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UZBEKISTAN: Raids, eviction threat for Urgench Baptists

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Police raided a Baptist church's Sunday meetings for worship in Urgench in September and administration and police officials threatened Pastor Stanislav Kim with eviction from his home. Although the local administration then orchestrated a hostile mob, the congregation has in October met without official interference.

On Sunday 15 September, police from the "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" raided the home of Pastor Stanislav Kim in Urgench in Uzbekistan's north-western Khorezm Region. The raid targeted the regular Baptist weekly meeting for worship, as has happened many times before to the Urgench congregation.

On 17 September, two days after the Sunday raid, officials summoned Pastor Kim to a meeting at the local mahalla committee (the lowest level of district administration). At the meeting were city and police officials as well as the local state-controlled imam. The mahalla Chair Khayrullo Yunusov was unable to explain to Forum 18 why an official of one belief was invited to a meeting attacking followers of another belief's exercise of freedom of religion and belief (see below).

Officials at the meeting claimed that there was in the mahalla "general discontent of the mahalla with the Baptists", claiming to have had complaints from 89 residents out of about 3,000 people. One of the alleged 89 complainants is known to be a mahalla employee, but the others have not been identified (see below).

The meeting decided Pastor Kim "must leave our mahalla or he should arrange his meetings elsewhere", as well as that he and his family should be evicted from their home if the meetings do not stop. Mahalla Chair Yunusov denied that officials had threatened eviction, but refused to discuss this threat more when Forum 18 quoted from a letter he had sent to Pastor Kim threatening eviction (see below).

"some of their members come to their meetings with children under 17, and the Baptists teach them their religious dogmas," Mahalla Chair Yunusov claimed. However, Pastor Kim observed that "we do not allow children in our meetings without their parents' consent" (see below).

The day after the meeting, on 18 September, Mahalla Chair Yunusov "gathered some neighbours and summoned brother Kim once again to their building", Baptists told Forum 18. Yunusov's mob "spoke to Kim in a hostile manner, and demanded that he and his family leave his home and move to another area," the Baptists complained. On 22 and 29 September police launched two further raids on Sunday meetings for worship (see below).

On 15 October Mahalla Chair Yunusov told Pastor Kim "that the best solution could be for us to rent a place outside the mahalla". Pastor Kim told Yunusov that "we are not going to rent a place, and we have our own property where we worship." (see below)

Pastor Kim also told Yunusov that the Baptists do not want to apply for state permission to exist, and that "we will continue our meetings for worship". He noted that their last meeting for worship was on Sunday 20 October and that officials have not interfered since the 29 September raid (see below).

Forum 18 asked the Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent what is either "extremist" or "terrorist" about exercising the freedom of religion and belief that police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Departments" are involved. The Committee did not respond (see below).

From 2 October the Religious Affairs Committee has been run by State Security Service (SSS) secret police Colonel Abdugafur Akhmedov, who previously ran the SSS secret police in the southern Surkhandarya Region (see below).

Police raid Baptists meeting for worship

On Sunday 15 September, police from the "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" raided the home of Pastor Stanislav Kim in Urgench in Uzbekistan's north-western Khorezm Region. The raid targeted the regular Baptist weekly meeting for

worship, as has happened many times before to the Urgench congregation (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2383).

"We had many guests alongside with our regular worshippers since we were celebrating the autumn harvest God gave us. Our guests were from across Uzbekistan," Pastor Kim told Forum 18 on 16 October. "They sent two of their officers to our meeting and then left."

Congregations of the Baptist Council of Churches meet for worship without seeking state permission, as is their right under international human rights law. But Uzbekistan, against its international human rights obligations, bans any collective exercise of the freedom of religion and belief without state permission (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314).

"Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" police throughout Uzbekistan are used by the regime to target the exercise of human rights without state permission. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)

"Stop the meetings of the illegal Baptist Christian religion"

On 17 September, two days after the Sunday raid, officials summoned Pastor Kim to a meeting held by the local mahalla committee (the lowest level of district administration). Mahalla committees are a key element in the regime's attempts to stop people exercising freedom of religion and belief without state permission. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)

At the meeting held in the mahalla's building were the Deputy Head of Urgench City Administration Munavarkhan Amanbayeva, Expert of the City Administration Department of youth, social and educational issues Oybek Vaisov, the head of Urgench's police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" Khushnut Yakubov, his Deputy Khayrullo Salayev, local police officer Inspector Akbar Muradov, and the Chair of the local Al-Khorezm mahalla administration Khayrullo Yunusov.

Urgench City Administration officials who refused to give their names refused to put Forum 18 through to the Head of the Administration Shukhrat Abdullayev on 16 October. They referred Forum 18 to Deputy Amanbayeva. The person who answered her mobile phone claimed to Forum 18 that "she is busy and cannot talk with you". They would not say when a conversation could happen.

The mahalla meeting also included Imam Matyakubov of the mahalla's state-controlled Kuzli ota Mosque. The regime strictly controls and restricts all mosques and all public expressions of Islam. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)

Baptists told Forum 18 on 15 October that Pastor Kim was "questioned in a hostile manner in front of some mahalla residents about meetings for worship".

Mahalla Chair Yunusov was unable to explain why an imam was invited to a meeting attacking the freedom of religion and belief of followers of another belief. "We invite imams to mahalla meetings because they are part of the mahalla," Yunusov mumbled to Forum 18 on 15 October. When Forum 18 again asked why an imam was invited, Yunusov claimed that "the imam did not speak against them [Baptists] but only expressed the general discontent of the mahalla with the Baptists".

According to the minutes of the 17 September meeting, sent with a letter to Pastor Kim which Forum 18 has seen, Yunusov claimed that "residents of our mahalla wrote a complaint to us that Stanislav Kim gathers citizens in his home to propagate the teachings of the Illegal Baptist Christian religion". Yunusov further claimed that 89 residents "told us that either Kim must leave our mahalla or he should arrange his meetings elsewhere".

Asked by Forum 18 why the Baptists cannot meet for worship in their private property, Yunusov claimed that "this disturbs the neighbours".

The alleged residents also allegedly complained that "young children, including neighbours' children with adults, participate in these meetings, which concerns us". Mahalla Chair Yunusov claimed that "some of their members come to their meetings with children under 17, and the Baptists teach them their religious dogmas. And they sing songs loudly in their home".

Pastor Kim told Forum 18 that "we do not sing loudly, and we do not allow children in our meetings without their parents' consent".

When Forum 18 pointed out to Mahalla chair Yunusov that parents have the internationally recognised human right to teach their children their beliefs and bring them to meetings, he claimed that "they are small children and do not understand what they are being taught".

Mahalla Chair Yunusov claimed to Forum 18 that "It's the mahalla residents' common view that the Baptists should not meet for their religious meetings in a residential area". However, very few names of the alleged 89 residents – out of about 3,000 residents – have been given, and at least one of the names is a mahalla employee. Yunusov also could not identify the alleged 89 residents to Forum 18.

In stark contrast to the anonymity of the claimed residents, all applications for state permission for a religious community to exist must include among other things full personal details of 100 adult Uzbeks citizens, as well as permission to exist from the mahalla. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)

Mahalla Chair Yunusov went on to tell the 17 September meeting that Pastor Kim "despite numerous talks with police from the Urgench Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department, and several punishments including criminal punishments given to him is intent on continuing these illegal meetings".

Among the numerous punishments for exercising freedom of religion and belief given to Pastor Kim (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2383) and his congregation is an August 2016 criminal punishment of two years corrective labour (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2219) imposed on the Pastor for having Christian books in his own home.

"He must be informed in writing of his eviction"

Deputy City Administration Head Amanbayeva, city official Vaisov, and Imam Matyakubov all attacked Kim in the meeting, claiming that "you must register your Church or arrange your meetings elsewhere".

The state officials at the meeting then decided that "if Kim continues his criminal violations he must be informed in writing of his eviction from the mahalla". Also, police Inspector Muradov "should be informed of the further actions of the mahalla Administration regarding this issue".

