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UZBEKISTAN: Fines, rape threat for religious literature

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Of four female Jehovah's Witnesses detained by Samarkand police for meeting for worship, one faced rape threats, Forum 18 has learnt. Three were fined for "illegal" religious literature. Two Protestants – one spent 16 days in prison - have fled Uzbekistan to escape "police persecution".

Individuals across Uzbekistan continue to face fines for religious literature found during police raids in homes. Samarkand City Criminal Court in the central Samarkand Region on 15 March handed down huge fines to three Jehovah's Witnesses women for religious materials found on their tablet device, Forum 18 notes. During nearly 24 hours in detention at Samarkand City Police in early February, officers hit the women and demanded that they renounce their faith, Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18. Officers threatened one with rape.

Two Protestants - Latipzhon Mamazhanov and Murot Turdiyev - have chosen to flee Uzbekistan with their families after what fellow Protestants have described to Forum 18 as continuous pressure from the authorities.

The Court and Police in Fergana are searching for Mamazhanov to punish him for a second time for the same "offence" of possessing religious literature. Local Protestants complained to Forum 18 that he became very sick during 16 days in prison in Fergana in March.

Between February and March Almalyk City Police raided Turdiyev's home in Almalyk, cut off its electricity, ambushed his home waiting to catch him, threatened him with a criminal case, and asked him to become a police informer. Also Fergana Police seized his car for 12 days, and Fergana Court warned him (see below).

Tight controls

Uzbekistan retains tight state controls on all exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief. Printed literature, videos and DVDs of religious content have long been subjected to harsh prior compulsory state censorship. Police and secret police officers frequently raid homes and confiscate religious literature from their owners, including Arabic-language Korans, and Uzbek and Russian-language Bibles and New Testaments. Courts frequently order that such confiscated religious literature be destroyed (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862). A court in Tashkent ordered Bibles and New Testaments destroyed in December 2015.

Prisoners of conscience Zuboyd Mirzorakhimov, a Tajik citizen, and Zoirjon Mirzayev are both serving five year prison terms for having Muslim sermons on their mobile phones when they entered Uzbekistan (see F18News 21 March 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2160).

Mass raids, fined, short-term jailings

Across Uzbekistan the authorities continue raiding individuals' homes – including those of Protestants of various denominations and Jehovah's Witnesses - and confiscating their religious literature. On 17 May, officers raided Council of Churches Baptists in Khorezm Region.

Between January and May, at least 14 Protestants and 49 Jehovah's Witnesses are known to have received fines of up to 100 times the minimum monthly wage under Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons").

A fine of 100 times the minimum monthly wage – currently 1,302,400 Soms – is equivalent to 3,700 Norwegian Kroner, 400 Euros or 450 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate.

In one case in Nukus in the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan, 14 Protestants received total fines of 350 times the minimum monthly wage or 45,584,000 Soms (130,000 Norwegian Kroner, 14,000 Euros or 15,600 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange

rate) (see F18News 7 June 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2185).

In another case, 30 Jehovah's Witnesses received fines totalling more than 1,050 times the minimum monthly wage or 136,752,000 Soms (390,000 Norwegian Kroner, 42,000 Euros or 47,000 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). Two of the Jehovah's Witnesses were also given ten-day jail terms (see F18News 28 June 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2192).

Raids, large fines and confiscations of "illegal" religious literature continue, at least 18 Protestants and 11 Jehovah's Witnesses having been fined up to 60 times the minimum monthly salary (see F18News 7 June 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2185).

Samarkand literature fines follow raid on religious meeting

Judge Zafar Kholikulov of Samarkand City Court on 15 March fined three female Jehovah's Witnesses for meeting for worship in a home in February. Each was fined 50 times the minimum monthly wage, 6,512,000 Soms. They were punished under Administrative Code Article 184-2 for possessing "illegal" literature.

On the evening of 3 February Samarkand Police arrested the three together with another local resident with whom they were meeting for worship and religious study. Police held the four women at a Samarkand Police Station for almost 24 hours. The Police confiscated their tablet device and passports before releasing them in the afternoon of 4 February.

While in detention, two of the women were "physically abused", while another female Jehovah's Witness was "subjected to sexual harassment", Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18 on 25 April.

Asked why Judge Kholikulov fined the Jehovah's Witnesses, the official who answered his phone on 23 May, replied that he (refused to give his name) is the Assistant to the Judge, and that he is "on a vacation." He declined to comment on the decision and tell Forum 18 whether the Court investigated the police abuses. He referred Forum 18 to the Chancellery.

A Chancellery official (who refused to give his name) looked up Kholikulov's decision, but refused to explain the reasons of the fines. "I cannot comment," he told Forum 18 on 23 May.

Police torture female Jehovah's Witnesses

At Samarkand's Police Station No.6 in early February, the four women were questioned by Officer Sanjar Esanov, Chief of the Station, Lieutenant Askarali Boykobilov and Officer Sobir Rakhimov (both of whom are Esanov's subordinates), as well as Officer Khusrav Shamsiyev of Samarkand's Anti-Terrorism Police.

The officers who questioned the women were "drunk and very aggressive", Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18. "They demanded that the women deny their faith." Lieutenant Boykobilov "roughly grasped the shoulders of [one of the women] and kept pushing her". Another was also "pushed", and Officer Shamsiyev "slapped her on the face".

Chief Officer Esanov took another of the four women to a dark room and "strangled her and hit her on the body", Jehovah's Witnesses complained. Officer Rakhimov also slapped her face. Officer Esanov threatened to "undress her and rape her, after which he will take her out of the room naked so the others could see. Then he began unbuttoning her overcoat but she resisted and he stopped."

Police Chief Esanov adamantly denied to Forum 18 that he or his colleagues abused the Jehovah's Witnesses. "It's all a pack of lies. Police in Uzbekistan never act in such a way," he told Forum 18 from Samarkand on 23 May.

The United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, which Uzbekistan acceded to in 1995, defines torture as: "any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity".

Under Article 6 of the Convention Uzbekistan is obliged to arrest any person suspected on good grounds of having committed torture. Under Article 4 Uzbekistan is obliged to try them under criminal law which makes "these offences punishable by appropriate penalties which take into account their grave nature" (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Asked why police arrested the four women, Esanov responded: "Ask the Court, everything is explained in its decision."

Told that Forum 18 has documented many cases where police in Samarkand and elsewhere in Uzbekistan have arrested and abused

individuals for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief - including Jehovah's Witnesses - and asked why Police and other authorities violate individuals' human rights, Chief Esanov paused and Forum 18 could hear him consult his officers. "If you disagree with us then talk to the Court," he responded, before declining to talk to Forum 18 further.

Families flee "police persecution"

Two members of the same Protestant Church, Latipzhon Mamazhanov from Fergana in eastern Uzbekistan and Murot Turdiyev from Almalyk in Tashkent Region, have fled Uzbekistan after continuous pressure from the authorities, their fellow-believers complained to Forum 18 on 12 May. Both were "sick and tired of the police persecution, and therefore took their families and left Uzbekistan," they said.

Mamazhanov was arrested and jailed on 12 March for 15 days in Fergana, the same day police illegally raided his home and those of other local Protestants searching for religious literature. He was released only on 28 March, one day after he should have been released under the law. Mamazhanov was imprisoned in the Region's Kuva District Police Detention Centre where up to seven inmates were put in a cell designed for two people, no sanitary and hygiene rules are followed, and food is given only once a day. He and other prisoners who insisted they were innocent of crime were also tortured several times (see F18News 13 April 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2167).

After his release from prison, Mamazhanov "felt very sick and found he had developed several diseases", Protestants complained to Forum 18. They said that during his imprisonment he lost seven kilos in weight, developed shingles and experienced stomach problems. "The prison made him practically an invalid," Protestants lamented.

Harsh treatment and even torture in prisons is common (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Protestants note that Mamazhanov suffers from hepatitis, diabetes, osteochondrosis of his back and spine, and two hernias of his spine.

New case against Mamazhanov?

Since early May Fergana City Court and Police have attempted to bring Mamazhanov before the Court to hand him an administrative fine for the 12 March confiscation of religious literature from his home, his fellow-believers told Forum 18. "He was already jailed after that Police raid and confiscation, and now the authorities are looking to punish him a second time for the same alleged offence," local Protestants complained to Forum 18.

An official of Fergana City Court Chancellery (who did not give her name) told Forum 18 that the Police had brought a case against Mamazhanov under Administrative Code Article 184-2, but that the Court referred it back to the Police for further investigation. She declined to give any further information.

