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UZBEKISTAN: Short prison terms, fines after "show trial"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Two Baptists were each given five-day prison terms and three more fined in Karshi to punish them for organising Sunday worship raided by police. A Russian Orthodox priest was forced to attend what Baptists call a "show trial", which was also shown on television.

Authorities in the southern Kashkadarya Region held what local Baptists complain was a "show trial" of five of their members. On 21 July Karshi [Qarshi] City Administrative Court handed down five-day prison terms to two church members and fined three others. The two arrested men were then taken to the detention prison in handcuffs. The judge pressured a Russian Orthodox priest to attend the trial and questioned him on religious freedoms in Uzbekistan. Local television filmed the trial and later broadcast it in the region.

According to amendments to the Law on Courts, cases of administrative violations are now tried in Administrative Courts. The amendments were adopted by Parliament on 28 March, signed by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev on 12 April and entered into force on 1 June. Previously, administrative cases had been heard in Criminal Courts.

Armed with automatic weapons, Urganch City Police in the north-western Khorezm Region raided the worship service of local Protestants. All those present were forced onto a bus and taken to the Police Station, where the female believers were stripped to their underwear and searched. Police are believed to be preparing administrative charges against the hosts of the meeting (see below).

In the eastern city of Fergana, police with search warrants raided the homes of four local Baptists. They seized religious literature but refused to issue records of what they had seized. Administrative cases against the Baptists could be in preparation (see below).

A human rights defender from the north-western region of Karakalpakstan has complained that the authorities keep local Protestants "in constant fear", with surveillance, threats, raids, fines and short-term imprisonments. "We are pleading with international human rights organisations to raise this issue before the Uzbekistan and Karakalpakstan authorities," the human rights defender told Forum 18 (see below).

Harsh controls on exercising freedom of religion or belief

Uzbekistan imposes harsh state controls on who can exercise freedom of religion or belief and where. The state bans and punishes any group or community that meets for worship without state registration. It arbitrarily denies state registration to groups it does not like.

Uzbekistan also enforces strict censorship of all religious publications and all aspects of their distribution. The authorities also impose a de facto ban on religious literature of any belief in homes or in public places. If found such literature is frequently ordered to be destroyed. State pressure is so great that for their own safety some religious believers have destroyed their own sacred texts. The so-called "expert analyses" used to justify such freedom of religion and belief violations are often flawed, or even violate published law. The resulting court trials also often violate the rule of law (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1862>).

Karshi: Police raid meeting for worship

On Sunday 18 June, Karshi City Police raided a meeting for worship organised by Council of Churches Baptists for about 200 deaf church members. Police officers "wrote down the names of all of them," local Baptists complained to Forum 18 on 4 August.

The Karshi City Police duty officer (who did not give his name) on 4 August as well as Shirzod Elboyev of the Criminal and Anti-Terrorism Police on 5 August told Forum 18 that Major Firdavs Khamroyev of the Police led the case.

Major Khamroyev refused to explain why the Police raided the Baptists' worship meeting. "I don't know who you are or what you

want from me," he told Forum 18. He then put the phone down.

Karshi: Two five-day prison terms, three fines

On 21 July, nearly five weeks after the raid, Karshi City Administrative Court tried five church members accused of organising the meeting for worship. The five - Viktor Tashpulatov, Mikhail Balykbayev, Jahongir Shadmonov, Svetlana Andreychenko and Munira Gaziyeva - were accused of violating Administrative Code Article 240, Part 1.

This punishes "Carrying out of unauthorised religious activity, evasion by leaders of religious organisations of registration of the charter of the organisation, and the organisation and conduct of special children's and youth meetings, as well as vocational, literature and other study groups not relating to worship" with fines of 50 to 100 times the minimum monthly wage or a prison term of up to 15 days.

"Some 60 people were invited to the trial, including representatives of various state organs, television channels who filmed it, and an Orthodox priest," Baptists complained to Forum 18. Fr Vladimir Skorniyakov, Senior Priest of Karshi's Most Holy Mother of God Russian Orthodox Church, confirmed to Forum 18 that he had been pressured to attend the trial, which television channels had filmed.

