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UZBEKISTAN: Police arrest, insult & threaten to rape female Jehovah's Witnesses

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Two female Jehovah's Witnesses, Gulya Boikova and Parakhat Narmanova, have been arrested, insulted and threatened with rape by police in Karshi (Qarshi), Forum 18 News Service has learnt. On 22 January a pending court case against the women was adjourned by Judge Abdukadyr Boibilov, while police gather more evidence. This is one example of the continuing persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan, who are the religious minority most frequently victimised by the authorities. Witnesses have been subjected to vicious beatings by police, and a Jehovah's Witness is the only member of a religious minorities to have been sentenced to jail for his religious beliefs. (There are about 6,500 prisoners of conscience from the majority religion, Islam.) The persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses is probably explained by their being the most active religious minority in trying to spread their beliefs, and the Uzbek religion law banning "actions aimed at proselytism".

Two Jehovah's Witnesses, Gulya Boikova and Parakhat Narmanova, were arrested by police on 20 December in the town of Karshi (Qarshi), southern Uzbekistan, after street preaching on the streets, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The women were taken to the town's police station, where they were held for more than 11 hours. According to their lawyer, the police insulted the women, calling them "the dregs of society" and hinted that they could rape them with impunity.

After being told that they would be summoned to appear in court under the administrative code, the women were released at 8 pm that evening. On 22 January, the women were tried at the local court, but Judge Abdukadyr Boibilov ordered police to gather additional evidence demonstrating that the women had indeed been preaching, and then adjourned the case. Attempts by Forum 18 to contact Boibilov proved unsuccessful, and a court staff member said that "Boibilov is busy at the moment, and no-one is going to comment on the Jehovah's Witness case until the next legal hearing". "Even if we win the court case, it is still unlikely that the police who spent 11 hours insulting the women will be brought to account," Forum 18 was told by their lawyer, Rustam Satdanov.

Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses continues elsewhere in Uzbekistan. Forum 18 has learnt that the authorities have for the past two years denied an exit visa to Erkin Khabibov, a Jehovah's Witness from Bukhara (Bukhoro). Under Uzbek law, a citizen must obtain a five-year exit visa to travel to countries with which Uzbekistan operates a visa regime. Without an exit visa, an Uzbek citizen may not even travel to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan or Turkmenistan, as there is a visa regime operating with these countries. Speaking to Forum 18, Khabibov said that he has been convicted under the administrative code for preaching, and that a criminal case had been brought against him for the same reason, although this has not reached court because of insufficient evidence. According to Khabibov, the department of visas and citizenship at the city police department told him that the delay in issuing an exit visa was connected with his having been prosecuted under the administrative code for his religious beliefs.

"Khabibov's name is on a list held by the National Security Service (NSS) [the ex-KGB secret police], and this explains the delay in issuing him with an exit visa. Shortly either the NSS will allow us to issue an exit visa to Khabibov, or we will give Khabibov an official refusal setting out our reasons for doing so," Forum 18 was told by Mirzho Akhmedov of the Bukhara police visa and citizenship department.

Of all the religious minorities in Uzbekistan, Jehovah's Witnesses are the most frequently victimised by the authorities. For example, there are several recorded instances where Jehovah's Witnesses have been subjected to vicious beatings at police stations (see F18News 2 June 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=69).

Amongst the country's religious minorities, only a Jehovah's Witness has been sentenced to jail for his religious beliefs. (There are about 6,500 prisoners of conscience from the majority religion, Islam.) In July 2002, Tashkent Jehovah's Witness Marat Mudarisov was arrested by the NSS and spent several months in detention. In November 2002, he was found guilty and sent to prison. On 8 October 2003, Mudarisov's sentence was overturned under international pressure and the Tashkent City Court ruled that he had "caused no harm to public order . . . nor threatened to cause such harm." Criminal charges against him were dismissed.

Tashkent's harsh policy towards Jehovah's Witnesses can probably be explained by the fact that of all the religious minorities, Jehovah's Witnesses are the most active in trying to spread their beliefs, and the Uzbek law on religion clearly bans "actions aimed at

proselytism".

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

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at

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

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY