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UZBEKISTAN: "Investigations" don't stop police illegal actions

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

In Urgench and Namangan Region, Protestant Christians complained about police raids and house searches without warrants, as well as police pressure on individuals to sign fabricated statements. "Investigations" in both places found no police wrongdoing. Instead, church members face possible punitive measures.

Following two separate raids by police on Protestant Christians to punish them for exercising freedom of religion or belief, church members' complaints about police illegality have unleashed further punitive police measures against them. Protestants in the north-western city of Urgench [Urganch] and in the eastern Namangan Region complained about police raids and house searches without warrants, as well as police pressure on individuals to sign fabricated statements. "Investigations" in both places found no police wrongdoing.

Despite police bringing great pressure against multiple people to sign false statements against Pastor Ahmadjon Nazarov and other Christians in Urgench, "investigations" by the Interior Ministry and police have found no violations by police. The "investigations" followed complaints by local Christians to officials including the Prime Minister about illegal police actions.

However, police pressure to sign false statements against Pastor Nazarov continued during the time "investigations" were allegedly being conducted. In one of the "investigations", Urgench Prosecutor Davlatov took no action against blatant illegality by police, but is instead considering acting against those who reported police illegality (see below).

In Namangan Region, local Christians also complained about illegal police actions during and after a raid including a Bible confiscation. The illegal actions included – as in Urgench - police falsifying statements. An "investigation" was alleged to have been conducted, but yet again no steps have been taken to punish police illegality. Instead a case has been opened against church member Ravshan Yunusov, whose home was raided and who complained to officials up to the General Prosecutor's Office about police illegality (see below).

"I am a Christian and I keep a Bible in my home," Yunusov stated. "Why should Christians be treated for this as if they are guilty of a crime?" Local Protestants, who wish to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that they think police are "trying to make Yunusov weary to stop him complaining about illegal police actions" (see below).

Urgench impunity

On 23 November 2018, 12 police officers raided a home in Urgench (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2434) [Urganch] in Uzbekistan's north-western Khorezm Region where Sharofat Allamova and her family were hosting several fellow-Protestants for a meal. After searching the home without a warrant and confiscating a New Testament, they questioned those present. Pastor Ahmadjon Nazarov suffered heart pains and had to be hospitalised after officers pressured him to sign a statement.

The following day Captain Mukhammad Rakhimov, head of Urgench Police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department, and other officials tried to pressure one of those present (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2434), Lolakhon Umarova, to accuse the host and the pastor of holding "unauthorised religious meetings". When she refused they threatened to deprive her of her two children and lodge a criminal case against her. When she still refused they summoned her mother-in-law and ordered her to beat her daughter-in-law until she signed a statement about what one officer called "illegal Christian Wahhabi activity". Major Khamro Masimov, Head of Khorezm Regional Police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department, also summoned Umarova for questioning. The mother-in-law then threw Umarova and her son out of the family home.

Police also took another local resident to the local Mahalla Committee (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2434) after she visited the pastor's flat, where Captain Rakhimov and other officers "mocked her, threatened her, and made her recite Islamic prayers".

Allamova complained in writing to Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov about the police's unlawful actions, including the raid on her home. But on 22 December Zakir Akhadov, Deputy Head of the Interior Ministry's Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism

Department, wrote back claiming that her complaint was "thoroughly investigated by the [Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism] Department, and was referred to Khorezm Regional Police for further investigation".

Akhadov claimed that Urgench Prosecutor's Office was also conducting its own investigation. "When the investigation is over, Khorezm Regional Police will inform you of the results," the letter claimed.

Asked why Deputy Head Akhadov did not properly investigate or punish the police's illegal actions, an official who refused to give his name at first claimed to Forum 18 on 25 January 2019 that they could not answer as Akhadov was in an "important meeting". On a later call the official then changed their story and claimed to Forum 18: "You need to get permission from the Foreign Ministry to talk to us."

