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TAJIKISTAN: Baptist missionary killed while praying

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

In the wake of the shooting to death late on 12 January of Baptist pastor and missionary Sergei Besarab, who was gunned down while he prayed, fellow Baptist pastor Rashid Shamsizade has told Forum 18 News Service it is too early to determine whether he was killed because of his religious activity. However, Besarab, a reformed criminal, had been working in the northern town of Isfara in a district noted for the devoutness of its Muslim population. Only a week before his death, a local paper published an attack on Besarab's missionary work. A deputy interior minister is leading the investigation into the killing.

An investigation has been launched into the killing of a Baptist pastor and missionary in the northern Tajik town of Isfara in a region known for its devotion to Islam. The head of the country's Baptist Union, Aleksander Vervai, told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Dushanbe on 14 January that at 9pm on 12 January, unknown intruders burst into the yard of the church armed with automatic weapons and shot Sergei Besarab through a window. He said that at the time he was shot Besarab was kneeling in prayer. When his wife Tamara rushed in from another room, he was already dead.

A deputy interior minister, Abdurahim Qahhorov, told the Asia-Plus news agency on 14 January that the law-enforcement agencies were taking measures to detain the criminals. It added that a group led by another deputy interior minister, Said Juraqulov, left for Isfara on 13 January to launch an investigation into the case.

Ikhbol Teishiev, a correspondent at Isfara television, told Forum 18 from the town on 14 January that the local police have refused to comment on Besarab's death. He reported that the pastor's active missionary work – which included distributing Tajik-language evangelistic booklets – had aroused the anger of some local people. He added that a week before his death, the local paper Nasimi Isfara had published an article sharply criticising Besarab's missionary work. The article also pointed out that Besarab had been imprisoned four times.

Rashid Shamsizade, a Baptist pastor from Dushanbe, readily admitted Besarab's criminal past. "We conduct services in prisons and indeed it was there that we met Besarab," he told Forum 18 on 14 January. "After he got to know the Holy Scripture he became a completely different person – he was indeed born again." After release from prison, Shamsizade recalled, Besarab had become an active church member and was soon sent to Isfara as a missionary. He said it was difficult to assess this early whether Besarab had been murdered because of his religious activity.

Isfara district is a special part of Tajikistan. Forum 18 has observed that the population is generally more devoutly Muslim than in other parts of the country. Indeed, alcoholic beverages are banned in many villages in the district and many women can be seen wear a hijab in public. On occasion local Muslims have even burnt down shops selling alcohol.

During a July 2002 visit to the district, Tajik president Imomali Rahmonov announced that three men from Isfara who had fought in Afghanistan with the Taliban were being held at the United States' detention centre at Guantanamo. The district has also given strong support to the Islamic Revival Party (IRP). In the 2000 parliamentary elections, the IRP won a large majority in and around Isfara district. In the village of Chorku, for example, it garnered 93 percent of the vote.

Forum 18 has often heard from devout Muslims in the area of their opposition to Christian missionary work among fellow-Muslims, a view that reflects the interpretation of Sharia law that requires that those born Muslim who convert to other faiths should be executed.

For more background see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=190

A printer-friendly map of Tajikistan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=tajiki>

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