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UZBEKISTAN: Prosecutor "fed up" with Baptist appeals

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

In apparent testimony to the power of international protests, public prosecutor Shurali Ashurov, who questioned Baptist pastor Vladimir Khanyukov for up to five hours at a time and threatened his congregation for its refusal to register with the authorities, has called for an end to the flood of appeals that have reached his office. "I constantly receive protest letters from Baptists from various parts of the world," he told Forum 18 News Service from the western Uzbek town of Mubarek. "I am fed up with reading them." He revealed that in the wake of the petitions, a commission came from the capital Tashkent to investigate the Baptists' complaints. He insisted to Forum 18 that he is not preventing the church from meeting.

In apparent testimony to the power of international protests, a public prosecutor who questioned a local Baptist pastor and threatened his congregation earlier in the year for its refusal to register with the authorities has called for an end to the flood of appeals that have reached his office. "I constantly receive protest letters from Baptists from various parts of the world," Shurali Ashurov told Forum 18 News Service on 22 April. "I am fed up with reading them. A commission even came from Tashkent to verify the Baptists' complaints."

Ashurov, the public prosecutor of the town of Mubarek in Kashkadarya region of western Uzbekistan, summoned Baptist pastor Vladimir Khanyukov three times in February and questioned him for three to five hours about the life of the church. When the pastor was first summoned, Ashurov showed him a number of petitions from Baptist churches and demanded that they stop writing such petitions to him.

Despite these petitions, Baptists in Mubarek were still experiencing pressure because of their refusal to be registered, they told Forum 18 at the beginning of March. The Mubarek congregation belongs to the International Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians/Baptists, which rejects registration on principle in all the post-Soviet republics where it operates. Its congregations have faced particular pressure in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

The Mubarek congregation's latest round of problems began on 2 February, when Ashurov raided a Sunday service with his deputy and an inspector from the Criminal Investigation Department. They detained those at the church for five hours, took photographs and made threats. They also demanded statements from everyone present, but the Baptists refused.

On 24 February Khanyukov was again summoned to the procuracy. Representatives from the regional procuracy, the department for interethnic affairs, the ministry of justice and Ashurov himself questioned the pastor for five hours about the internal workings of the church and tried to prove the need to register the church. They gave him a statement to sign, but Khanyukov refused.

Ashurov told Forum 18 that the conflict with the Baptists began in early February when police officers came to check up on the church and advised the believers to register it, which they categorically refused to do because it was against their religious convictions.

It was after this, Ashurov maintains, that this "nightmare of protest letters" began. "I did indeed summon Khanyukov several times and ask him to stop writing letters, because we are not disturbing believers or preventing them from meeting, although we could do so under Uzbek law," he declared. (Under Uzbekistan's law on religion, the activity of an unregistered religious community is forbidden.) "Khanyukov responded that he had written just once and that the later protest letters were not being sent at his instigation."

Ashurov also asked Forum 18 for the telephone number and address of the Baptists' central office. "I want to explain to them that no-one in our town is persecuting their brothers and persuade them to stop writing complaints against us." He said that so far he had only managed to telephone one Baptist from the town of Naryan-Mar in Russia's northern Nenets Autonomous Region. "He promised to help me."

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY