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UZBEKISTAN: Protestant tortured by police trying to force abandonment of Christianity

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

A Pentecostal Christian in the capital, Tashkent, has been tortured by police since being arrested on 14 June, and other church members have been summoned and threatened, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. 19-year-old Kural Bekjanov was tortured by both police officers and prisoners to try to force him to abandon Christianity. His mother, Gulya, saw him on 26 June, when he had lost weight, had difficulty walking and his fingers and legs were covered in blood. "His mother heard the cries of her own son and begged them to stop beating him," Forum 18 was told. "They told her it wasn't her son's cries, but she said she knew the sound of her own son's voice. Yesterday police threatened to put him on a chair wired up to the electricity – believe me, all this is happening," a church member told Forum 18. Protestants in Karakalpakstan, in north-west-Uzbekistan, the targets of a long running anti-Christian campaign by the authorities, have told Forum 18 of renewed difficulties in meeting. Elsewhere, the trial of six members of the Bethany Church in Tashkent has been fixed for 7 July, after police raided the church whilst a service was taking place.

A member of a Pentecostal church in the Uzbek capital Tashkent has been tortured in police custody since his arrest on 14 June while other church members have been summoned and threatened, sources in the Full Gospel Church told Forum 18 News Service from Tashkent on 28 June. They say 19-year-old Kural Bekjanov has been tortured both by police officers and cell mates in an attempt to pressure him to abandon his Christian faith. When his mother Gulya was finally allowed to see him at Tashkent city police station on 26 June, he had lost weight, had difficulty walking and his fingers and legs were covered in blood. "Yesterday police threatened to put him on a chair wired up to the electricity – believe me, all this is happening," one church member told Forum 18 on 28 June. Protestants have complained of a widespread crackdown affecting churches across Uzbekistan except, paradoxically, in Andijan, where an uprising against the government was brutally suppressed in May.

Bekjanov was arrested on 14 June at his Tashkent home and taken to the city's Mirobad district police station. Initially he was accused of involvement in the murder of a 65-year-old US citizen of Korean origin, Kim Khen Pen Khin, who had worked with Pentecostal churches in Tashkent. Her body was found in central Tashkent on 11 June. She had been assaulted and strangled. Although the accusations against Bekjanov of involvement in the murder were dropped two days after his arrest, church members told Forum 18 that when the police found out he was a Christian they started to beat him. "His mother heard the cries of her own son and begged them to stop beating him," one church member told Forum 18. "They told her it wasn't her son's cries, but she said she knew the sound of her own son's voice."

Bekjanov was then transferred to the main city police station where "the worst things of all began", as a church member told Forum 18. He was put in a cell with alleged Wahhabis and Akramia-members who said they had been seized by police in Andijan in the wake of the suppression of the uprising in May (in other cases in Uzbekistan, police have planted informers in cells who pretend to be prisoners). "These prisoners asked him if he was a Christian, and when he replied 'Yes', they beat him brutally," a church member told Forum 18. "Police officers saw this but made no effort to intervene."

Sources said police "brutally tortured" Bekjanov every night for the next twelve days, inserting needles under his finger nails (a form of torture reported by other former prisoners in Uzbekistan). His ribs were broken. "Every Christian in Tashkent was shocked when they found out that the aim of the torture was to get him to renounce his faith in Christ," a source told Forum 18 from Tashkent.

Bekjanov was not the only Full Gospel church member interrogated in the wake of the discovery of Kim Khen Pen Khin's body. Sources say the police were less interested in investigating the murder than in questioning church members about their beliefs. "In the last two weeks, two church members were brutally beaten – one of them a pastor who is now recuperating after suffering concussion and seven other injuries, which were recorded at Tashkent's 16th hospital," a church member told Forum 18. "In addition, 17 church members – among them four church workers – were questioned for maybe eight to fourteen hours at a time. They were insulted, humiliated and threatened – police spoke to them in the way you would not even speak to animals. Each day it is getting worse and worse."

Another church member reported that he had been summoned early in the morning of 17 June to an investigator named Murad in the

27th office of Mirobad police station. Murad beat him so hard that he fell over and cried out. "He swore at me using all kinds of terrible expressions," the church member told Forum 18. "He then ordered me to go down on my knees and bow down to him. When I refused he beat me and kicked me in the stomach." He was not finally freed until 7 pm. The church member subsequently lodged a complaint to the Tashkent city prosecutor and other agencies.

"Lieutenant-Colonel Davron from the 34th office of Mirobad police station told one of our people that all Christians are animals who have sold themselves to America and should be shot as this is a Muslim state," one church member reported. "The investigator Murod told some of our female church members that he is fed up with these Christians and they should all be locked up."

Other Protestant sources have told Forum 18 the widespread crackdown on Protestants began the day after the Andijan uprising was crushed. Presbyterian churches were closed down in Yangiyul and Angren, towns near Tashkent, as well as one in the small town of Farhad in Syrdarya region south of Tashkent whose pastor spent seven days in prison.

In Termez on the southern border with Afghanistan, police took the pastor Bakhrom Nazarov to the police station where he was beaten and held in handcuffs. The whole congregation – including ten children aged six months to fourteen years – were held by police for 24 hours in the place where the church met for services. "They were given no food or water," one Protestant told Forum 18. "Police then took the church members to the police station to see the detained pastor and warned them they too would suffer the same treatment."

Police raided a Protestant church in the western town of Urgench during the Sunday worship service on 26 June, Protestant sources told Forum 18 on 28 June. Some of the 60 church members present were detained briefly for questioning, while others were questioned in the church. The congregation – whose pastor was sacked from his job in a factory several weeks ago – has been trying to register in vain for the past two years, but local agencies which need to approve the application have refused to consider it. In the week before the raid, the pastor had discussed a new registration application with officials.

Protestants in Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston], in north-west Uzbekistan, report renewed difficulties meeting. Four members of various churches outside the regional capital Nukus said they could no longer meet even in small groups in private homes. Meanwhile the Emmanuel Protestant church in Nukus – which was stripped of registration on 4 June (see F18News 2 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=575) – is challenging the removal of registration through the courts. A hearing has been set for 4 July. Given that this was the last registered Protestant church left in Karakalpakstan, local Protestants believe this will be a crucial case.

Meanwhile, the trial of leading members of the Bethany Church in Tashkent has been fixed for 7 July, Protestants have told Forum 18 from the city. After the church's Sunday service was raided by police on 12 June, six church members - including the pastor Nikolai Shevchenko - face administrative charges of breaking the country's religion law by leading an unregistered religious community (see F18News 17 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=588).

For an outline of the repression immediately following the Andijan

uprising, see F18News 23 May http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567 and for an outline of what is known about Akramia and the uprising see 16 June http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586. For later developments see eg. F18News 15 June http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=585

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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