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UZBEKISTAN: Extra jail terms, no amnesty

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Relatives of two sisters imprisoned since November 2009 for holding Muslim meetings are disappointed they were not amnestied in September. Both had three-year terms added to their sentences in 2016. The younger, 48-year-old Mehrinisso Hamdamova, has a tumour which relatives say is now "huge".

Efforts by relatives of two Muslim prisoners of conscience, the sisters Mehrinisso and Zulhumor Hamdamova, to gain amnesty and release from prison in September were unsuccessful. The authorities jailed the two sisters in Karshi [Qarshi] more than seven years ago, for holding Muslim meetings for women without state permission. Both had three years added to their prison terms after their initial sentences expired.

Both sisters' health has long caused serious concern, especially that of the younger sister, 48-year-old Mehrinisso Hamdamova. She is suffering from a tumour which relatives say has grown to a "huge size". The authorities have denied both sisters medical treatment (see below).

Relatives of Khayrullo Tursunov, another Muslim prisoner of conscience who has been serving a 16-year jail term from June 2013, hope for his amnesty and release from prison. However, they told Forum 18 that his parents do not know who to approach and what steps to take, and "will be greatly thankful to those who can help them to do so" (see below).

Also hoping for his amnesty are relatives of Zuboyd Mirzorakhimov, a Muslim from Tajikistan. He was jailed in Uzbekistan for five years for having the Koran and Muslim sermons on his mobile phone when he transited through Tashkent in 2013 (see below).

Meanwhile, Tashkent City Court on 25 August upheld the convictions of five Muslim believers who were among a group of eleven given long prison terms in May (see below).

Torture and impunity for torturers continues, directed against Muslims, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses and people of other faiths exercising their freedom of religion and belief. Women are targeted for assault, and in another torture case police told a Jehovah's Witness that complaining makes no difference as "we will remain unpunished" (see F18News 12 October 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2325).

Muslim sisters' prison terms extended

Relatives of two jailed Muslim sisters, Mehrinisso and Zulhumor Hamdamova, wrote to the prison authorities seeking their amnesty, they told Forum 18 on 4 October. They received a letter in August saying the request would be considered in September. "Unfortunately, they were not amnestied in September," relatives lamented. "Now we hope that they will be released in December but we are not sure."

Mehrinisso and Zulhumor Hamdamova were arrested in November 2009, together with another female relative, to punish them for holding unauthorised religious meetings. Kashkadarya Regional Criminal Court jailed the three at a closed trial in April 2010 for between six and a half and seven years (see F18News 26 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1436).

Mehrinisso Hamdamova was due to be released in November 2016 but, despite suffering from a myoma (a tumour associated with uterine cancer), was given an additional three-year prison term, relatives told Forum 18. Relatives told Forum 18 that the authorities did "not tell us and we do not know on what grounds" her sentence was extended.

Similarly Zulhumor Hamdamova, who was due to be released in May 2016, had her prison term extended in August 2016 by three years for alleged violation of prison rules (see F18News 13 December 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2238).

Asked why the Hamdamova sisters were given new prison terms, the Interior Ministry's Main Office of Enforcement of Punishments referred Forum 18 on 3 October to the Head, Colonel Abdurazzak Kadyrov. Asked about the sisters' new prison terms, Kadyrov's secretary Nuriddin (who refused to give his last name) refused to put Forum 18 through to Kadyrov. "We cannot answer such

questions over the phone. You need to come to the reception in person," he said. He further declined to talk to Forum 18 about the Hamdamova sisters and other prisoners of conscience.

Zulhumor Hamdamova was taken to a different prison in August 2016, where she was given the extended three year prison terms, relatives told Forum 18. She was then brought back to the same Zangiota 64/1 prison in Tashkent Region, where both she and her sister continue to serve their sentences.

Authorities' new conditions for release of sisters?

Local police officers and prison officials have told the sisters' relatives that "if Zulhumor's daughter and sons who are abroad return to the country, they will be pardoned and Zulhumor and Mehrinisso will be released from prison", relatives told Forum 18.

Zulhumor Hamdamova's children "escaped Uzbekistan since they were afraid that they too could be arrested when their mother and aunt were arrested", relatives added. The relatives said that they do "not know where they are hiding" and that they are "not sure whether they will return".

How long has Mehrinisso Hamdamova left to live?

