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UZBEKISTAN: Can prisoners pray in labour camp?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Abijan Yakubov, a prisoner in labour camp 64/47 near Navoi in central Uzbekistan, was punished by 15 days in isolation cell this spring for reciting the Muslim prayers (namaz), human rights activist Surat Ikramov told Forum 18 News Service, citing Yakubov's wife. When she complained, labour camp governor Mukhiddin Abdullayev explained to her that prisoners in his labour camp are "categorically forbidden" to say prayers. She added that other prisoners have been beaten to force them to renounce their Muslim faith. Farukh Mukhammedov, head of the Interior Ministry's State Directorate for Correction and Punishment, claimed to Forum 18 that prisoners who wish to recite the Muslim prayers at dawn (currently banned) are allowed by their faith to postpone these prayers. The government's senior religious affairs official, Shoazim Minovarov, admitted to Forum 18 that the problem exists. "We intend to discuss it with the State Directorate for Correction and Punishment and find a solution which will be acceptable to prisoners," he claimed.

Relatives of prisoners in labour camp 64/47 in the town of Kiziltep in Navoi [Nawoiy] region of central Uzbekistan say prisoners there are forbidden to recite Islamic prayers (namaz), Surat Ikramov, the chairman of the Human Rights Initiative Group of Uzbekistan, told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Tashkent on 24 April. He said that M. Rashidova, wife of the prisoner Abijan Yakubov, had told him that her husband, a Muslim, had been put in an isolation cell for 15 days this spring as punishment for reciting his prayers. Rashidova said other prisoners have been beaten to force them to renounce their faith. Ikramov reported that cases of prisoners in Uzbekistan being completely forbidden to pray are comparatively rare, and are the result of arbitrary rulings by individual prison and labour camp governors.

Ikramov quoted Rashidova as declaring that when she asked the labour camp's deputy governor why her husband had been put in the isolation cell, he told her that Yakubov had infringed internal prison regulations. "When I asked for details of how exactly he had infringed the regulations the deputy governor told me that he had said prayers and that this was against the rules in that prison," Rashidova continued. She said that after that she also talked to the labour camp governor, Mukhiddin Abdullayev, and he confirmed that prisoners in that labour camp are "categorically forbidden" to say prayers.

Rashidova said that in labour camp 64/47 Khusniddin Bozorov, Mirsoat Agzamov, Isroil (last name unknown) and eight other prisoners have been forced to "renounce their faith" after being "physically abused" by guards under Amin (last name unknown), the head of the section. She said Isroil was beaten about the head, while the others were beaten unconscious. As a result one prisoner, Rustam Yulchiyev, declared a hunger strike from 8 March.

On 24 and 25 April Forum 18 tried about 20 times to ring the labour camp on the number given by directory enquiries, but the phone went unanswered.

"Prisoners are usually put in the cells for saying prayers before reveille or after curfew," Ikramov told Forum 18. He said the problem for Muslims in prison is that the time for the first morning prayer (at dawn) often comes before reveille. "The camp administration regards a Muslim who prays at that time as breaking prison regulations and so they put him in the cells. For a Muslim, though, it is very important to say prayers at the times prescribed by the canons of Islam."

Farukh Mukhammedov, head of the State Directorate for Correction and Punishment at the Interior Ministry in the capital Tashkent, asserted definitively that prisoners have the right to say prayers and that in so doing they do not infringe internal prison regulations. "Prisoners have the right to say prayers after reveille and before curfew," he told Forum 18 on 26 April. "We shall check up on any alleged infringement of this prisoners' right on the part of the Colony [labour camp] administration."

But pressed by Forum 18 on whether prisoners have the right to say prayers before reveille or after curfew, Mukhammedov was more guarded. "Islam allows a Muslim to postpone prayer times if he is forced to do so by circumstances. It's a difficult question whether prisoners have the right to pray before reveille or after curfew. I'm not prepared to answer this on the telephone."

Shoazim Minovarov, the chairman of the government's Committee for Religious Affairs, admitted that prisoners sometimes complain that they are not allowed to pray before reveille and after curfew. "This problem certainly exists," he told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 26 April. "We intend to discuss it with the State Directorate for Correction and Punishment and find a solution which

will be acceptable to prisoners."

Muslim prisoners have long complained that they are obstructed in praying in prisons and labour camps, especially for prayers before reveille and after curfew, as well as in observing the Ramadan fast (see F18News 20 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=546). Death row prisoners wishing to see a clergyman before their execution were earlier denied access (see F18News 11 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=211), but this problem has reportedly now eased. (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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