Rustam Yegamberdiyev, Chief of Criminal Police of Fergana Region, on 24 May referred Forum 18 to the Anti-Terrorism Police. "I don't know the details, ask them, they are leading the case," he said.

Asked about the case, Anvar Myrzayev, Chief of the Anti-Terrorism Police in Fergana, refused to talk to Forum 18. "I don't know you, and it's a wrong number," he said. Subsequent calls to him on the same day went unanswered.

Asked about the case on 24 May, duty officers (who did not give their names) at Fergana Police refused to put Forum 18 through to any other officials, but referred Forum 18 to Myrzayev.

Police threaten Turdiyev with criminal case

Police detained Turdiyev, together with Mamazhanov's brothers, in Fergana on 12 March as they tried to defend Mamazhanov against the unlawful police actions. Police confiscated his car the same day. The car was returned to him 16 days later, on 28 March, when Judge Shukhrat Sotivoldiyev jailed Mamazhanov for 15 days, and formally cautioned Turdiyev (see F18News 13 April 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2167).

On 28 April, one month after the Fergana Court warning, two plain-clothes officers of the Criminal Police in Almalyk stopped Turdiyev while he was trying to get in his car, local Protestants told Forum 18. Turdiyev was taken to Almalyk Police Station where he was questioned.

Officer Alisher (last name not given) of the Criminal Police questioned Turdiyev, demanding that he write a statement. Turdiyev was "threatened that he will be put in prison unless he stops writing complaints about police actions," local Protestants complained. Officer Alisher told Turdiyev that "Police will plant drugs or bullets on him, and open a fabricated case against him." However, Turdiyev refused to do so or sign the police report. Officers, "seeing that they could not achieve what they want", then released him.

Turdiyev's home ambushed by Police

While Turdiyev was being tried by the Fergana Court on 28 March, one police officer in uniform and several plain-clothes officials came to his home in Almalyk at 8 am and "began pounding and kicking on the doors for one hour." Turdiyev's "neighbours came out to the noise and asked them why they behaved in such an unruly way." The officials answered that "they want to see Turdiyev and check up on his flat."

The officials then "took turns putting their ears to the door to see whether or not Turdiyev was in the flat." After this they turned off electricity to Turdiyev's flat and left. However, "unidentified Police officers set up an ambush not far from the home, and began waiting to catch him."

When Turdiyev returned from Fergana to Almalyk on 1 April, he found out that all the food in their refrigerator was spoiled because the electricity had been cut off. Food, which included beef, sausage, and lard and products, cost Turdiyev some 107,000 Soms.

Turdiyev harassed earlier

Two officers of Almalyk Police also earlier on 20 February raided Turdiyev's home at 6.30 am under the guise of a passport inspection in the building, Protestants complained to Forum 18.

They checked the passports of Turdiyev, his wife and children, as well as the title deed of their flat, taking copies of it. "We found out later that in the entire building, police checked up only on Turdiyev's flat. This shows that there was no passport regime check-up. The police only wanted to harass him and his family."

Turdiyev was on the same day "against his will" taken to Almalyk Police Station. There an officer who would not give his name but said he was Chief of the Criminal Police "demanded that he write a statement explaining why he travels abroad, which countries and for what purpose he visited, why he chose to buy a flat in Almalyk, why he was registered with his family and lives in Almalyk." Police also demanded that he should write about the lifestyle of his family members, their sources of money, and about his family and other relations.

The Police Chief then asked Turdiyev to become an informer for the police, Protestants complained. However, Turdiyev refused to do so.

Asked why the police are pressuring Turdiyev, Ravshan Amilov, Chief of Almalyk's Criminal Police, claimed to Forum 18 on 24 May that "I know him but we do not have such facts." When Forum 18 asked why his colleagues ambushed Turdiyev's home and turned off his electricity, as well as why he was brought to the Criminal Police and threatened with a criminal case, Amilov did not say. "I will ask the terrorism Police about the case and you call us back some time later," he said.

Jahongir Baltayev, Chief of Almalyk Anti-Terrorism Police refused to talk to Forum 18 on 24 May. "It's a wrong number," he replied. Told that Almalyk Police gave his number to Forum 18, he 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=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 is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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