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UZBEKISTAN: Charity worker faces secret police death threats

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

After a secret police raid on her home, interrogations, death threats and a large fine in June, and a 15 day prison sentence for her father, Tashkent-based Protestant Marina Kalinkina told Forum 18 News Service that secret police pressure has not let up. On 11 July, secret police officers again interrogated her about what they claim was illegal religious activity as part of her work for Bridge of Friendship, a registered charity she leads. One officer told her that if she dared to complain about her treatment to international organisations it would only make things worse for her. Begzot Kadyrov of the government's religious affairs committee defended the secret police actions, claiming that Kalinkina is using her charitable work as an opportunity to preach. "In other words, she is doing the work of an unregistered religious organisation, and that is forbidden under Uzbek law," he told Forum 18.

Uzbekistan's National Security Service (NSS) continues to summon and interrogate Protestant Marina Kalinkina - head of a registered charitable organisation Dustlig Kuprigi (Bridge of Friendship) - because of her religious beliefs, as she told Forum 18 News Service on 18 July from the Uzbek capital Tashkent. The pressure has continued even after she was fined in June for her religious activity and her father Nail was imprisoned for 15 days. She told Forum 18 that secret police pressure has included death threats. But speaking to Forum 18, a senior religious affairs official has dismissed her complaints that the pressure is unjustified.

Kalinkina reported that on 7 July she received a telephone call ordering her to come to the NSS for interrogation. She refused because no written invitation was sent to her. Early on 10 July, around 6.30 am, two secret police officers, Rustam Hurshid and Captain Nikolai Lapshin, appeared at her door and demanded she sign an official warning. When she refused to open the door, the officers started to shout that she is a "criminal woman". "They shouted so loud that everybody in the hall heard the commotion," she told Forum 18. Later in the day, Kalinkina's neighbours handed her an NSS summons which the officers had left for her.

On 11 July, Captain Lapshin questioned Kalinkina for over two hours. He claimed that she had been engaged in charitable work which was forbidden by law. Lapshin also told her that if she dared to complain about her treatment to international organisations it would only make things worse for her.

The harassment began back in June. On 4 June a number of Christians, many of them pensioners and veterans, gathered in Kalinkina's Tashkent home. They had just started the gathering when around 10 a.m. four men forced their way into their house. Despite repeated requests by Nail Kalinkin, Marina Kalinkina's father, the men refused to identify themselves or to show proper papers authorising them to interfere with what she describes as a "peaceful and legal gathering". Instead they started to shout and intimidate those present and to write down their names. It was learned later that these men were local policemen.

When Kalinkin insisted on seeing proper identification, one of the men named Akbar grabbed him by the belt and started to drag him to the gate, while at the same time swearing and yelling at him and trying to handcuff him. "I am arresting you for disobedience, I will shoot you!" Akbar threatened.

Abuse continued when Kalinkin, who is an invalid, and Marina were taken to the police station. Kalinkin was beaten on the head and chest, his shirt was torn, and he was continually insulted. He was repeatedly threatened that he would be thrown into the basement of the secret police station for criminal investigation. Marina, who has had problems with her health, developed a high fever as a result of this incident.

The two were told to come back on 6 June for further interrogation. A local lawyer advised them that according to the law they were not obliged to go without a written summons. Because of this advice and Marina's deteriorating health, they decided not to go. Telephone harassment by the secret police continued daily with both father and daughter being continually threatened. One such death-threat towards Nail Kalinkin was captured on tape.

The Kalinkins tried to seek legal aid from the district attorney's office in Tashkent. Upon hearing that the secret police was involved in their case, help was refused. Lawyers said they could do nothing for them. On 9 June they had to attend a court session of their case. They were not allowed to have legal representation and no witnesses were called. The judge only read the sentence: Nail Kalinkin was sentenced to 15 days' imprisonment and his daughter was fined on administrative charges of illegally teaching religion. Nail was incarcerated in a Tashkent prison among common criminals and Marina was given a large fine (see F18News 17 June 2005

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=588). She has since paid the fine.

Kalinkina rejects accusations that she was conducting illegal religious activity. She stresses that her charity – which is registered with Tashkent's justice department - helps old people and impoverished families. "On the day the police descended on us, we were celebrating the birthday of an old man to whom we had given financial help," she told Forum 18. "It was not a religious meeting. Yes, I did pray to God before the meal – but who can stop me doing that in my own home? Nor do I believe that I am breaking the law when I discuss religious issues with my guests."

Begzot Kadyrov, chief specialist at the department for non-Muslim faiths at the Uzbek government's religious affairs committee, defended the measures taken against her. "Kalinkina's main problem is that she registered her organisation as a charitable rather than religious enterprise," he told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 18 July. "There is nothing about religious activity in Dustlig Kuprigi's statute. Yet in fact Kalinkina is preaching to people. In other words, she is doing the work of an unregistered religious organisation, and that is forbidden under Uzbek law."

The moves against Kalinkina and her father came at the same time as many Protestant congregations, Jehovah's Witnesses and a Hare Krishna devotee faced increased pressure (see F18News 14 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=606 and 11 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=602).

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

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

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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