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UZBEKISTAN: Authorities now behaving "as badly as usual" after post-bombing crackdown

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Mass arrests of religious believers of all faiths, following the March/April terrorist bombs, have now virtually ceased, and Forum 18 News Service has been told by Protestants, Hare Krishna devotees and Jehovah's Witnesses that the authorities are now behaving "as badly as usual". However, over 100 people are still in custody in southern Uzbekistan, apparently for being "faithful Muslims" and several prominent Muslims appear to have been singled out by the authorities for repression in the crackdown.

In the post-terrorist bombing crackdown against people of all faiths (see F18News 13 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=298), mass arrests of religious believers that began straight after the attacks have now virtually ceased. Protestants, Hare Krishna believers and Jehovah's Witnesses have all told Forum 18 News Service that, while the authorities had stepped up the pressure on them immediately after the terrorist attacks, they were now behaving towards them "as badly as usual" (eg. see F18News 27 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=329).

"Straight after the attacks dozens of our brothers were called in for police questioning. Now, the situation has become more stable. Of course, it wouldn't be correct to say that we are happy with the state policy towards us, but we have to recognise that now the situation is almost the same as it was before the terrorist attacks," Forum 18 was told in Tashkent by Jehovah's Witness Andrei Agafonov.

However, in the crackdown more than 100 Muslims were arrested by the National Security Service secret police (NSS), in Kashkadarya region, in southern Uzbekistan, Forum 18 has learnt. Tulkin Karayev, of the Human Rights Organisation in Uzbekistan, speaking to Forum 18 in the region's central city of Karshi [Qarshi] on 29 May, said that all those arrested in the region had leaflets from an alleged radical Islamic organisation, Jamaat, planted on them, and several also had drugs planted on them. "No-one in Kashkadarya region has heard of the existence of this Jamaat organisation before, and I strongly suspect that in fact this organisation has simply been dreamt up by NSS staff," Karayev said. He told Forum 18 that not one of those arrested was a terrorist, and that the only crime they are guilty of was being "faithful Muslims".

Forum 18 visited seven families of the detainees between 29 May and 1 June in Karshi and it is clear the majority of those arrested from these families are deeply devout Muslims. All the detainees' wives wear the hijab, and some of them cover not only their heads and necks but also the lower part of their faces, leaving only their eyes uncovered. "My brother is particularly upset at the fact that he is not allowed to perform religious rituals in his temporary cell," Forum 18 was told on 30 May by Begzot Tuichiev, brother of detainee Dilshod Tuichiev.

Unnecessary physical force was frequently said to have been used in the arrests, against both the detainees and their relatives. "When I tried to stop the police from taking my son Nurriddin Rakhimov, the police seized me by the arms and legs, lifted me from the ground and forcibly threw me onto the asphalt," Forum 18 was told in Karshi on 30 May by 54-year-old Noroy Uzbekova.

The arrest on 4 April of the 29-year-old imam of the central Navo mosque Rustam Klichev was widely noted in the region (see F18News 13 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=298). After arresting Klichev, the NSS searched his home, according to his seven months pregnant wife Kul'par Rakhimova, committing flagrant breaches of the law by, for example, planting a leaflet claimed to be issued by the Jamaat organisation. But Rakhimova maintained to Forum 18 on 29 May in Karshi that "the day before, I had cleaned the larder where the leaflet was discovered, and I can declare with complete certainty that it was not there." Rakhimova believes that the authorities have capitalised on the terrorist attacks to launch a new campaign against believers. "Karshi residents are extremely unhappy at the authorities' repression of Muslims. Since my husband's arrest, Muslims have even staged several demonstrations at the NSS building," Rakhimova told Forum 18.

NSS investigator Bakhtier Faiziev, who is in charge of these cases, told Forum 18 on 1 June in Karshi that he could not provide any information because it was an undercover investigation. "We don't intend to create any mysteries, but it would be improper to give an interview before the case has reached court," he told Forum 18.

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There have also been other arrests of prominent Muslims in the crackdown, most notably 28 year old Husnuddin Nazarov, eldest son of the former imam of the Tashkent Toktabai mosque, Abidkhan Nazarov, as well as the chairman of the Namangan section of the Independent Organisation for Human Rights of Uzbekistan, Erk Gulyam Khalmatov.

Imam Nazarov's sermons were extremely popular, hundreds coming to hear him call for a return to the Islam of the time of the prophet Mohammed, and insisting that Muslim women must wear the hijab. These sermons irritated the authorities, and Nazarov was forced into hiding in 1998, sympathisers told him that he would shortly be arrested. Police then arrested close relatives and supporters. Nazarov's eldest son, Husnuddin Nazarov, went missing on 17 May this year, failing to return from the mosque. Police had visited him and questioned several neighbours in the previous week and the family suspects that the police have arrested him. Local police and the Interior Ministry denied this.

Immediately after Husnuddin's disappearance, his relatives asked lawyer Irina Mikulina to represent him, because they did not believe the police and Interior Ministry and this lawyer specialises in defending arrested Muslims. Forum 18 was told on 3 June in Tashkent by Mikulina that "I lodged a request with the Internal Affairs Ministry and the NSS to find out where Husnuddin Nazarov was being held, but they did not give me any firm response, even though by law the police have to make contact with the relatives straight after an arrest and offer the detainee the services of a lawyer." She is sure that Husnuddin has been abducted either by the police or the NSS. "It's quite ludicrous to suggest that hooligans attacked Husnuddin. Husnuddin disappeared not far from his own home, and there were a lot of people on the street," Mikulina said she feared for Husnuddin's life. "There have already been cases where believers have simply disappeared without a trace," she said. Mikulina believes that Husnuddin's disappearance is connected with the crackdown against Muslims following the terrorist attacks.

The chairman of the Namangan section of the Independent Organisation for Human Rights of Uzbekistan, Erk Gulyam Khalmatov, was arrested by police on 17 May and placed in temporary detention, allegedly on suspicion of dealing in drugs. Following pressure from the British and US embassies, Khalmatov was released from detention after giving his written assurance that he would not leave the country, and a criminal case was brought against him. "I have indeed grown several poppies in the kitchen garden at my dacha. I am an elderly 70-year-old man, and cannot take medicine. Uzbek traditional medicine prescribes poppies as a cold-cure and I thought that they might do me good," Gulyam Khalmatov told Forum 18, speaking from Namangan.

Khalmatov is sure that the drug charge is an excuse because "I have defended repressed Muslims and this has incurred great anger on the part of the authorities. In February this year, some police officers came to see me and told me that my name was on a list of religious extremists compiled by the police. Evidently, following the terrorist attacks the authorities have resolved that at last the time has come to deal with me," he told Forum 18.

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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