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UZBEKISTAN: Increased repression of religious minorities continues

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses inside Uzbekistan have told Forum 18 News Service of ongoing post-Andijan uprising repression. Mahmud Karabaev, pastor of a Full Gospel Pentecostal church, faces up to three years in prison for "participation in the activity of an illegal religious organisation," following a joint police, NSS secret police and Public Prosecutor's office raid on his home. Latif Jalov of the Public Prosecutor's office refused categorically to confirm or deny to Forum 18 the charges, stating that "there is such a thing as a secret investigation." The church's lawyer, Iskander Najafov, believes the situation for Christians in Uzbekistan has worsened. "Instead of catching terrorists the authorities are persecuting Christians," he complained to Forum 18. Najafov's view of a nationwide crackdown is echoed by Andrei Shirobokov of the Jehovah's Witnesses, who told Forum 18 that the "facts suggest that the state's religious policies have become more severe since the Andijan events."

Mahmud Karabaev, pastor of the Full Gospel Pentecostal church in the town of Jizak [Jizzakh], 200 kilometres (125 miles) south-west of the capital Tashkent, faces up to three years in prison if convicted of "participation in the activity of an illegal religious organisation". Latif Jalov, a senior official of Jizak prosecutors' office, informed the pastor that a criminal case has been launched against him on the basis of article 216 (part 1) of the Criminal Code, the church's lawyer Iskander Najafov told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 14 November. It remains unclear if and when Karabaev will face trial.

However, reached by Forum 18 on 17 November, Jalov refused categorically to confirm or deny that a case has been launched against Karabaev. "There is such a thing as a secret investigation," he told Forum 18. "Questions regarding this can be submitted in written form."

After the authorities brutally crushed an uprising in Andijan [Andijon] in the eastern Fergana [Farghona] Valley, killing hundreds of protestors, the state began a nationwide crackdown on all independent political, social and religious activity (see F18News 23 May http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567 and 15 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=585). Six months after the uprising, Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses have insisted to Forum 18 that conditions for their communities are worsening.

The prosecution has been brought against Karabaev because of an informal meal he had with church members in his house on 25 October, which was raided by about 10 officers of the National Security Service (NSS) secret police, police and the prosecutors' office. They sealed the premises and instructed those present to make written statements explaining why they were there (see F18News 27 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=678).

Uzbek laws forbid the activity of religious communities not registered by the Ministry of Justice (in defiance of the country's international human rights commitments), and the Jizak community does not have registration. However Najafov told Forum 18 that the community had merely gathered to drink tea together. "The gathering in Jizak was not a religious meeting. It appears that believers are no longer permitted to visit each others' houses," he told Forum 18.

Najafov believes the situation for Christians in Uzbekistan has worsened since the Andijan events. "Instead of catching terrorists the authorities are persecuting Christians," he complained to Forum 18. He remains convinced that an anti-Christian campaign is being conducted (see F18News 27 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=678).

The authorities have also stopped the last internal formal legal possibility of appealing against the banning of all Protestant activity in the north-west of Uzbekistan, and have barred the Full Gospel congregation in Tashkent's Mirobad district from meeting (see 11 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=686).

Najafov's view of a nationwide crackdown is echoed by Andrei Shirobokov of the Jehovah's Witnesses. "Our attempts to protest against sentences given to Jehovah's Witnesses from Navoi [Nawoiy] and Karshi [Qarshi] have achieved nothing," he told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 17 November. "The authorities also intimated that there was no point in even trying to register our community in Tashkent. These facts suggest that the state's religious policies have become more severe since the Andijan events."

On 31 August, the city court in Karshi in central southern Uzbekistan found two Jehovah's Witnesses guilty of violating Article 216 (2) of the Criminal Code - breaking the Law on Religious Organisations. Bakhrom Pulatov was fined 705,150 Soms (3,961 Norwegian kroner, 509 Euros or 624 US dollars), while Feruza Mamatova was fined 548,450 soms (3,081 Norwegian kroner, 396 Euros or 485 US dollars), the largest fines the Jehovah's Witnesses have ever faced in Uzbekistan. Both Pulatov and Mamatova had previously been fined under the Administrative Code for taking part in the activity of an unregistered religious organisation (see F18News 16 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=653).

