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UZBEKISTAN: Officials "acted like bandits"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Uzbekistan has fined a 76 year-old woman 10 times the monthly minimum wage and ordered the destruction of her books, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Naziya Ziyatdinova was subjected to what the authorities describe as an "Anti-terror-Tozalash" ("Anti-terror-Cleaning") raid through a window of her flat, even though she has great difficulty walking as she has Parkinson's Disease. She was removed from her bed and the contents of her home turned "upside down" by four officials acting illegally without a search warrant. Local Protestants described officials as having "acted like bandits". Forum 18 was told that the fine was "unaffordable" for Ziyatdinova, as her pension is very small and cannot even cover the medicines she needs. Each time she was taken to court she "felt very sick fearing harsher punishment". After one hearing an ambulance was called for her. However, Ziyatdinova did not sign a confession she was being pressured to sign. The Judge in the case, Khusniddin Dusnazarov, adamantly denied to Forum 18 that there had been any wrongdoing by officials.

Uzbekistan continues to attack people exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief, in a recent case fining a 76 year-old woman and ordering the destruction of her books, Forum 18 News Service notes. The woman, Naziya Ziyatdinova, was subjected to what the authorities describe as an "Anti-terror-Tozalash" ("Anti-terror-Cleaning") raid through a window of her flat, even though she has great difficulty walking as she has Parkinson's Disease. She and her daughter Zulfiyya Teplonogaya had personal Christian books confiscated from them and ordered to be destroyed, and Ziyatdinova (who lives on a very small pension) was fined 10 times the minimum monthly salary.

Elsewhere, Uzbek Customs officers on 11 May stopped four Baptists at the border with Kazakhstan and confiscated 30 Christian books and other materials from them. Cases under the Code of Administrative Offences have been opened against them.

"Anti-terror"?

On 14 March, in Guliston in Syrdarya Region near the capital Tashkent, police raided Ziyatdinova's private home at Zakirov Street 78. Local Protestants, who did not wish to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 15 May that four officials took part: Inspectors Saida Abdukhamidova and Malalkhat Tozhiyeva, who normally focus on children, and Tohir Ibrohimov and Sanzhar Mirzayev from an unknown state agency.

The raid was officially described as "Anti-terror-Tozalash" ("Anti-terror-Cleaning"). Raids described in this way have taken place before, and – like other raids - have involved the National Security Service (NSS) secret police (see eg. F18News 21 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1433).

The raid took place at 11 am in the morning. As Ziyatdinova, who walks with great difficulty as she has Parkinson's Disease, did not immediately open the door of her flat, officials "banged on the doors and shouted so loudly that all the neighbours were disturbed and gathered to watch" Protestants stated. One of the officials then broke into the flat by climbing through a second floor window.

The four officials then took Ziyatdinova off her bed, and "without producing a search warrant turned everything in the home upside down". They then gave her "various papers to sign". The officials then left, having confiscated Ziyatdinova's personal Bible, other Christian books and DVD discs.

"They acted like bandits"

Local Protestants complained to Forum 18 that the officials "acted like bandits". "Why should they enter the home of a seriously ill peaceful person through a window?" they asked.

Guliston Police told Forum 18 on 22 May that "we do not know who Ibrohimov and Mirzayev are and what agency they represent". Inspector Tozhiyeva, when asked why the raid took place and why did it happen in this way, replied "Aha". She then put the phone down, apparently after consulting with someone for a few seconds. Subsequent calls to her phone went unanswered.

Inspector Abdukhamidova on 22 May put the phone down as soon as she heard Forum 18's name. Subsequent calls to her phone

went unanswered.

Pressured

Several court hearings took place after the "anti-terror" raid, under Judge Khusniddin Dusnazarov of Guliston Criminal Court. During the hearings, Ziyatdinova was threatened with charges under the Code of Administrative Offences' Article 240 Part 1. This was done to pressure her to confess that her daughter Zulfiya Teplonogaya led an illegal organisation in her home.

Article 240 ("Violation of the Religion Law") Part 1 punishes: "Carrying out of unauthorised religious activity, evasion by leaders of religious organisations of registration of the charter of the organisation, the organisation and conduct of worship by religious ministers and of special children's and youth meetings, as well as vocational, literature and other study groups not relating to worship". Punishments range from fines of 50 to 100 times the minimum monthly salary to being jailed for up to 15 days.

Violence and torture, or threats of this, by police and other officials are "routine" the United Nations Committee Against Torture has found. Women in particular are often targeted by such assaults (see eg. F18News 14 August 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1732).

