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UZBEKISTAN: Worsening repression in uprising's aftermath

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Devout peaceful Muslims across Uzbekistan, not just in the area where May's uprising took place, are being forced by the authorities to make written declarations that they will not participate in "illegal religious organisations" or join "extremist organisations," Forum 18 News Service has learnt. As all unregistered religious activity is illegal, "illegal religious organisations" range from bona fide peaceful religious communities to violent Islamist groups. Human rights activists, from the uprising's centre in the Fergana Valley, have told Forum 18 that they believe that harsh government repression will worsen the situation for all faiths. This view has been supported by Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees. One Protestant pastor told Forum 18 that "the situation in the city remains very tense â€¦ you hear people saying that Uzbeks need to seize state buildings, and that the police and army won't act against the demonstrators next time."

The main effect of the harsh government suppression of the May uprisings in Andijan [Andijon] and Karasu will be to worsen the situation of religious believers of all faiths, not just Muslims, two human rights activists from Uzbekistan's section of the Fergana [Farghona] valley have separately told Forum 18 News Service. Akhmajon Madmarov from Margelan on the outskirts of the regional centre Fergana, in the south, and Rovshan Khalmatov from the regional centre Namangan, in the north, both told Forum 18 that all practising Muslims had been called in to the police and told to write a declaration saying that they would not participate in "illegal religious organisations".

Human rights activist and journalist Tulkin Karaev told Forum 18 that in his home town of Karshi (Qarshi) in central Uzbekistan – a long way from the Fergana valley - the police had forced known devout Muslims to sign pledges that they would not join "extremist organisations".

Given that in Uzbekistan all unregistered religious activity is illegal – in defiance of its international human rights commitments – such "illegal religious organisations" range from bona fide peaceful religious communities that have been unable or unwilling to obtain official registration, to militant Islamist groups seeking to use violence to further their aims. Among militant groups is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which has been responsible for guerrilla incursions. Also banned in Uzbekistan – although it remains active – is Hizb-ut-Tahrir, an extremist group that wants to rule the world under an Islamic caliphate where religious minorities and others would have few rights, which is known for its virulent anti-Western and anti-Semitic rhetoric (see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170).

The impending verdicts in the long-running trial in Andijan [Andijon], in eastern Uzbekistan, of a group of businessmen around the now-imprisoned Akram Yuldashev sparked the violence in the city in mid-May (see F18News 23 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567). It remains unclear how far this group was violent or not, though the government has treated it as a dangerous subversive group (see F18News 16 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586). Muslim sources have told Forum 18 that Akramia cells have been reported in the capital Tashkent.

The government has used the latest uprisings to try to reassert its control over the Muslim community. Madmarov told Forum 18 in Andijan on 5 June that the imam at the central mosque in the town of Angren 100 kilometres (60 miles) east of Tashkent said at Friday prayers that the republic's prosecutor's office has drawn up a plan with the muftiate to identify "religious extremists". An official at the muftiate's international department Abdurakhim Abdurakhmanov refused to confirm or deny Madmarov's report. "All of the muftiate's leadership is currently away for discussions with believers in Andijan," he told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 14 June. "Unfortunately, there is simply no-one here at the muftiate at the moment who can respond to your questions."

The Uzbek government has complete control over the official Islamic leadership, or muftiate (see F18News 20 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=58) and over Islamic religious education (see F18News 1 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=318). It also maintains strict controls on the availability of information and religious views, notably on the internet (see F18News 19 June 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=86)

As part of its attempts to counter views that the suppression of the Andijan uprising represented an attack on Muslims, the Uzbek government made great play of reported remarks from Muhammad Tantawi, the Grand Shaykh of al-Azhar in Egypt, to Jahon, the

news agency of the Uzbek Foreign Ministry. It quoted Tantawi on 26 May as supporting the Uzbek government's moves against "religious extremism and terrorism, which contradict the very essence of the holy Islamic faith". He was quoted as declaring that states can only develop when security, stability and social cohesion are guaranteed. He described calls for "the revival of the caliphate" and "jihad" as "anti-human", according to Jahon.

However, although the themes to be covered in sermons at Friday prayers in mosques are dictated to imams centrally across Uzbekistan, Tulkan Karaev told Forum 18 that no special sermons were preached related to the events in Andijan.

Since the suppression of the uprisings, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees have also been called in by the police for "preventative interviews" (see F18News 23 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567).

No mass arrests of believers have been reported so far. At least for the time being, the government is concentrating on neutralising human rights activists engaged in defending religious believers. Straight after the Andijan uprising the local human rights activist Saijakhon Zainabiddinov, who was involved in defending in court the group of businessmen dubbed by the government the "Akramists", was arrested and remains under guard. The human rights activist Mutobar Tajikbaeva, who was also involved in defending the Akramists, was detained for three days. Around 15 of the best-known Tashkent-based human rights activists remain under house arrest.

Also detained was human rights activist and journalist Tulkin Karaev, who specialises in defending believers' rights. He was released on 14 June after serving an administrative sentence on charges of "petty hooliganism." He had in fact been attacked by a woman believed to have been a provocateur. "Every day in prison police officers questioned me about my human rights activity on behalf of religious believers," Karaev told Forum 18 on the day of his release. "This was strange, given that I had been sentenced for petty hooliganism!" He said he had been warned that if he did not stop his human rights activity, he would be sentenced under criminal charges.

Some now fear for the future. "The situation in the city remains very tense. On the street and at work you hear people saying that Uzbeks need to seize state buildings, and that the police and army won't act against the demonstrators next time," the pastor of a local Protestant church Bakhtior Tuichiev told Forum 18 on 3 June. "I'm afraid that this situation will leave us Protestants caught between two stools. I am appealing to countries in the world community asking them to give me political asylum."

In north-west Uzbekistan, the regional authorities have continued their long-running anti-Christian campaign by making Protestants illegal (see F18News 2 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=575).

For an outline of the repression immediately following the Andijan uprising, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all faiths as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=546

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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