The minimum monthly wage in Uzbekistan is 5,540 Soms (32 Norwegian Kroner, 4 Euros, or 5 US Dollars), and other economic data is regarded as secret.

On 6 October a court in the town of Navoi, also in central southern Uzbekistan, fined local Jehovah's Witness Azim Klichev 90,000 Soms (511 Norwegian Kroner, 65 Euros, or 77 US Dollars), also on the basis of article 216-2 of the Criminal Code. He and fellow Jehovah's Witnesses in Karshi were found guilty of attending gatherings of an unregistered religious community.

Officials categorically reject the views of the Protestants and the Jehovah's Witnesses. "To claim that the authorities have toughened their religious policies is a deliberate distortion of the facts," Begzot Kadyrov, the senior specialist of the government's Committee on Religious Affairs, told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 15 November. "On the contrary, we are now even more attentive to the needs of religious believers. For example, new mosques have been registered since the Andijan events."

Representatives of other faiths are in partial agreement with Kadyrov's view. "I have not noticed any real changes in the state's religious policies since the Andijan events," Vadim Kostritsin, who chairs the Uzbek Society for Krishna Consciousness, told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 17 November.

"For now at least the Andijan events have not been reflected in the state's religious policies," the former chief mufti of Uzbekistan, Muhamad Sadyk Muhamad Yusuf, told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 19 November. The former mufti has on several occasions openly criticised the authorities' religious policies. He also conceded that the authorities have opened several mosques since the Andijan events - for example two in Tashkent - but stressed that this is not on a mass scale and so it is premature to talk of a new direction.

The former mufti's view is shared by the human rights activist Tulkin Karaev from Karshi, himself forced to flee from Uzbekistan after the Andijan events. "I follow the situation in Uzbekistan closely, and almost every day phone my home country," he told Forum 18 on 17 November in the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek. "I have not noticed any toughening of the Karimov regime's policies towards Muslims since Andijan. The authorities are most actively involved in pursuing journalists and human rights activists. Fortunately they have forgotten about religious believers for the time being!"

After the authorities brutally crushed the Andijan uprising in May, human rights activists who had reported on the killings have been jailed. The Namangan (in the Fergana Valley) regional correspondent of Radio Ozodlik (Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty) was sentenced to six months' imprisonment. More than fifteen independent journalists have suffered persecution, repression and beatings at the hands of law enforcement agencies and the NSS secret police.

Detained in Interior Ministry pre-trial detention centres are a number of human rights activists, including the chair of the Appeal human rights organisation Saidjakhon Zainobiddinov, the chair of the Flaming Hearts organisation of the town of Margilan, in the Fergana Valley, Mutabar Tadjibaeva, the Andijan-based activist of the Ezgulik (Goodness) human rights group Abdugappar Dadabaev, and the independent Namangan activist Sobitkhon Ustaboev.

Persecution forced many other journalists and human rights activists to leave Uzbekistan, among them the director of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting office in Tashkent Galima Bukharbaeva, the coordinator of the Uznews.net project Kudrat Babajanov, the Fergana region BBC radio correspondent Matlyuba Azamatova, the independent journalist and human rights activist from the Kashkadarya region Tulkin Karaev, the independent journalist and chairman of the Society for the Defence of the Rights of Journalists of Uzbekistan Yusuf Rasulov, the Andijan region Radio Ozodlik correspondent Gafurjon Yuldashev, the Andijan region BBC radio correspondent Sharifjon Ahmedov, and the Namangan region Voice of America radio correspondent Obid Rizo.

Forum 18 News Service's own Central Asia correspondent was detained and deported from Uzbekistan (see F18News 16 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=631), and the authorities have since the Andijan uprising increased their attempts to isolate religious communities from international support (see F18News 3 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=665).

The use of heavy postal censorship is routine in Uzbekistan (see F18News 14 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=687), as is the seizing and destruction of religious literature (see F18News 6 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=643).

Due to the increased repression, a number of Andijan-based human rights activists known to Forum 18 have been forced to emigrate

from Uzbekistan, including Muzaffarmirzo Iskhokov, Lutfullo Shamsudinov, and Dilshod Tillahojayev. (END)

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 what is known about Akramia and the Andijan uprising see 16 June 2005
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>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY