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UZBEKISTAN: Should Christians be shot?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Amid a major crackdown, eleven Protestants in Nukus were questioned at the public prosecutor's office and pressured to convert to Islam. They were also threatened with being shot, though the city prosecutor, M. Arzymbetov, subsequently denied this to Forum 18 News Service. The prosecutor also tried to have a Protestant, Iklas Aldungarov, expelled from his university medical course, but the university rector, Oral Ataniyazova, has resisted the pressure. "How and what Aldungarov believes is his own personal business, and we do not have the right to interfere with it," she told Forum 18. She added that a very large number of young people in the region are becoming Christians. "Evidently, the Christian churches have managed to set up a competent, well conceived operation here. I do not think that is a bad thing. Let's see the mosques here work as well as the Christian churches." Pressure on Protestants elsewhere in Uzbekistan is also continuing.

Amid a major crackdown on a group of Protestants in Nukus, the capital of the Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] autonomous republic in north-western Uzbekistan, eleven members of a local congregation, the Church of Christ, have been summoned for questioning at the public prosecutor's office, where they were pressured to renounce their faith and convert to Islam. They now face fines in court. "All of them are members of an unregistered religious organisation," Nukus city prosecutor M. Arzymbetov told Forum 18 News Service on 19 April. "The activity of unregistered organisations is forbidden by law." He denied reports Forum 18 had received that the Protestants had been coarsely insulted and threatened with being shot. "It wasn't I who spoke to the Protestants, but my assistant Kasym Davletmuradov. He is a very bright man and he is not capable of such a thing." Arzymbetov also tried to have church member Iklas Aldungarov expelled from his university in retaliation for his participation in the church, though so far Aldungarov has held onto his place.

The crackdown began on 1 April, when Arzymbetov wrote to the rector of the Medical University, Oral Ataniyazova, to inform her that Aldungarov, a final year student, was taking part in "an illegal religious sect", the Church of Christ. The letter, of which Forum 18 has a copy, told her that the public prosecutor had evidence that Aldungarov had violated Article 240 part 1 (breaking the law on religious organisations) and Article 241 (breaking the law on giving religious instruction) of the code of administrative offences and that the case had already been passed to the court. Describing "attracting people to other religious confessions", distributing religious literature and organising meetings as "a crude violation of the law" impermissible among students, the prosecutor called for Aldungarov to be removed from the university and to confirm that this had been done by 10 April.

Sources told Forum 18 that Aldungarov had never had any problems before, has never been detained or had literature confiscated.

Arzymbetov confirmed that he had written to the university about Aldungarov, but denied that he had ordered that he be expelled. "I simply recommended that the rector should keep an eye on her students," he claimed to Forum 18. "The question of Aldungarov's expulsion did not arise and he remains a student there."

Yet university rector Ataniyazova confirmed that the public prosecutor's letter had recommended that Aldungarov be excluded but insisted she had rejected such pressure. "We replied to the prosecutor that Aldungarov's religious beliefs do not have any bearing on his studies, and therefore we consider it simply unethical to consider such a letter," she told Forum 18 from Nukus on 16 April. "How and what Aldungarov believes is his own personal business, and we do not have the right to interfere with it." She said that a very large number of young people in Karakalpakstan are converting to Christianity. "Evidently, the Christian churches have managed to set up a competent, well conceived operation here. I do not think that is a bad thing. Let's see the mosques here work as well as the Christian churches."

At the same time she claimed that Aldungarov was a very poor student. "Every session he fails two or three exams. But I want to stress that we are not going to make a connection between Aldungarov's progress and his religious convictions."

In the wake of the attempt to oust Aldungarov from the university, the National Security Service (former KGB) secret police and the public prosecutor's office then widened their crackdown, beginning on 9 March to summon other church members for questioning.

Protestant sources told Forum 18 that Arzymbetov, his assistant M. Utemuratov, and investigator Davletmuratov tried to force those summoned to sign statements admitting that they had participated in "illegal" religious meetings and training. When one church

member Mahset Jabbabergenov refused to sign the documents, Arzymbetov reportedly began swearing at him and threatening to imprison if he did not sign. When the threats had no impact, he reportedly declared: "You Christians should all be shot!" Officials from the public prosecutor's office also insisted that Jabbabergenov, Aldungarov and the other Protestants – Arzubay Abenov, Bahadir Joushimov, Kolbuy Joushimov, Timur Uralbaev, Miruert Muratova, Abbat Allamuratov, Aygul Allamuratova and Muhamed Saitov - should give up their Christian faith and become Muslims. Other local Protestants were later summoned for questioning.

"Although the authorities had no facts to prove the accusation they kept inviting everybody who had any connection with Christianity and questioning them," one Protestant source who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18. "If during the questioning they heard any names they summoned those people to the office."

Meanwhile, pressure has continued on Protestants in other parts of the country. On 10 March the criminal court for Yakkasaroy district of the capital Tashkent fined six Protestants - Salimjon Babakulov, Mardjon Nurulov, Olim Mamurov, Nadira Tadjikulova, Nargiza Tadjikulova and Jamilya Makhmudova. They were punished for holding religious meetings in private apartments under Article 240 and Article 241 of the administrative code.

In another incident in Tashkent, on 9 March police raided and cut short a meeting being held by around 10 Protestants on the premises of the Harvest company. Uzbek citizens present were each fined five times the minimum wage, or 27,200 soms (183 Norwegian kroner, 22 Euros or 27 US dollars). The South Korean citizens who were present at the meeting were "recommended" to leave the country for engaging in "unlawful religious activity".

Meanwhile on 23 March the deputy head of the justice department for Tashkent region, Sh. Khaknazarov, ordered a founding group that was seeking registration for a Protestant church on Friendship collective farm near Tashkent to revise its registration application, claiming it contained "grammatical errors". "Every time, the justice administration deliberately concentrates in its letters only on some inaccuracies, so that next time they can once again refuse registration supposedly for objective reasons," one Protestant who preferred not to be named told Forum 18. "In fact, officials are simply dragging their feet so that the church cannot function." (See also F18News 18 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=281)

Elsewhere, Baptists of the Council of Churches who refuse on principle to register with the authorities told Forum 18 on 10 April that Viktor Otmakhov, whose home in the town of Angren near Tashkent is used for services, was summoned to the town's public prosecutor's office on 1 April and questioned for five hours. Deputy public prosecutor Nurlan Bainazarov demanded that he name all those who attend services and give their home addresses, but Otmakhov refused. Bainazarov then threatened to start a criminal case against him. He was given a written warning that if he does not stop services in his home, arrests, fines and other unspecified punishments will follow.

These incidents are the latest in a continuing series of attacks on Protestants across Uzbekistan (eg. see F18News 4 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=267) and take place in the context of the current post-terrorist bombing crackdown against people of all faiths (see F18News 13 April http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=298).

For more background, 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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