Kahromon Gulomov also complained about the police's illegal actions, this time to Urgench City Prosecutor J. Davlatov. On 7 December Davlatov wrote back claiming: "We have studied case materials prepared by the police. We found from a written complaint against Nargiza Artykova that you have ties with an unofficial Christian group. We will inform you of our further actions."

Artykova is a local Christian. Prosecutor Davlatov did not explain why he was taking no action against illegality by police officers, but was instead, based on an unknown complaint made on unknown grounds, considering acting against those who reported police illegality.

Police routinely break the law, and unfair trials are also common. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)

Pastor Nazarov commented to Forum 18 that the authorities may have pressured someone to write a complaint against Artykova.

"Investigations" don't stop police illegality

The "investigations" the authorities claimed to be carrying out did not stop police illegality.

On 24 December – Christmas Eve - Major Masimov put pressure on Umarova to write a statement complaining about Pastor Nazarov and his exercise of freedom of religion and belief. Masimov wanted to dictate the "statement" word for word, but Umarova refused, local Protestants who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18.

However, Major Masimov managed over the next week to assemble 12 "statements" complaining about Pastor Nazarov. When Forum 18 asked the Major why he questioned 12 people over the Christmas period and forced them to write statements against Pastor Nazarov, Major Masimov claimed to Forum 18 on 24 January 2019: "We were only investigating complaints by citizens against Nazarov." Masimov also claimed that "people complain that he invites others to his home where they organise unregistered religious meetings".

Against Uzbekistan's legally binding obligations under international human rights law, the regime bans the exercise of freedom of religion and belief without state permission. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)

Major Masimov could not explain to Forum 18 why Pastor Nazarov and others cannot meet privately at home to pray and read the Bible together without state permission. When asked, Masimov paused and then said "it is better to do this in an official church". He claimed that "we will soon open several churches in our region". When Forum 18 again asked Masimov why people cannot meet for worship in their homes, he could not answer.

In May 2018 Uzbekistan added new obstacles (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2396) to the already difficult procedure for a belief community to apply for state permission to exist.

Major Masimov then claimed to Forum 18 that "we will not bother them [Pastor Nazarov and others] again".

Major Masimov also on 24 December 2018 summoned Pastor Nazarov to his Police Station, he told Forum 18. "He demanded that I visit the Police Station to talk about my complaints to the authorities about police actions. But I refused to go after consulting with a lawyer," Nazarov said.

On 16 January 2019 Urgench police chief Ilkham Tajimuratov wrote to Pastor Nazarov, Allamova and Rano Abdullayeva claiming: "We made an internal investigation into your complaints and found that the concerned police officers committed no violations in their actions."

Police Chief Tajimuratov also claimed to Forum 18 on 25 January that "we found no violations". When Forum 18 asked why his own police force repeatedly raided people who read their own Bibles in their own homes and punish local Christians, Tajimuratov calmly replied "just write a complaint to us and we will investigate".

Namangan Region: "Investigations" don't stop police illegality

On 19 November 2018, police in Pap in Uzbekistan's eastern Namangan Region raided the home of Ravshan Yunusov. He and seven other Protestants were having a meal together and reading the Bible when officers arrived. Police searched the flat illegally without a search warrant and confiscated legally-bought literature, including Bibles.

Officers arrested all eight Protestants and took them to Pap Police Station, where they questioned them until 3 am the next morning. Police forced most of the Protestants to sign statements written – illegally - by police, and said that they might be prosecuted for possession of the religious literature they legally bought. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2431)

Yunusov wrote to the police complaining about their illegal actions. Sanjar Jabbarov, Head of the Namangan Regional Police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department, wrote back on 24 December, claiming that "after your complaint [police] conducted an internal investigation into unlawful actions of Pap District Police Major Muhiddin Suvonov, Senior Lieutenant Sherzod Nabiyeu and Lieutenant Anvar Akbarov. The investigation results were referred to Namangan Police Disciplinary Board for further action."