Judge Azamat Khushvakhtov who heard the case handed down five-day prison terms to Tashpulatov and Balykbayev. The three others each received a fine of three times the minimum monthly wage, 449,325 Soms.

Judge Khushvakhtov refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 4 August. He put the phone as soon as Forum 18 asked why he had punished the church members and why outsiders had been invited to the trial. Numerous subsequent calls the same day to his landline and mobile phone went unanswered.

After Judge Khushvakhtov announced the verdict, officials "demonstratively put handcuffs on us and took us to the detention prison directly from the court room", Tashpulatov told Forum 18 on 4 August.

Tashpulatov and Balykbayev served their five-day arrests and were released in the evening of 26 July.

Karshi: "Show trial"

"The whole trial was a show," Tashpulatov complained to Forum 18. "Judge Khushvakhtov asked the Russian Orthodox priest whether Christians can practice their faith in Uzbekistan, and he answered 'Yes'." The priest told the Court that "if a Church has official registration, then it can hold religious services without any problems", Tashpulatov added.

"After this the Judge turned to me and asked whether we asked any state organ for registration, and I answered, 'No'. He gave me a lecture on religious freedom in Uzbekistan and that we [Baptists] continually violate the Law. Meanwhile all the film crews were active, pointing their cameras everywhere."

Tashpulatov said that he and his fellow Baptists do not usually watch television. But neighbours told them that local Kashkadarya television showed the footage of the trial several times.

"It was not my desire to attend the trial," Fr Skorniyakov told Forum 18 from Karshi on 5 August. "The Judge called me and told me I must participate. When I tried to resist the invitation, he put pressure on me, saying that if I do not come it will not be good for the Church."

Asked what the Judge questioned him about during the trial, Fr Skorniyakov replied: "He asked me if we have religious freedoms and, as a representative of Christians, what we must do. I cited the Apostle Paul, saying that we need to obey the authorities, since all authority is from God. I then added that this was unless that obedience goes against our conscience and moral principles."

Fr Skorniyakov did not wish to discuss the case further, but stressed: "I want you to know that I have nothing against the Baptists."

Urganch: Raid with automatic weapons on worship meeting

On 23 July, police in the city of Urganch in the north-western Khorezm Region raided the Sunday morning meeting for worship of local Protestant Christians in the home of a married couple. "Twenty five officers of law-enforcement agencies broke into the home of Ahmadjon and Yelena Nazarov and disrupted the worship service going on in their flat," Protestant Christians from Urganch, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, complained to Forum 18 on 4 August. "Some of the officers carried automatic weapons. Only six of the officers were in police uniform."

Leading the raid was Shukhrat Kurbanov, Deputy Chief of the Criminal and Anti-Terrorism Police of Khorezm Region. Accompanying him were Urganch City Police officers Sardorbek Allabergenov, Yusupboy Yusupov, Mukhammad Rakhimov,

Odylbek Matyakubov, Bakhtiyor Bekchanov, Bakhtiyor Karimov and Khursand Samandarov.

City Police Officer Allabergenov refused to explain why the Police raided the worship meeting. "I do not understand your question," he claimed to Forum 18 on 4 August. "I have no time to talk to you." He then put the phone down.

Participating in the worship were some 20 adults and 7 children. Police wrote down names and details of each person present. Officers also carried out an unauthorised search in the home, the Protestants complained. They confiscated a Children's Bible, a personal notebook with notes, sheets of paper with Christian songs, and three mobile phones. The officers then "forced all the worshippers onto a bus" and took them to Urganch City Police Station.

Urganch: Strip searches, pressure to write statements

In the Police Station the Protestants were "forced to sit on the floor." Police officers "with the help of female Officer Salomat Atajanova undressed sisters [female Church members] down to their underwear," they complained. "Officer Atajanova then seized a mobile phone with Christian sermons on it, found on one of the sisters."

Officers "forced nine of the believers to write statements but the rest refused to do so." They told the Protestants that the confiscated items will be sent for religious "expert analysis" to the State Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent. The Police are believed to be preparing administrative charges against the Nazarov couple.

Chief of the Criminal and Anti-Terrorism Police, Gayrat Khudayberganov, defended the raid. "It has nothing to do with their religion," he told Forum 18 on 4 August. "They held an unauthorised meeting." Told that it was a religious meeting, and asked why participants had been taken to the Police Station and some of them subjected to strip searches, he responded: "I did not know about this. I will make an inquiry about this to my Deputy Shukhrat."

Khudayberganov then without giving details told Forum 18 that Police opened an administrative case, and "next week the Court will hear the case. It will properly evaluate what happened." He said that he "cannot discuss the case further until after the trial".

Fergana: Simultaneous raids, confiscations

In the eastern Fergana Region on 1 July, Police raided the homes of four members of the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in the city of Fergana, local Baptists complained to Forum 18. Police conducted simultaneous early-morning searches at four addresses. Armed with search warrants, officers raided the homes of Pastor Aleksei Beryalev, Boris Kuznetsov, Sergei Stanislavsky and Yevgeniya Fedina.

Officers seized 41 Christian books and 48 magazines, 6 Bibles, a notebook computer and other items from the four Baptists. Officers refused to give the Baptists copies of police records of the confiscations.

Baptists told Forum 18 that as of 4 August the authorities neither returned the confiscated items nor informed them of whether or not any case was opened against them.

Karakalpakstan: Protestants "in constant fear"

The authorities in the north-western Region of Karakalpakstan "suppress Protestant Christians and keep them in constant fear", a human rights defender from the region, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, complained to Forum 18 on 4 August. "There are no registered Protestant Churches in Karakalpakstan, and the last one was recently stripped of official registration."

The authorities have refused state registration (and therefore the right to exist) to all religious communities in Karakalpakstan except mosques of the state-backed Muslim Board and one Russian Orthodox parish. Officers frequently raid and punish local Protestants (see F18News 17 May 2017 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2280>).

Protestants exist in Karakalpakstan, the human rights defender noted. "They live and work there. They cannot just disappear. They have faith in their religion, and want to practice it. The authorities are closely monitoring the believers' every move. They are afraid not only to meet for worship but also to do anything religious, because it could be interpreted by the authorities as illegal religious activity and result in their punishment."

The human rights defender pointed to the 15-day administrative arrests handed down in Nukus on 20 April to Atamurat Tajimuratov, Salamat Biskeyev, Joldasbai Zhanabergenov and Marat Mambetaliyev, four Protestant men from a local Church, to punish them for meeting for worship in a home (see F18News 20 June 2017 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2288>).

In addition to the 15-day prison terms, Judge Sailaubai Mambetkadyrov of Nukus City Criminal Court also handed down huge fines to five other Church members, the human rights defender added. Yerkin Tansykbayev, Zhamila Tajibayeva, Barshyn Bazarbayeva, Zamira Utemuratova, Sarbinaz Kaypbayeva, each received a fine of 40 times the minimum monthly wage, 5,991,000 Soms.

All nine were punished under Administrative Code Article 184-2. This punishes "Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons". Fines for individuals are between 20 and 100 times the minimum monthly wage, plus confiscation of the materials and items used to manufacture or distribute them.

In addition, the four men imprisoned for 15 days were also punished under Administrative Code Article 241. This 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".

"We are pleading with international human rights organisations to raise this issue before the Uzbekistan and Karakalpakstan authorities," the human rights defender told Forum 18.

Asked about the case, Nukus Court's Chancellery official (who did not give his name) referred Forum 18 to Judge Mambetkadyrov. The Judge greeted Forum 18 at first, but when asked about the imprisonments and fines he had handed down claimed it was a wrong number. Subsequent calls to his number the same day went unanswered.

Telephones at Karakalpakstan's Religious Affairs Department went unanswered on 4 August. (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating freedom of religion and belief 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>.

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at <<http://nationalgeographic.org/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Uzbekistan>>.

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