valentina and Natalya Pleshakova guilty of violating several Articles of the Code of Administrative Offences: Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan with a purpose to distribute or distribution of religious materials by physical persons"); Article 194, Part 1 ("Failure to carry out the lawful demands of a police officer or other persons carrying out duties to guard public order"); and Article 195 ("Resisting the orders of police officers").

They were each fined 20 times the minimum monthly wage, 1,447,100 Soms (4,270 Norwegian Kroner, 580 Euros or 740 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

Judge Ermatov spent "five minutes hearing the case, and then without announcing the verdict," told the Pleshakovas to "go home." The verdict, which the two women received one week later, alleged that they stored in their home copies of "The Watchtower", "Awake!" and "What is the Purpose of Life?". The verdict noted that the state Religious Affairs Committee had described them as publications of the Jehovah's Witness religious organisation, the activity of which "is banned in the territory of Tashkent City".

The verdict claimed the women also engaged in illegal missionary activity by spreading Jehovah's Witnesses literature and resisted the police officers who searched their flat.

Judge Ermatov refused to comment on the case. "That case is over, and we gave our decision," he told Forum 18 on 4 September, brushing off Forum 18's question whether the court examined the police actions during the raid of the Pleshakovas' home and also why the peaceful believers' home was raided. He then put the phone down. Subsequent calls to Judge Ermatov went unanswered.

Still guilty on appeal

Both Valentina and Natalya Pleshakova appealed against the fines. The two women's case was taken up by the head of the Russian Orthodox Uzbek diocese, Metropolitan Vikenty. A member of the Orthodox community in Tashkent, who preferred not to be identified for fear of State reprisals, told Forum 18 on 6 September that the Metropolitan wrote to the State Religious Affairs Committee and to Sayora Rashidova, Uzbekistan's Human Rights Ombudsperson.

On 23 August, sixteen days later after the first decision, Judge V. Tsvetkov of Tashkent's Criminal Court with a decision, which Forum 18 has seen, cancelled the fines. The Court, however, upheld the part of the decision that the Pleshakovas "did violate" the Religion Law, and the lower court "correctly qualified the actions of the violators". Taking into account that the daughter is a disabled person and that the mother is a pensioner, it deemed it possible to confine the decision to a warning to each of them.

The appeal court decision also upheld the lower court decision that 125 religious publications confiscated from them should be destroyed.

Why the raid and fines?

The Pleshakovas told Uznews that they believe the local authorities are trying to find ways to confiscate their two homes and that the 6 August raid and court proceedings may have been related to that. Although the homes are "not in good shape" but because of the "location where they are situated" the two properties may be worth "tens of thousands of [US] dollars."

The women said that in late August, inspectors from the State Sanitary and Epidemiology Service came to conduct an inspection. They said that they are expecting new fines from the Inspectors now.

"Two-faced Januses of Religion"

Four days after Uznews first revealed the Pleshakovas' plight, the state-sponsored Gorizont.uz information agency on 27 August published an article under the name Nikolai Fyodorov entitled "Two-faced Januses of Religion". Alluding to the two-faced mythical

Greek god, the author alleged that the Pleshakovas - and another Orthodox believer recently fined, Kokand-based Muhabbat Mamatkulova - are "hypocrites", and that they are not Russian Orthodox believers. "They regularly read the Jehovah's Witnesses' literature, and attend their assemblies," the article claims.

Gorizont has a long history of attacking members of religious communities the authorities do not like, including Baha'is, Baptists and other Protestants, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Articles appear often to be published under pseudonyms. Independent human rights defenders in Uzbekistan, who wished to remain anonymous, have told Forum 18 that the Gorizont agency is sponsored by the National Security Service (NSS) secret police.

Forum 18 was unable to reach anyone at Gorizont to comment on the 27 August article. However, in February 2010, its director Daniyir Juraev refused to tell Forum 18 why he does not seek and publish responses from religious communities attacked in articles to the often serious allegations against them (see F18News 16 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1409).

The author of the 27 August article praised the level of development and human rights in Uzbekistan, claiming that "unfortunately some people, misusing the freedoms, try to master the minds of their kin and acquaintances to use them for their mercenary purposes, while disguising their missionary activity as though they are only teaching the foundations of a religion."

The author presumes that "such people when they are exposed for their illegal religious activity make various insinuations, making statements of violation of their rights they attempt to appeal to the official religion as well to the media." The author then likens the three Orthodox believers to "wolves in sheep's clothing". The author mentions that the Pleshakovas were punished without giving the level of the fines.

Sacrilegious?

Gorizont's author also claims in the same article that Mamatkulova, being a member of an ethnic Korean-led Protestant Church, presents herself as a Russian Orthodox believer. Mamatkulova, a resident of Kokand in Fergana Region, was "found guilty of giving illegal religious lessons," and fined by Kokand City Court in August. "It was established that Mamatkulova privately taught her daughter Omina religion without having special religious education."

The article described the fact that the Pleshakovas and Mamatkulova asked Metropolitan Vikenty of Uzbekistan's Russian Orthodox Church to defend them as "sacrilegious". It is an "attempt to compromise the activity of law-enforcement agencies, and to display themselves as prisoners of conscience". Their appeal to the Metropolitan is "provocative, (..) written under dictation of foreign missionaries, the purpose of which is to drive a wedge between the authorities and [Russian] Orthodoxy."

The author calls on "sensible people" not to ignore cases of people who without necessary religious education teach others religion and "destroy" their destiny. The author claims that a person taught religion in this way "(..) learns not only false interpretation of religious canons but finally falls into the nets of missionaries and sectarianism." The author also cautions the Russian Orthodox Church's leaders from "hasty conclusions," and calls on them to "pay attention to the hypocrisy of the mentioned in the article persons!"

Kokand fine

Gorizont did not specify the level of the fine handed down to Mamatkulova by Kokand City Criminal Court in August, nor the Article of the Code of Administrative Offences. However, Article 241 punishes "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" with a fine of five to ten times the minimum monthly wage or arrest of up to 15 days.

Kokand City Criminal Court officials eventually on 6 September put Forum 18 through to the Court's Chair, Judge Adkhamjon Khashimov. However, Khashimov refused to explain to Forum 18 why Mamatkulova was fined, and why religious believers cannot keep religious books in their homes and teach their faith. "I cannot comment on that case over the phone," he said.

When Forum 18 insisted with the questions, Khashimov responded: "Look, I am in the middle of hearing a case. Call back later." He put the phone down without telling Forum 18 when it could call back. Subsequent calls to Judge Khashimov on 6 and 7 September went unanswered.

A member of the Orthodox community from Tashkent, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 6 September that as in the Pleshakovas' case, Metropolitan Vikenty petitioned for Mamatkulova, and her fine was also subsequently cancelled.

The Orthodox community member welcomed the cancellation of the fines given to both Pleshakovas and Mamatkulova. "All three indeed are Russian Orthodox believers, and attend the Church regularly," they told Forum 18. Asked why then the Police and the media falsely identified the Pleshakovas as Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mamatkulova as a Protestant, the Orthodox believer told

Forum 18 that in both cases the local police officers were to "blame". They said that the police officers "made mistakes, and mistook them for someone else". (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=1862.

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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