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UZBEKISTAN: Ex-KGB's "preventative work" with religious minorities

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Although believers are frequently tried and fined for conducting unregistered religious activity, which Uzbekistan has criminalised, Forum 18 News Service has discovered that, unseen by outsiders, the National Security Service (NSS, the former KGB) also often engages in "preventative work" with members of religious minorities. NSS officers indicate to believers that they know a lot about them and their community, and interrogate them further about the community's activity and plans in an apparent bid to intimidate and threaten them. Vadim Negreyev - an officer from the NSS national headquarters in the capital Tashkent cited by a number of believers for his role in investigating minority faiths – declined to discuss his work with Forum 18. The NSS engages differently with members of the majority Muslim faith – unregistered communities are immediately closed down as soon as they are discovered.

Uzbekistan's law on religion bans the activity of unregistered religious communities. If members of an unregistered religious community meet in a private home, sooner or later the police will appear at the apartment and take them to the local police station. They will then be tried and fined or even placed under administrative arrest for up to 15 days.

However, often this unhappy chain of events does not unfold immediately but, as Forum 18 News Service has learnt, is preceded by "preventative work" with believers by officers of the National Security Service (NSS, the former KGB) apparently aimed at intimidating and threatening them. Such "preventative work" is conducted only with members of religious minorities. Unregistered Muslim communities are closed down as soon as the authorities become aware of their existence, because of the government's panicky fear of Islamic radicals.

In this article, Forum 18 has had to rely only on information given by believers, as NSS officers refused to talk to Forum 18 for this investigation. Forum 18 managed to reach NSS officer Vadim Negreyev – cited by a number of believers for his role in investigating minority faiths - by telephone on 11 February, but he too declined to answer Forum 18's questions.

Rustam Satdanov, a lawyer based in the capital Tashkent who has defended Jehovah's Witnesses, told Forum 18 on 10 February of a typical example of how such "preventative conversations" between NSS staff and believers unfold: "On 16 December 2003 Vadim Anatolyevich Negreyev, an official at the NSS national headquarters, called my mobile, although I have not given my telephone number to anyone from the NSS. He suggested that I visit him the next day at his office. When I asked why, he did not explain, saying only that it was about business in which I was involved."

Satdanov told Forum 18 that he went there as requested the following day. Negreyev took him down a long corridor into what he took to be the basement. At the end of the corridor was a door leading into a small room, where there was just a table and three chairs, all of which were fixed to the floor.

"Behind the table sat Bokhodir Kakhramonovich Alayev, who introduced himself as head of the NSS administration for combating religious extremism," he recounted. "He treated me quite good-naturedly, and smiled. Alayev's first question was to ask after things at home, and how my two sons were. He mentioned both of them by name. He asked after my wife, mother, father and my little brother Timur."

Satdanov, who had previously worked for the Interior Ministry, said Alayev went on to ask more questions. "These were designed to put me on edge by their depth of information - I know these tricks, having taken an entire course on interrogation techniques at Uzbekistan's Academy of Internal Affairs." Alayev gave him to understand that he knew that every one or two weeks he held Jehovah's Witness meetings at home.

"Negreyev said that if I wanted he could provide me with work defending Jehovah's Witnesses. He added, laughing, that they would let the Jehovah's Witnesses meet undisturbed at New Year, and then I would have lots of work; he said they were planning this for after the holidays. Then they started congratulating me on being communicative, and said that the NSS was currently taking on dimwits who could not even put a report together."

Satdanov said they then told him he was an officer "like them" and that he had done himself "no good" by leaving state employment. They said he could have had a good career, that he was still young, and that it was not worth "spoiling" his relations with the NSS, which could influence his life in future, for the sake of "some" clients.

"Alayev said that he himself had the power either to further my career or to ruin my life - he simply had to drop the hint of slander to the right person and I would lose my lawyer's licence. I said that I did not intend to work with them and that if I had wanted to work with them I would not have left state employment. Then they started explaining that I would not have to work for them, just to give them information that would be of interest. I refused, and would not listen to them. The conversation lasted for three hours."

Significantly, when Forum 18 named Satdanov, with his agreement, in its telephone conversation with Negreyev on 11 February, the NSS immediately began to pressure the lawyer with "threatening" telephone calls. "We had a friendly chat with you, and you immediately telephoned journalists and disclosed the names of our agents," Satdanov quoted the NSS officers as having told him. "So now we're really going to find ways of dealing with you."

NSS officers have held similar "conversations" with members of other faiths. Last June, Nelya Denisova, a member of the Asia Protestant church received a summons to the NSS offices in Tashkent. The same Negreyev spent four hours interrogating her about the activities of the Association of Independent Churches, of which the Asia church is a member. "Just don't publish an article about our conversation on the Internet," Negreyev told Denisova at the end of the interrogation. "No-one here tortured or raped you! We just had a friendly chat."

"This is far from the first time that members of our church have been summoned by NSS officers," the Association's co-ordinator, Vladimir Zhikhar, told Forum 18 the following month. He believed the main reason for the NSS interest in the church's activity was that it operates without registration (see F18News 15 July 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=104).

Forum 18 has received reports of numerous similar conversations between NSS officers and believers. Also indicative is that when they meet Forum 18, many believers behave as if they are carrying out a secret mission, constantly checking that there is no-one shadowing them. They warn that the correspondent's telephone is tapped and home is under open surveillance.

The NSS also appears to use other ways of infiltrating groups of believers. About a year ago Bakhtier Tuichiev, pastor of a Protestant church in the town of Andijan in the Uzbek section of the Fergana valley, told Forum 18 that he had been visited by a group of people claiming to be Russian journalists from CNN and the BBC. The pastor was put on guard by the fact that they were mainly interested in his view of Uzbekistan's president Islam Karimov. Pastor Tuichiev told Forum 18 he believed the "journalists" who had talked to him were in fact NSS officers. Forum 18 telephoned the BBC and CNN offices in Tashkent and Moscow (the CNN and BBC Moscow offices oversee their work throughout the CIS) and both companies told Forum 18 that their journalists were not in Andijan at the time of the "interview" (see F18News 14 March 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=5).

Forum 18's correspondent has also encountered NSS working practices. In June 2002, while investigating the violation of believers' rights in the town of Nukus in north-western Uzbekistan, two men entered the correspondent's hotel room unannounced, saying they were employed by the Visa and Registration department at Nukus town police department. Although they claimed to be carrying out a "routine check on foreigners", they were primarily interested in what Forum 18's correspondent was doing in Nukus. The visitors were astonishingly well-informed; they knew, for example, that the previous day Forum 18's correspondent had left the town for 24 hours.

Hotel staff told Forum 18 that of all the foreigners staying at the hotel only its correspondent had been subjected to the "routine check". The hotel staff also said that after Forum 18's correspondent had made a few telephone calls, they had received a call from the NSS asking for information about the person staying in that room. They also suggested that after this the telephone in the correspondent's room had been tapped.

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>

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