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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

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UZBEKISTAN: Preacher to face criminal charges, and JW to be fired?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Dilshod Akhmedov, a Jehovah's Witness in Tashkent who was imprisoned for 15 days in May, and who refuses to give up public preaching, is now being investigated under the criminal code by police. Conviction carries a penalty of a fine of between 50 and 100 times the minimum wage, or up to three years in prison. Also, officials in the city of Samarkand [Samarqand], have threatened a female Jehovah's Witness, Lolya Nurmanova, with being fired for her beliefs. The authorities have also compelled a woman sympathetic to the Jehovah's Witnesses to report to the authorities everything that goes on in the religious community. Pressure continues on Jehovah's Witnesses throughout Uzbekistan, with some being convicted and fined without being given a chance to defend themselves in court.

Amid mounting pressure on Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan, a man in the capital Tashkent could now face criminal charges and up to three years' imprisonment for preaching his faith after an earlier administrative penalty. Despite serving 15 days in prison in May, Dilshod Akhmedov refused to give up his preaching, and in September police in Tashkent's Yaksarai district searched his apartment.

Akhmedov's administrative code conviction for preaching in public places lays him open to possible criminal charges. "The Yaksarai district police department is currently gathering documents to bring a criminal case against Akhmedov under Article 216 (2) (breaking the law on religious organisations)," Andrei Shirobokov, a Jehovah's Witness in Uzbekistan, told Forum 18 in Tashkent on 18 October.

Missionary activity is illegal in Uzbekistan, contrary to international human rights agreements, and Article 216 (2) of the Uzbek criminal code states that: "The conversion of believers from one faith to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity will, after the application of penalties under administrative law for similar activities, be punished by a fine of between 50 and 100 times the minimum wage or up to six months' detention or up to three years in prison."

In a separate case, regional officials in the city of Samarkand [Samarqand], have threatened a female Jehovah's Witness with being sacked from her work for her faith. Shukhrat Nazarov, who works at the department for relations with religious organisations at the regional administration, threatened local Jehovah's Witness Lolya Nurmanova with losing her job, Shirobokov told Forum 18. He said Nazarov telephoned Nurmanova on 15 October and told her to attend an interview at the regional administration. When Nurmanova said she would only come to the office if she received a summons, Nazarov said he would announce at her workplace that she was a Jehovah's Witness, and then she would have "big problems".

Nazarov has also, according to Shirobokov, compelled a woman who is sympathetic to the Jehovah's Witnesses to report to the authorities everything that goes on in the religious community.

Reached at his office at the regional administration in Samarkand on 18 October, the assistant head of the department for relations with religious organisations, Asror Khakimov, insisted to Forum 18 that he knew nothing about what had happened to Nurmanova. Khakimov questioned Forum 18's correspondent closely, took his telephone numbers and told him to telephone again in 15 minutes' time, when the head of department, Firdouz Khalimov, would be at the office. Forum 18 made five telephone calls over three hours, but each time Khakimov replied that Khalimov had not yet arrived. On 19 October, despite Forum 18's ten attempts to reach officials in the office over the course of the day, the telephone went unanswered.

The authorities in Samarkand have in the past broken their own country's and international law in their attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses (see F18News 23 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=399).

Jehovah's Witnesses continue to face fines for preaching their faith publicly. In Tashkent on 15 October Jehovah's Witnesses Zinaida Kim and Yaira Khojayeva were each fined 6,300 soms (40 Norwegian Kroner, 5 Euros, or 6 US dollars). On 17 October a court in the town of Karshi in southern Uzbekistan sentenced five local Jehovah's Witnesses to a fine of 27,200 soms each (172 Norwegian Kroner, 21 Euros, or 26 US dollars) under Article 240 of the code of administrative offences, which punishes "breaking the law on

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religious organisations". This fine is equivalent to slightly less than the average monthly salary.

Shirobokov described it as "extraordinary" that the accused were not even summoned to court, and the sentence was given in their absence. This is not the first time that Uzbek courts have breached normal legal procedure in order to convict religious believers (see for example F18News 20 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=397).

For more background information see Forum 18's Uzbekistan 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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