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UZBEKISTAN: Latest moves against Fergana Valley's Muslims

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Two new instructions have been issued which will apply in Uzbekistan's part of the strongly Muslim Fergana Valley, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Unwritten instructions to imams in Namangan have been issued, ordering them not to allow into mosques Muslim men wearing the white prayer caps common in Central Asia. "The authorities view wearing the prayer cap as a sign of religiosity, and want to stop such people having any influence over young people," Tolib Yakubov, head of the Human Rights Organisation of Uzbekistan, told Forum 18. Also, the Rector's Office of Namangan State University has reportedly issued forms requiring those renting rooms to students to confirm that the students are not "extremists," will be kept under "strict control," and will not have contact with "harmful religious tendencies and movements." The Pro-Rector of the University has denied to Forum 18 that such forms have been issued.

Uzbek authorities have issued two instructions which will apply against peaceful Muslims in the strongly Muslim Fergana [Farghona] Valley in the east of the country, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. A new, unwritten instruction to imams in Namangan has been issued, ordering them not to allow into mosques Muslim men wearing the white prayer caps common in Central Asia. "The authorities view wearing the prayer cap as a sign of religiosity, and want to stop such people having any influence over young people," Tolib Yakubov, head of the Human Rights Organisation of Uzbekistan, told Forum 18 from the Uzbek capital Tashkent on 20 March.

In a similar way to the difficulties now faced by Muslim men in Namangan wearing prayer caps, in the mid-1990s the authorities routinely regarded with suspicion any men wearing beards of going to the mosque "too frequently", and women wearing the hijab (headscarf). However, unlike the campaign against beards and headscarves, Forum 18 is not aware of moves against wearing the prayer cap elsewhere in Uzbekistan.

There has also been a new form issued by the Rector's Office of Namangan State University, which reportedly requires those renting rooms to students in the town to confirm that the students are not "extremists". The fergana.ru website gave the text of what it said was the new form, in which local residents renting room to students had to fill out their own details and details of the students, confirm that they live at their address and that in the hours when they are not studying they will be kept under "strict control" with the help of the police and the authorities of the mahalla (city district).

As well as pledging to ensure that the students will not take drugs or drink alcohol, residents have to promise that the students will not have contact with "harmful religious tendencies and movements hostile to the constitutional system of our country". These movements are not identified, and it is unclear whether non-Muslim movements are also covered by this vague formulation. The mahalla leadership and the local police officer also have to sign the form.

Yakubov complained to Forum 18 that these two moves by the authorities in Namangan will put further pressure on peaceful Muslims trying to practise their faith. They are the latest measures to follow the Andijan uprising, which was violently crushed by the authorities in May 2005.

"The guarantee letters reported by fergana.ru are an example of the crudest pressure on religious believers," Yakubov told Forum 18. "The authorities are fighting not against political movements like the banned Hizb ut-Tahrir party, but in fact against religious believers."

The authorities have long been hostile to Islamist movements like Hizb ut-Tahrir, which aims to establish a world-wide Islamic caliphate where non-Muslims would have few rights (see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170), and the violent Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. But the authorities have also harshly restricted the rights of peaceful Muslims who have no connection to either group, as well as believers of other faiths. Many Muslims - especially those who worship outside the framework of the state-controlled mosques - have been accused of being "Wahhabis", a term widely and inaccurately used by the authorities in Central Asia as a term of abuse for devout Muslims.

The Pro-Rector of Namangan State University, Gairat Dajibaev, categorically denied to Forum 18 that his university had issued such forms. "We don't take any forms from those renting rooms to our students," he told Forum 18 from Namangan on 17 March. "I'm

hearing from you for the first time that the website fergana.ru has published this slanderous information. I don't read such websites - I only read Uzbek newspapers. They are quite enough for me."

No-one was prepared to comment at the Namangan Regional Administration. The secretary of the administration head told Forum 18 on 17 March to contact Tohorjan Dadahanov, the head of the region's Department for Links with Social and Religious Organisations. However, Dadahanov was reluctant to talk. "I'm too small a person to respond to journalists' questions," he told Forum 18 on 17 March. "Ask the head of the Regional Administration or his deputies." (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 F18News 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>

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