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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: Islamic charitable work "criminal" and "extremist"?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Local people Forum 18 News Service has spoken to reject Uzbek government and foreign press allegations that an Islamic charitable organisation, called by the authorities 'Akramia' and by its members 'Birodar', was set up by people who wanted to use violence to set up an Islamic caliphate. Twenty three businessmen prominent in Islamic-inspired charitable work – whom the authorities accuse of being members of a "criminal" and "extremist" organisation – are currently due to be tried. One local human rights activist, Lutfullo Shamsuddinov, told Forum 18 that he believes the authorities have deliberately chosen to stage the trial in a small town, which is hard for human rights activists and foreign observers to reach. No date has yet been set for the trial to begin. The father of one of the detainees, Shokurjon Shakirov, insisted to Forum 18 that the arrested businessmen used the money in the mutual benefit fund that they had established to carry out charitable work and regularly transferred money to children's homes and schools.

Twenty three businessmen prominent in Islamic-inspired charitable work – whom the authorities claim were members of a "criminal" and "extremist" organisation with the name Akramia - are due to go on trial at Alatankul district court on the outskirts of Andijan [Andijon], a town in the Uzbek section of the Fergana [Farghona] valley, local human rights activist Lutfullo Shamsuddinov told Forum 18 News Service on 5 February. He believes the authorities have deliberately chosen a court that is not in Andijan itself but in a smaller town, so that the court hearings are harder for human rights activists and foreign observers to reach. No date has yet been set for the trial to begin.

The 23 men due to face trial are Rasuljon Ajikhalilov, Abdumajit Ibragimov, Abdulboki Ibragimov, Tursunbek Nazarov, Makhammadshokir Artikov, Odil Makhsdaliyev, Dadakhon Nodirov, Shamsitdin Atamatov, Ortikboy Akbarov, Rasul Akbarov, Shavkat Shokirov, Abdurauf Khamidov, Muzaffar Kodirov, Mukhammadaziz Mamdiyev, Nasibillo Maksudov, Adkhamjon Babojonov, Khakimjon Zakirov, Gulomjon Nadirov, Musojon Mirzaboyev, Dilshchodbek Mamadiyev, Abdulvosid Igamov, Shokurjon Shakirov, and Ravshanbek Mazimjonov. They are accused under Articles 242 (organising a criminal organisation), 159 (undermining the constitutional basis of the republic of Uzbekistan), 244-1 (preparing or distributing documents that contain a threat to public safety) and 244-2 (setting up, leading, and participating in extremist religious organisations) of the Criminal Code.

The head of the Uzbek government's committee for religious affairs, Shoazim Minovarov, refused absolutely to discuss the impending trial. "I don't want to discuss the issue of Akramia," he told Forum 18 from the capital Tashkent on 8 February. "I refuse to make any comment on this subject." When Forum 18 commented that, unlike the banned radical Islamist movement Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Andijan businessmen emphatically avoided politics and that therefore their prosecution appears illogical, Minovarov refused all further comment.

Bakhrom Shakirov, father of one of the detainees Shokurjon Shakirov, said all the so-called members of the Akramia organisation were arrested on 23 June 2004. He insisted to Forum 18 that in fact the detainees were not members of any underground organisation. "All of the detainees were devout believers and entrepreneurs," he told Forum 18 on 5 February. "They set up a mutual benefit fund and tried to help one another in commercial matters, following Islamic teachings."

Bakhrom Shakirov said the arrested businessmen used the money in the mutual benefit fund that they had established to carry out charitable work and regularly transferred money to children's homes and schools. "A broad-based social welfare scheme was set up at the companies run by the detained businessmen," he told Forum 18. "Staff at the companies received material help when they married (staff were often even provided with an apartment) and when they were ill (the employer paid in full for all the medicines and sick leave). Any employee at the company knew quite well that if anything went wrong the company management and his colleagues would always come to his aid."

Shakirov maintains that the "Islamic businessmen" worked out a genuine minimum subsistence wage in Andijan (which was several times higher than the official minimum wage) and agreed to pay staff a wage that was higher than this figure. "It's true that Muslim prayers were read out at these Islamic companies, but this was a voluntary matter," he reported. "They didn't demand that workers should be believers, but people at these companies gradually came to understand the truth of Islam."

According to Shakirov, these Islamic companies gradually became famous throughout Andijan, and the local media regularly carried

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positive reports about the charitable activities of the businessmen who are now under arrest. "Even now, while the businessmen are in prison, local television is showing glowing reports about their charitable work."

Shakirov believes that it is the popularity of these Islamic companies among the population that has provoked the authorities' harsh response. "The state has begun to see these businessmen as ideological competitors, because their activity has truly demonstrated the superiority of Islamic economics," he told Forum 18.

He did not deny that the businessmen currently under arrest are supporters of the imprisoned Islamic dissident Akram Yuldashev. "In the early 1990s I and my sons made friends with Akram Yuldashev. The word 'Akramia' was applied to us by the authorities, but we call our circle of people with a similar outlook 'Birodar'," he told Forum 18, citing the Uzbek and Farsi word for "brotherhood".

Shakirov said Yuldashev emphatically distanced himself from politics and never called for the formation of an Islamic state. "Yuldashev's main idea was that every Muslim should aspire to personal perfection and that then the world would gradually change for the better," Shakirov explained. "In the early 1990s I was a manager of an Islamic furniture company, and Akram Yuldashev was one of the staff at the factory. In 1997 grenades were planted on me and I was put in prison for three and a half years. Now it seems that it is my son's turn."

In 1992, Akram Yuldashev, a 29-year-old maths teacher from Andijan, wrote a theological pamphlet "Yimonga Yul" (Path to faith). In the pamphlet he did not touch on political issues, but considered general moral themes, arguing for the superiority of Islamic philosophy. A circle of sympathisers formed around him, who tried to follow Islamic guidelines in their own lives.

In 1998 the authorities planted drugs on Yuldashev and arrested him. In April that year Andijan city court sentenced him to two and a half years' imprisonment on charges of possessing drugs. At the end of December the same year he was released under an amnesty. However, he was re-arrested the day after the bomb attacks in February 1999 in Tashkent and was sentenced by the same court to 17 years in prison. No proof was offered in court that he had organised the Tashkent attacks. He was also found guilty of forming an extremist religious organisation, Akramia, whose aim was supposedly to form an Islamic state in Uzbekistan. According to the court's findings, Yuldashev's pamphlet "Yimonga Yul" apparently called for Uzbekistan's state structure to be overthrown, for power to be seized and for the legally elected and appointed state representatives to be removed.

Local people Forum 18 has spoken to reject Uzbek government and foreign press allegations that Akramia was set up by former Hizb ut-Tahrir members, dissatisfied by the organisation's professed rejection of violence, as a means to achieve the aim of an Islamic caliphate. (For an outline of Hizb ut-Tahrir's views and aims, see F18News 29 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170). Yuldashev's brochure contains no call to seize power violently and a Russian translation by the Andijan-based human rights activist Saidjakhon Zaynabiddinov was posted on the centrasia.ru website on 25 August 2004. "Anyone who reads Akram Yuldashev's brochure carefully will understand that the accusation that this philosophical tract calls for the violent overthrow of the authorities is simply absurd," Zaynabiddinov told Forum 18 in Andijan last November, dismissing the dozens of references in the court verdict against Yuldashev which cited the pamphlet as the main proof against the author.

"They're not content that my innocent husband is locked up in prison, but are trying to make out of him some kind of Bin Laden," Zaynabiddinov quoted Yuldashev's wife Yedgora as complaining. (END)

For 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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