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UZBEKISTAN: "We defend human rights"?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

In what seems to be a widening crackdown against religious freedom in Uzbekistan, the police and NSS secret police have raided several churches and a Baptist has been fined for hosting services in her home. Yesterday (18 May), a group of Protestants in the capital Tashkent were detained following a police raid on a private flat. Humanitarian aid agencies suspected of involvement in Christian missionary activity are also being closed. Irmuhamad Shermatov, of the Justice Ministry's Department for the Defence of Human Rights, has insisted to Forum 18 News Service that "we defend human rights," but refused to say what the Ministry was doing to end attacks on religious freedom. A colleague of Shermatov's in central Uzbekistan told Forum 18 that the Justice Ministry has closed down two Protestant churches. She refused to say how in Uzbekistan church members could freely practice their faith, as the country's international human rights obligations require.

Amid what appears to be a widening crackdown on religious believers across Uzbekistan - including recent raids, bans and fines on Protestant churches - an official of the Justice Ministry's Department for the Defence of Human Rights has refused to discuss what - if anything - his department is doing to defend the religious freedom rights of the country's citizens. "This is not the subject of a telephone discussion," Irmuhamad Shermatov told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Tashkent on 19 May. Despite insisting that "we defend human rights", he refused to explain what the department was doing to end harassment of religious believers trying to practice their faith peacefully or to say how many people had appealed to his department for help to end such harassment. He then put the phone down.

The Justice Ministry website <http://www.minjust.uz> claims the Department's tasks as proposing amendments to improve laws in the area of human rights and their implementation, supporting civil society, improving people's knowledge of their rights and freedoms and handling complaints. The Department has branches in each region of the country.

Farhod Gulyanov of the Justice Administration (the local branch of the Justice Ministry) of Samarkand [Samarqand] region in central Uzbekistan told Forum 18 on 19 May that it had closed down a Seventh-day Adventist church in Samarkand on 28 April and the Korean-led Miral Protestant church in nearby Pasdargom district on 4 May. Gulyanov alleged that the reasons for closure were that the churches had persistently violating the country's religion law and the terms of their statutes.

"Religious communities have freedom to meet and worship, but they must abide by the law and their own statutes," Gulyanov's colleague Tatyana Masalatova insisted to Forum 18 from Samarkand on 19 May. She refused to explain what alleged violations the two churches had committed and declined to say how church members could freely practice their faith, as Uzbekistan's international human rights obligations require. She then claimed that 26 non-Muslim religious communities are registered in Samarkand region and put the phone down.

Samarkand Justice Administration officials told Russian news agencies Interfax and RIA-Novosti on 17 May that the Adventist church, officially registered in November 1998, had conducted services in private homes and not "in the premises dedicated to this purpose as the law demands". Officials also alleged that underage children had taken part in "missionary religious events" without permission of their parents and that "at weekly meetings of the church the question of conducting missionary work among the population was constantly discussed". Officials also complained that the church had provided the authorities with "untrue data about the sources of finance". Officials said the Adventist congregation had been fined in October 2001 and April 2005 for allegedly violating its statute.

Officials told the Russian agencies that a check-up on the activity of the Miral church, registered in October 2003, had shown that the church leadership body did not hold regular general meetings of all members, did not provide a leadership report on its activity and the work of its audit committee, did not hold elections for the pastor and did not produce a congregational report and expenditure accounts.

The officials also complained that the church's preacher, a Korean citizen Li Syn Ryul, was simultaneously pastor of a Protestant church in Samarkand and that "together with his wife, he conducts illegal missionary activity to attract the local population to the Christian religion". The church had been fined under the Code of Administrative Offences back in March for violating the law with a warning that the violations should be removed within one month. "However, the church did not pay the fine and did not remove the

violations of the law," an official told Interfax.

Serious violations of religious freedom continue in Uzbekistan. Some examples from the past month are: trials of Muslims, apparently for being serious in the practice of Islam (see F18News 15 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=780); the jailing of a Jehovah's Witness, a banned Protestant church being raided and children intimidated and threatened in a bid to force them to renounce their Christian faith (see F18News 5 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=774); and Muslim prisoners being banned from saying Muslim prayers (see F18News 2 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=772).

A group of Protestants in Tashkent were detained yesterday (18 May) in a police raid on a private flat, though two were freed later in the day, Protestant sources have told Forum 18. Bibles, hymnbooks and a personal computer were confiscated at the time of their detention. Police filmed the raid and the detentions. Two of the six still held are students and have already been threatened with expulsion from their higher education institution because of their faith.

The 18 May raid followed another large-scale raid on a group of Protestants near Tashkent, one of a number of similar incidents known to Forum 18 elsewhere in the country.

Council of Churches Baptists have complained to Forum 18 on 18 May that the authorities are "ever more insistently" demanding the compulsory registration of their congregations. Council of Churches Baptists refuse on principle to register with the state authorities in post-Soviet countries, believing that it violates their freedom to worship in accordance with the Bible and the Uzbek Constitution.

Members of the church in the town of Kuvasai in Fergana [Farghona] region close to the border with Kyrgyzstan reported that ordinary police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police officers raided the evening service on 12 April held at the home of church member Lyubov Vitkovskaya. She, together with two Baptists who had come from the nearby town of Fergana, Andrei Stanislavsky and Mahmud Hakimjanov, were detained after the service and taken to the local police station, where they were interrogated until midnight. All three refused to sign a police record of the interrogation.

On 5 May, an Administrative Commission led by S. Kamalovov fined Vitkovskaya 9,400 Soms [47 Norwegian Kroner, 6 Euros or 8 US Dollars] for hosting religious services in her home. Average monthly salaries in Uzbekistan have been estimated at the equivalent of about 60 US Dollars.

However, on 7 May, the same police and NSS secret police officers returned to raid the church's Sunday service. "Without any documents they demanded that the service be halted and all those present come outside into the yard", church members reported. "The believers stayed in their places and continued the service right to the end." After the service, police wrote down the identities of all those present, drew up an inventory of the church's literature and took it all away "allegedly to conduct an expert analysis". They also took a personal Bible from one church member.

Then the town's deputy prosecutor arrived together with the local secret police chief. "They started to persuade the believers to register their congregation and promised their help in this," church members reported. "Otherwise they threatened to act as they saw fit."

Church members called on all fellow-believers to pray and appeal for Vitkovskaya's fine to be cancelled, for the confiscated literature to be returned and for the possibility "to conduct worship services unimpeded".

Protestant sources in the Fergana Valley say it is all but impossible for more than a couple of church members to meet at one time in a private home. "For Protestants, a small meeting with a couple of guests is regarded as an illegal service," a Protestant who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18 on 16 May. "This is enough for neighbours to call the police." The Protestant said after the violent crackdown on the Andijan uprising in May 2005, the authorities constantly warn people to be vigilant against "dangerous" groups. "In Muslim society, Protestant groups are viewed as dangerous, even if people know we don't have weapons or drugs. We are seen as breaking people away from society."

The Protestant cited one case in April when four church members had got together in a private home. "That was enough for punishment," the Protestant reported. "An official record was drawn up and one of those present was fined. This is just an everyday event now."

Protestants in particular are becoming increasingly afraid of reporting specific details of police raids on and harassment of congregations and individuals, fearing that if their cases are reported they could be singled out for even harsher victimisation. "I believe publishing information is necessary, as the government wants to be internationally accepted," another Protestant told Forum 18, acutely aware of the dilemma facing local believers harassed by the authorities.

Several Protestants have complained to Forum 18 that under Uzbekistan's repressive religious laws, all religious activity is illegal unless it is conducted by a registered congregation, which requires a congregation to have at least 100 adult citizen members and the

approval of many government agencies. The authorities across the country are enforcing this ever more strictly. "Small Baptist and Adventist congregations have been warned they cannot meet for worship recently," one source told Forum 18. "They're too small to register, so they can't even meet."

Meanwhile, the authorities have continued to close down foreign humanitarian aid agencies they suspect of being involved in Christian missionary activity.

On 15 May, a court in the eastern city of Kokand closed down the local branch of the US-funded aid organisation Central Asian Free Exchange, after alleging that its staff urged recipients of its humanitarian aid to convert to Christianity. The group's website says the Kokand branch was involved in agricultural, health education and English-language projects locally.

The Justice Ministry is now considering stripping another US-funded group, Global Involvement Through Education, of permission to work in Uzbekistan after Samarkand City Court found four foreign members of staff guilty in April of "attempts to convert locals to a religion of Protestant character" and fined. "Witnesses testified during a trial that, under the cover of teaching English, the foreign staff actually called students of local universities to give up Islam or the Orthodox religion, to take up Protestantism," the local agency press-uz.info reported on 10 May. "During the trial, various audio, video, CD, print products advocating Protestantism were presented as evidence." (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=777.

For an analysis of whether the May 2005 Andijan events changed state religious policy in the year following, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=778. For an outline of what is known about Akramia itself, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586, and for a May 2005 analysis of what happened in Andijan http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567.

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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