Relatives, who visited the sisters in early August, expressed concern particularly about Mehrinisso Hamdamova's health. "Mehrinisso's myoma has grown to a huge size," they told Forum 18. "The prison authorities did not release any medical reports to us on how long she has left to live. It is now in a stage that the myoma cannot be surgically removed since it may be fatal."

The Hamdamova sisters' prison address:

Uzbekistan

Tashkent Region

Zangiota tumani

Uchr. 64/1

Hamdamova Mehrinisso Imomovna

or

Hamdamova Zulhumor Imomovna

State-appointed Imams visiting prison to determine who can be amnestied

Khayrullo Tursunov, another Muslim prisoner of conscience, was extradited back to his native Uzbekistan from Kazakhstan in March 2013 against the express wishes of the United Nations Committee Against Torture. That June a court in Kashkadarya Region handed him a 16-year jail sentence for the alleged "extremist" exercise of freedom of religion and belief (see F18News 5 November 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1893).

Tursunov – who is now 42 - was exposed to the potentially fatal disease of tuberculosis (TB), when in December 2013 the authorities moved him to a TB prison. Later he was moved back to Karavulbazar Prison 64/25, and the authorities claimed to Forum 18 that he was cured (see F18News 18 February 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1930).

Tursunov's relatives visited him in prison "not so long ago", an individual who knows Tursunov and his family, and who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 28 September 2017. Tursunov "appears to be doing fine," they added, and that "nothing has changed in his prison conditions". They could give no further details.

"[State-appointed] Imams are said to be visiting prisons to talk to Muslim prisoners to sort out who can be amnestied," the individual told Forum 18. However, Tursunov has "not been interviewed so far". Tursunov's father and mother "are not well-educated and do not know who to talk or write to for their son's amnesty. They will be immensely thankful if somebody helps them in this."

Also hoping for amnesty

Also hoping for his amnesty are relatives of the 41-year-old Zuboyd Mirzorakhimov, a Muslim from Tajikistan imprisoned in Uzbekistan for carrying the Koran and Muslim sermons on his mobile phone as he transited through Tashkent.

Arrested in September 2013, Mirzorakhimov was sentenced in Tashkent the following month to five years' imprisonment in a

general regime labour camp under Criminal Code Article 246, Part 1 ("Smuggling, that is carriage through the customs border .. without the knowledge of or with concealment from customs control .. materials that propagandise religious extremism, separatism, and fundamentalism"). Tashkent Regional Criminal Court rejected his appeal in November 2013 (see F18News 17 February 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2149).

Mirzorakhimov's relatives told Forum 18 from Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe on 28 September 2017 that there are "no changes in his prison conditions". His wife visited him in prison in early September and he is "doing fine", they added.

Though Mirzorakhimov's prison term is due to end in September 2018, the family hopes that he will be amnestied in December 2017. "We were hoping that Zuboyd could be amnestied in September but this did not happen," they told Forum 18.

Jail terms for discussing faith upheld

On 25 August a panel of Judges at Tashkent City Criminal Court, including Orif Klychev, Khamro Berdyklichev and S. Karimov, upheld the lengthy prison terms given by the same Court three months earlier to five Muslims, human rights defender Surat Ikramov told Forum 18 from Tashkent that day. The five were the brothers Bakhadyr and Ravshan Sadykov, Davron Fayziyev, Sobirjon Khasanov and Abdurashid Rashidov.

The five were among eleven Muslim men punished for meeting in homes and teahouses to discuss their faith. The other six sentenced Muslims appear not to have appealed against their convictions.

On 26 May Tashkent City Criminal Court handed down prison sentences of five to six years to the eleven. One of the eleven, Khusnuddin Rizayev, a 39-year old professor of Tashkent's State Pedagogical University, had already been sentenced in a separate case on 25 January. That sentence has been combined with the sentence handed down on 26 May (see F18News 20 June 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2288).

"The hearing of the appeal was just a formality," human rights defender Ikramov complained to Forum 18. "The panel of Judges spent only 35 minutes on the hearing before announcing the decision. The judicial charade continues in Uzbekistan."

Judge Klichev refused to comment on the appeal decision. "We cannot discuss this over the phone. You need to come to the Court in person," he told Forum 18 on 3 October. Told that human rights defenders had told Forum 18 the case had been fabricated, and asked how Rizayev, one of the defendants, who worked for a Tashkent University which presented the Court with positive testimony of him, could be deemed an "extremist", Klichev responded: "Yes, I know, he was a professor but I cannot comment." He declined to talk further to Forum 18. (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=2314.

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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