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UZBEKISTAN: Raids, detentions and rape threats on Jehovah's Witness' holy day

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

As in 2005, Uzbekistan's Jehovah's Witnesses again faced raids, mass detentions and rape threats on their most holy day – the commemoration on 12 April of the death of Jesus, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "The NSS secret police and the ordinary police have carried out operations before on this day, but we have not seen repression on such a scale," Forum 18 was told. In Karshi [Qarshi], raids were particularly severe, with one Jehovah's Witness suffering severe concussion and a brain haemorrhage after being beaten by the police. Female Jehovah's Witnesses were threatened with rape. The raids took place despite assurances from the state Religious Affairs Committee that the government would not attack the commemorations. Also, as the Religious Affairs Committee itself admits, harassment of Protestants continues throughout Uzbekistan – even involving the authorities themselves breaking Uzbekistan's highly repressive laws.

As in 2005, Uzbekistan's Jehovah's Witnesses again faced raids, mass detentions and rape threats on their most holy day of the year – their commemoration of the death of Jesus, which they marked on Wednesday 12 April, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "The police, along with people in civilian clothes - probably members of the NSS secret police - burst into private apartments where believers were marking the occasion and dragged them forcibly to police headquarters. Police arrested more than 500 people and several were badly beaten," Jehovah's Witness Sergei Artyushkov told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Tashkent on 16 April. "The NSS secret police and the ordinary police have carried out operations before on this day, but we have not seen repression on such a scale."

Jehovah's Witness commemorations of Jesus' death in 2005 were also marked by coordinated police and NSS secret police raids (see F18News 1 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=536).

Artyushkov stated that raids took place throughout Uzbekistan. In Tashkent, law enforcement agencies raided three private apartments. In Samarkand [Samarqand] in central Uzbekistan two apartments were raided, while in the eastern city of Fergana [Farghona], where the Jehovah's Witnesses have a registered religious community, a further two apartments were raided. Under Uzbek law, a religious community is only allowed to operate in the place it is registered; unregistered religious activity is – against international human rights standards – illegal.

According to Artyushkov, when one apartment was raided in Bekabad, a town 100 kilometres (60 miles) east of Tashkent, several Jehovah's Witnesses were badly beaten and subjected to extreme insults.

In Karshi [Qarshi], Artyushkov said that the harshest treatment was meted out. Bahrom Pulatov ended up in hospital with severe concussion after being beaten by the police. Doctors found he had a brain haemorrhage. A sixty-year-old female Jehovah's Witness, Salamat Nurulaeva, was threatened by the police that if she did not sign a confession for taking part in an illegal religious meeting, they would strip her naked, make a video of her and show the film to all her neighbours. Police threatened another female Jehovah's Witness, twenty-year-old Gulsara Yusupova, that if she did not sign a similar statement, ten police officers would take it in turns to rape her.

Extended arrests also took place. Igor Proskurin, a Jehovah's Witness from Tashkent, was sentenced to five days' detention for taking part in "an illegal religious gathering". "This week we expect more court cases and we can't rule out the possibility that more of our brothers in faith will end up behind bars just for their religious beliefs," Artyushkov told Forum 18.

Artyushkov also stated that for several weeks prior to the celebration, Jehovah's Witnesses had been asking the government's Religious Affairs Committee to ensure that the government did not prevent believers from celebrating the festival. Begzot Kadyrov, chief specialist at the Committee, had given assurances that the Committee would take appropriate action. "But in the end the authorities unleashed more repression against us than in previous years," Artyushkov lamented. "If before we still held out some hope that the Religious Affairs Committee could help us, now we have no such illusions about that organisation. We have not even told them about the actions taken against us on 12 April."

Kadyrov denied to Forum 18 that he knew anything about any action by the law enforcement agencies against Jehovah's Witnesses on 12 April – in contrast to his 2005 comments, when he did claim prior knowledge (see F18News 1 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=536). He also denied that he and other staff at the Committee had promised that the commemoration would pass without extreme action by the authorities. "I simply told the Jehovah's Witnesses that I would look into the matter. I did not promise them anything specific," Kadyrov told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 17 April. He hung up without finishing the interview.

Interestingly, two hours after Kadyrov's interview with Forum 18, the Russian news agency Interfax published an interview with an unnamed member of the Religious Affairs Committee. "The rapid rise and increasing geographical spread of activity of these organisations is bringing with it active missionary activity, not only among the Russian-speaking population, but also among people of local ethnicity," the official told Interfax. The official claimed that missionary activity in districts inhabited by people practising Abrahamic religions (Islam, Christianity and Judaism) could lead to inter-faith conflict.

According to the Religious Affairs official, the methods of modern missionaries, particularly Jehovah's Witnesses, consisted in holding religious rituals and distributing religious literature in the local languages, and in holding illegal religious rituals and meetings in followers' apartments.

In a follow-up interview posted on a government-run website on 17 April, Kadyrov alleged that Pentecostal Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses are holding "illegal" religious gatherings and private religious lessons, claiming that Pentecostal missionaries preach in Uzbek and Tajik to try to convert local Muslims to Christianity. Kadyrov also complained – in contrast to his most recent comments to Forum 18 - that Jehovah's Witnesses had illegally marked their commemoration with "non-approved" gatherings.

Kadyrov also said that "illegal" imports of religious literature are on the rise, stating that the authorities seized 126 tapes and other video material with religious content from a Pentecostal Church follower who was heading to the western city of Nukus. Religious literature is strictly censored in Uzbekistan (see F18News 6 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=643) and strict postal censorship of religious literature is also applied (see F18News 14 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=687).

In earlier media interviews (such as with Interfax on 17 January and Uzbekinfo on 31 January), Kadyrov has tried to claim that Uzbekistan's religious minorities did not experience any difficulties. It is possible that, thinking that publicity for the raids on Jehovah's Witnesses was inevitable, Kadyrov was trying to place a 'favourable' interpretation of the states' repression in the news media.

As Kadyrov of the Religious Affairs Committee admitted, police harassment of Protestants continues throughout Uzbekistan – even involving the authorities breaking Uzbekistan's highly repressive laws. Andrei Li, from the town of Syr-Darya [Sidare] 80 kilometres (50 miles) south-west of Tashkent, has been fined for "illegal" religious activity, Iskander Najafov, a lawyer for the Tashkent-based Full Gospel Christian Church, told Forum 18 on 13 April. Li was summoned to the Syr-Darya district criminal court on 7 April to be handed the text of a judgment of 16 March against him under Article 240 (breaking the law on religious organisations) and Article 241 (failing to observe the proper procedures for instruction in religious teachings).

The judgement had been made without him being aware that a hearing was taking place. Despite this – which is illegal under Uzbek law - Judge Sorabekov found Andrei Li guilty of these "offences" and fined him 47,000 Uzbek Soms (265 Norwegian Kroner, 34 Euros, or 42 US dollars). Average monthly salaries in Uzbekistan have been estimated to be approximately 60 US Dollars.

"This judgement is a gross infringement of human rights," Najafov complained. "It fails to conform to the standards set by the legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan – for example, the failure to inform an individual about an investigation, and also the failure to provide any opportunity for the accused to use legal means to protect his interests." Najafov added that the court decision handed down to Li was drawn up in Uzbek, even though he does not understand the language. "In such circumstances, the region's laws require that a case be conducted in Russian."

Forum 18 failed to get any answer to its questions from Syr-Darya district court officials. A man who said he was Judge Sorabekov's secretary refused to call the Judge to the telephone. "We will not provide any information to journalists over the telephone. If you want us to give you any information, come to Syr-Darya," he stated before hanging up. Protestants in the town often face harassment by the authorities (see F18News 14 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=744).

Also, on 11 April the police burst into a private apartment in Tashkent where Protestants Lyudmila Sherstyuk, Edem Jambaisky and Lyudmila Jabarova had met to talk. The three, along with a young child who was with them, were taken to the city's Yunus-Abad district police station, where officers ordered them to write statements admitting they had taken part in an illegal religious meeting. The Protestants refused, and were only allowed to go home after several hours. (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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