Each time Ziyatdinova was taken to court she "felt very sick fearing harsher punishment". After one hearing an ambulance was called for her, local Protestants stated. However, she did not sign the confession she was being pressured to sign.

Judge Dusnazarov adamantly denied to Forum 18 on 22 May that he or other officials pressured Ziyatdinova to sign a confession incriminating her daughter. "Nothing like that happened," he claimed.

Asked why the Court did not punish the unlawful actions of the four officials who broke into Ziyatdinova's home without a search warrant, Judge Dusnazarov claimed: "We did not make any evaluation since no complaints were made."

"A Muslim country"?

Officials participating in one hearing reportedly told Ziyatdinova that "this is a Muslim country and all of your Christian books including the Bible are outlawed". When Ziyatdinova told the Court that all her books were purchased from the officially registered Bible Society of Uzbekistan, the officials responded, "There's no such Bible Society."

This allegedly "Muslim country" routinely imposes long prison terms on devout Muslims for peacefully following Islam (see eg. F18News 1 May 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1829). Muslim and other prisoners of conscience and ordinary prisoners are denied freedom of religion or belief, for example by being banned from praying openly or reading religious literature such as the Koran or Bible (see F18News 7 May 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1832).

Judge Dusnazarov denied to Forum 18 that statements were made in Court that the Bible or other Christian books were banned in Uzbekistan.

"Unaffordable" fine, book, CD and DVD destruction

On 19 April, 36 days after the "anti-terror" raid, Judge Dusnazarov fined Ziyatdinova 795,900 Soms (about 2,250 Norwegian Kroner, 300 Euros, or 380 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate), or 10 times the minimum monthly salary. The Judge also ordered, in a decision seen by Forum 18, that 15 of Ziyatdinova's personal Christian books including her Bible, a video cassette, and 6 DVDs be destroyed.

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 31 January 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1797).

Ziyatdinova was convicted under Administrative Code Article 184-2. This punishes: "Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan with a purpose to distribute or distribution of religious materials by physical persons".

Protestants who know Ziyatdinova told Forum 18 that the fine is "unaffordable" for her, as her monthly pension is 120,000 Soms or only 15 per cent of the fine. This pension is, Forum 18 was told, "not even enough to pay for her medicines".

Judge Dusnazarov, when told by Forum 18 that Ziyatdinova suffers from Parkinson's Disease and that she cannot afford the fine, replied: "If she is unhappy she can file a complaint". Asked why he fined Ziyatdinova, the Judge claimed, "I am very busy at the moment, call me in 10 minutes." Called back several times on 22 May Dusnazarov's telephone was not answered.

Customs officials confiscate books, CDs and DVDs

Confiscations of literature, CDs and DVDs at border crossing points also continue. Along with this, bans on entry and exit from the country on Muslims, Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses continue (see F18News 11 April 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1688).

Customs officials at Gisht-Kuprik on 11 May stopped four Baptists from officially registered churches, while they were crossing from Kazakhstan into Uzbekistan. Gisht-Kuprik is in Tashkent Region's Zangiota District. The Baptists were Pastor Fathulla Ibrahimov of Yangiyul Baptist Church, Osiya Khayrullina and Aleksandr Khokhlov, members of Tashkent Baptist Church, and Andrey Shevchenko, leader of Syrdarya Region Baptist Church. Khayrullina and Ibrahimov were detained for seven and half hours until 5 pm, and Khokhlov and Shevchenko were detained for 11 and half hours until 7 pm.

Captain A.S. Zaetov, and Lieutenants S. Sadirov, A.S. Yuldashev and Zh. Momonov confiscated Christian books and materials the Baptists were carrying. These comprised 30 books, including one Bible, two books of Baptist hymns, five copies of the Baptist magazines "Faith and Life" and "Path", two Baptist Calendars, seven DVDs and CDs, 15 bookmarks, 30 brochures, and two notebooks with personal notes.

The confiscated books and materials were sent for "expert analysis" by the state Committee for Religious Affairs in Tashkent. Committee officials refused to discuss the cases with Forum 18 on 27 May. So-called "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).

Customs officials have also opened cases against each of the Baptists under the Administrative Code's Article 227-22, Baptists who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 20 May. Article 227-22 punishes: "Non-declaration or inaccurate declaration of goods transported through the customs border". Possible punishments are fines for ordinary citizens of between five and 10 times the minimum monthly salary with confiscation of goods, and for officials between seven and 15 times the minimum monthly salary.

The case may be tried at Zangiota District Criminal Court, Baptists said. (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.

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