However, after talking to the Personnel Section, Pap Police Captain Abdurashid Yuldashev claimed to Forum 18 on 25 January 2019 that the "investigation is still going on". Asked when it is going to be completed and whether the officers will be punished, Yuldashev responded: "We do not have answers to those questions yet."

Namangan Regional Police wrote a similar letter to Otabek Nuraliyev on 27 December. He later found that when he was asked by Lieutenant Colonel Sh. Ergashev of Namangan Police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department to sign a blank paper, this was not to prepare charges against the officers who acted illegally. Instead, police typed a statement falsely claiming that Nuraliyev was not complaining about the illegal actions of Major Suvonov and other police officers.

Forum 18 asked police chief Jabbarov on 25 January why Yunusov's home was raided, and what measures were or will be taken against the police who acted illegally. However, Jabbarov refused to answer. "I cannot talk to you. Send your questions in writing," he insisted. He then put the phone down.

Yunusov and Nuraliyev also complained to the District and Prosecutor General's Offices. "You sent both my complaints to Namangan Police for whom the Pap District police officers work," Yunusov wrote. "Please independently investigate the case."

"Psychological pressure on the youngsters"

Yunusov complained that despite being a state-certified professional arm-wrestling coach who has trained athletes who have represented the country internationally, the authorities "treat me as an extremist and criminal". He points out that Major Suvonov and other officers pressured some of his trainees into signing false statements against him. "Police officers put so much psychological pressure on the youngsters that they signed the fabricated statements."

Major Suvonov was "not satisfied with this and visiting their homes pressured fathers of two of my trainees to write statements against me", Yunusov added

"I am a Christian and I keep a Bible in my home," Yunusov states. "Why should Christians be treated for this as if they are guilty of a crime?"

Uzbekistan imposes total censorship of all printed and electronic religious literature (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314), and police often confiscate books which have passed the state's compulsory censorship. The regime has repeatedly tried to stop followers of religious beliefs, including Christians, from reading their own sacred texts in their own homes.

Samir Rakhmanov of the General Prosecutor's Office repeatedly refused to answer Forum 18's questions or put Forum 18 through to an official who would answer them. He then put the phone down. Calls to other General Prosecutor's Office telephones went unanswered on 25 January.

"Trying to make Yunusov stop complaining about illegal police actions"

The regime's alleged "investigations" have also not stopped the Namangan Region human rights violations.

On 19 January Inspector Gayrat Khakimov of Pap Police visited Yunusov in his workplace to tell him that he is being prosecuted in connection with the raid and confiscation of a Bible from him. Inspector Khakimov asked Yunusov to sign a document stating that he had seen case materials and that a court hearing would take place. Yunusov refused to do this as he has not seen the case materials.

Inspector Khakimov promised Yunusov that he would give him copies of the case files, but has not done so. It is illegal for police not to show those charged with offences the case files.

Yunusov complained to Pap Police chief Sanjar Abdullayev on 21 January about this, asking "why police have not provided him with case materials, why police who raided his home illegally were not punished, and why the police are trying to cover up the unlawful actions of their officers".

On 23 January Inspector Khakimov called Yunusov twice. In the first call he told Yunusov that a court hearing will take place on 24 January. Fifteen minutes later Khakimov called again to say that the hearing was postponed to an unknown date. At no point did the Inspector tell Yunusov why the police have not provided case materials and so are denying him the chance to prepare his legal defence.

Local Protestants, who wish to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 25 January that they think the police are "trying to make Yunusov weary to stop him complaining about illegal police actions".

Pap Police Captain Yuldashev would not explain to Forum 18 on 28 January why the police are behaving like this. "I don't know", he claimed. He claimed that to get the case materials Yunusov needs to ask Inspector Khakimov, but would not explain why Khakimov has not provided materials despite Yunusov's repeated requests. (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Uzbekistan
(<http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>)

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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