Inspector Muradov was reluctant to discuss his participation in raids and the meeting. "I was in that meeting, but please talk to the police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department as this issue is their responsibility," he told Forum 18 on 16 October. He then refused to talk more.

The head of Urgench's police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" Yakubov did not answer his phone on 16 October.

When Forum 18 asked mahalla Chair Yunusov what the Baptists did that was criminal, he claimed that "the Baptists have misinformed you". When Forum 18 repeated the question, Yunusov could give no answer.

Forum 18 asked mahalla chair Yunusov why the authorities raided the Baptist Church and why they want to evict Kim's family from his home. "We are not against the Baptists," he claimed. "They have misinformed you. We are only suggesting them that they should rent a hall in the city for their meetings and not meet in a home in a residential area."

When Forum 18 pointed out that the warning letter threatens eviction, and asked what further actions the authorities will take, Yunusov replied: "I don't know. You need to ask the city authorities."

Officially-orchestrated mob

On 18 September, the day after the meeting, Mahalla Chair Yunusov "gathered some neighbours and summoned brother Kim once again to their building", Baptists told Forum 18. Yunusov's mob "spoke to Kim in a hostile manner, and demanded that he and his family leave his home and move to another area," the Baptists complained.

Raid, written eviction threat

On 22 September, one week after the initial raid, three Urgench police Criminal Investigation Department officers led by local police officer Inspector Muradov again raided the Baptists' Sunday meeting for worship.

"They entered our meeting hall, and Inspector Muradov video filmed all the participants," Baptists complained to Forum 18. Police then gave Pastor Kim a warning letter, including the minutes of the 17 September meeting, signed by mahalla Chair Yunusov. This claimed that Kim and his family will be "evicted" from their home "if he continues his criminal violations".

"Our children hear your songs and want to attend your meetings"

One week later, on Sunday 29 September, "Inspector Muradov and Chair Yunusov came to our meeting for worship", Pastor Kim stated. "They asked us why we gather and celebrate the Christian religion, in the midst of Muslim Uzbeks." They then told Kim that "you must not do this. Our children hear your songs and want to attend your meetings. You should stop this."

"Seemingly, it has not affected our members or their attendance"

However, Pastor Kim told Forum 18 on 15 October that "we keep on meeting for our worship without any hindrance. Since early

October no one from the authorities has visited us. Seemingly, it has not affected our members or their attendance."

On 15 October, Mahalla Chair Yunusov invited Pastor Kim to his office to tell him that he has received many messages about the case. "He again told me that the best solution could be for us to rent a place outside the mahalla," Pastor Kim told Forum 18 on 22 October. He told Yunusov that "we are not going to rent a place, and we have our own property where we worship."

Pastor Kim also told Yunusov that the Baptists do not want to apply for state permission to exist, and that "we will continue our meetings for worship". He noted that their last meeting for worship was on Sunday 20 October and that officials have not interfered since the 29 September raid.

SSS secret police officer appointed to run Religious Affairs Committee

On 2 October the regime appointed State Security Service (SSS) secret police Colonel Abdugafur Akhmedov as Chair of the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent. He replaced Jasur Akramov, who ran the Committee from April 2018 to August 2019. His predecessor Artykbek Yusupov ran the Committee from 2006.

The Religious Affairs Committee has a key role in suppressing the exercise of freedom of religion and belief (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314), as does the SSS secret police.

Colonel Akhmedov before his appointment ran the SSS secret police in the southern Surkhandarya Region, whose regional capital is Termez.

What is either "extremist" or "terrorist" about exercising this freedom?

Forum 18 asked Ulugbek Jurayev, Assistant to SSS secret police Colonel Akhmedov at the Religious Affairs Committee, why Uzbekistan raids people exercising their freedom of religion and belief, and what is either "extremist" or "terrorist" about exercising this freedom that police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Departments" are involved. He claimed on 14 October that: "I am not aware of the case but I am sure if they write to the Committee, it will investigate why this happened."

The duty officer at the SSS secret police's Tashkent headquarters on 4 October refused to answer questions. He also refused to put Forum 18 through to any officials. (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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