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UZBEKISTAN: Muinak Pentecostals fear new charges

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Pentecostals in Muinak in Uzbekistan's western region of Karakalpakstan fear that two church members, Kuralbai Asanbayev and Rashid Keulimjayev, may again face punishment under the administrative code for meeting together as Christians, less than three months after the two were beaten and imprisoned for five days. Local officials denied to Forum 18 News Service that the two were beaten in December. The leader of the local Pentecostal community, Salavat Serikbayev, has told Forum 18 that Protestants in the town have virtually no way of meeting together and live like the first catacomb Christians under the Roman Empire.

Pentecostals in Muinak, 200 kilometres (125 miles) north of Nukus, the capital of Uzbekistan's western region of Karakalpakstan, fear that two church members, Kuralbai Asanbayev and Rashid Keulimjayev, may again face punishment under the administrative code for meeting together as Christians. The two were beaten and imprisoned for five days in December. The leader of the local Pentecostal community, Salavat Serikbayev, has told Forum 18 News Service that Protestants in the town have virtually no way of meeting together. He complained that the police and the National Security Service watch his house constantly and record all those who visit him.

Serikbayev compared the life of local Protestants with those of the first catacomb Christians under the Roman Empire. They have to hold their services in great secrecy in the desert several kilometres (miles) away from the town. But no more than 10 people gather even at these services, because a large crowd of people leaving town would arouse the authorities' suspicions. Protestants elsewhere in Karakalpakstan report similar complaints (see F18News 12 March 2003).

The police raided Asanbayev's home in Muinak for a second time on 6 March, a source who preferred not to be named told Forum 18. As at the time of a raid last December, Keulimjayev was also present this time. Both were forced to make a statement. The source fears that there are again plans to charge the two under Article 240 of the administrative code, which punishes "infringement of the law on religious organisations".

On 17 December local authority officials and police broke into Asanbayev's home while Keulimjayev was visiting him. They were both detained in the police department where they were subjected to torture until 11 o'clock in the evening in an attempt to get them to confess that they were preaching the Bible to each other. The police not only beat Asanbayev and Keulimjayev; they also put gas masks on them and closed off the air supply.

The next day, Asanbayev, Keulimjayev and Serikbayev were summoned to a meeting at which officials of the local authority and the procuracy took part. However, because of the severe beating Keulimjayev could not get up from his bed to come to the meeting. Serikbayev told Forum 18 in Muinak that at the meeting he and his fellow Protestants were crudely insulted. For example, the public prosecutor declared that if the Protestants did not stop holding religious meetings, they would be sent to a prison in which Islamic activists were being held who would use them "like women". The hakim (chief of the district), Jarylkan Tursynbekov, supported the public prosecutor's words. He had earlier suggested choosing women's names for the Protestants. The hakim declared that Salavat would be called Sonya in prison, while Kuralbai would be called Katerina. The hakim also said that even if the Protestants did manage to collect the 100 signatures required for registration, they would still not be allowed to set up a Protestant church in Muinak. Serikbayev was handed an official letter at the meeting warning that Protestant activity was "unacceptable".

On 25 December Asanbayev and Keulimjayev were tried and sentenced to five days' imprisonment under article 240 of the administrative code.

Forum 18 failed to meet Tursynbekov, because he was away on business in Tashkent. Acting district chief Jynsybai Alabergenov told Forum 18 on 19 January that he could not comment on what had happened to the Protestants because he "knew about the case only in general outline". Forum 18's interview with the public prosecutor of Muinak district Mars Janabetov, also on 19 January, proved more fruitful. "It's all nonsense - no-one tortured Arsanbayev and Keulimjayev," he declared categorically. "I have received a European education and I do not employ such methods." He said that under Uzbek laws the activity of unregistered communities is forbidden "and of course we battle against law-breaking". He claimed they had already "shown mercy" to Asanbayev and Keulimjayev. "We could have sentenced them to a fine of one tenth of the minimum wage, but we did not do this because we realised that they did not have that sort of money."

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Janabetov declined to answer Forum 18's question about whether sexual insults were levelled at the Protestants at the December meeting. "We simply tried to explain to them that their activity in Muinak was inadmissible," he claimed. "Look, every one of us lives under difficult social conditions. People have no money, no work. In our town it is impossible to buy even basic food products. And in these difficult conditions they still start preaching Protestantism!?"

The Karakalpak town of Muinak is notorious in Central Asia as a symbol of one of the most devastating ecological catastrophes of the 20th century. Thirty years ago it was a major port on the shore of the Aral Sea, but is today located more than 100 kilometres (60 miles) from the sea as the waters have receded. Almost all the town's population previously worked in the fishing trade, but now, as the Aral Sea has dried up, they have been left without work. It would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that today Muinak is one of the poorest places in the whole of Uzbekistan.

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