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UZBEKISTAN: Sunday morning a favoured time for raids

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Sunday morning worship services have recently been a favoured time for police raids on Protestant churches, Forum 18 News Service has noted. Three separate raids on Sunday morning worship have taken place in recent weeks, on churches in the capital Tashkent and the nearby town of Angren. Also, Zamira Shirazova, a dancer in a folk group in north-west Uzbekistan, has been fired because she is a Protestant. Some sources suggest that Pentecostal churches have been banned from preaching in Uzbek, despite it being the state language, although this ban has apparently not been extended to other Protestant denominations or other faiths. Other religious minorities also face severe pressure – both official and social. One example is the small number of Hare Krishna devotees in the Khorezm region of north-western Uzbekistan.

Sunday morning worship services have recently been a favoured time for police to raid Protestant churches, Forum 18 News Service has noted. On 24 September, one Baptist church in the capital Tashkent was raided mid-way through the sermon and two church members subsequently fined. On 1 October in the nearby town of Angren, nearly fifty members of a registered Pentecostal church were taken to the police station after their Sunday service was raided. On 8 October the same Tashkent Baptist church was again raided, as was a Protestant church in the north-west of the country in Nukus, the capital of the Karakalpakstan [Qorakalpoghiston] Autonomous Region, where all Protestant activity is banned. Forum 18 has also learned that a dancer has been sacked from a state-sponsored Karakalpakstan folk group because she is a Protestant.

Professional dancer Zamira Shirazova was dismissed from the Karakalpak folk group "Aykulash Jyldyzlari" (Stars of the Moon's Embrace) on 3 September, accused of "taking part in a religious sect". "I tried to obtain a copy of this disgraceful order, but the head of the folk group Bairam Muradov refused to give it to me," Shirazova told Forum 18 from Nukus on 12 October. Forum 18 was unable to reach Muradov on 12 and 13 October to find out why he had sacked Shirazova, as his telephone had been cut off for non-payment of bills.

Nurula Zhamolov, head of Karakalpakstan's Religious Affairs Department, told Forum 18 he knew nothing about Shirazova's sacking. "If Shirazova was indeed sacked from her job because of her religious beliefs, that is in clear contravention of Uzbek law," he admitted to Forum 18 on 12 October.

The Karakalpak authorities have long adopted a harsher policy towards religious minorities than the authorities elsewhere in Uzbekistan. The Karakalpak ordinary police and local branch of the National Security Service (NSS) secret police regularly conduct raids on Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses. On 8 October, 25 Protestants were arrested at the end of their Sunday church service in Nukus, Protestant sources told Forum 18. Police came and filmed the church members, then took them all to the police station.

Zhamolov admitted that all the Protestant churches in Karakalpakstan have been closed down. "Currently, apart from the mosques, there is only one Orthodox church functioning on Karakalpak territory," he told Forum 18. "That means that the Protestants who were reportedly arrested on 8 October were acting illegally. However, I have not heard anything about the incident you speak of."

Protestants are also experiencing persecution in other parts of Uzbekistan. On 1 October, a group of police officers in the town of Angren, 100 kilometres (60 miles) east of Tashkent, burst into the officially registered Pentecostal church during its Sunday service and arrested 47 people. Officials are now gathering documentation to charge the church's pastor Askhad Mustafin under article 240 ("violation of the law on religious organisations") and Article 241 ("violation of the procedure for teaching religion") of the Administrative Code.

Forum 18 was unable to find out why Pastor Mustafin and the church are being targeted. The telephone of Angren's police chief went unanswered on 16 October despite Forum 18's repeated attempts to reach him. Mustafin was fined under Article 240 in June 2005 for leading services in his registered church (see F18News 17 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=588).

The congregation in Tashkent of the Council of Churches Baptists, who refuse on principle to register with the authorities in any of the former Soviet republics, is facing renewed pressure. About 12 officers from the city's Khamza district police – among them the deputy head of the local Counter-terrorism Department, S. Isakov – burst into the Sunday morning service during the sermon on 24

September. Other police officers stood outside smoking. "The intruders took photographs and tried to go into all the rooms of the church," church members told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 25 September. "After the service they blocked the exit and allowed through only the elderly and mothers with children."

Police put thirteen church members – including teenage children - on a police bus and took them to the local station. There, five were summoned to an office, photographed, had their personal details recorded and pressured to write statements. "They were warned that services and the Christian library are being undertaken illegally and next time they are undertaken criminal cases will be launched," church members reported. "They threatened to post a police unit by the prayer house if we do not register the church." Unlicensed religious activity is – against international human rights standards – a criminal offence in Uzbekistan.

Igor Voloshin, Mikhail Goryachev and Larisa Lankina were ordered to appear at the police station the following day, where an administrative court fined Voloshin and Goryacheva 21,600 sums (118 Norwegian Kroner, 14 Euros or 18 US Dollars) each under Article 240 of Uzbekistan's Administrative Code, which punishes "violation of the law on religious organisations".

At 11.30 am on 8 October, the Baptist church's Sunday morning service was again raided by a group of district police officers, who arrested seven church members. The police are now gathering documentation for a prosecution under Article 240 and Article 241, which punishes "violation of the procedures for teaching religion" of the administrative code.

The telephone of the police chief of the Uzbek capital's Khamza district went unanswered on 16 October despite Forum 18's repeated attempts to contact him.

In another sign of official pressure, Pentecostal churches have been banned from preaching in Uzbek, although it is the state language, Protestant sources have told Forum 18. It appears that this ban has not been extended to other Protestant denominations or other faiths.

Several foreign Protestants have been deported in recent months, including some long-time residents of Uzbekistan (see F18News 21 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=833). Among other attacks on Protestants in recent months was a massive armed police and NSS secret police raid on a summer camp near the southern town of Termez on 24 August. Some 20 church members were detained and many of them systematically beaten. Two were imprisoned – one of whom needed medical treatment for eye injuries sustained during his imprisonment – and nine were given large fines (see F18News 6 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=838).

Other religious minorities also face severe pressure. The small number of Hare Krishna devotees are particularly targeted in the Khorezm region of north-western Uzbekistan, on the border with Karakalpakstan, the Chairman of the Human Rights Initiative Group of Uzbekistan, Surat Ikramov, told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 12 October.

In a direct attack on one Hare Krishna devotee, Nodira Pirmatova, a resident of Shavat in Khorezm region, was taken to the town police department on 19 August. Under pressure from her parents and officials from the law enforcement agencies, she signed a document renouncing her religious beliefs. The police also arrested a devotee from the Tashkent suburb of Chirchik who was visiting Pirmatova and questioned him at the Shavat police department for six hours.

Shavkat's deputy police chief, Omon Ahmedov, brushed aside concerns about the way the police treated the Hare Krishna devotees. "I wasn't here the day when the Krishnaites were interrogated," he told Forum 18 from the town on 16 October. "But I can assure you we have no problem with them. And we're not putting them under any pressure."

This official attitude fuels social intolerance of religious freedom. Kamaliddin Saidov, a Khorezm resident and Krishna devotee, was imprisoned with his wife by his father for fifteen days in a separate room. His father demanded that he renounce his faith and forced Saidov and his wife to eat meat and drink vodka (Krishna devotees do not eat meat or drink alcohol). When they would not deny their beliefs, Saidov's father expelled them from the house after seizing all their documents.

Kamaliddin Saidov made official complaints against his father to the committee of his mahalla (local town district), to the divisional police inspector and the district Prosecutor's Office but without any success. Instead of dealing with his complaints, all the officials told him to stop being a Hare Krishna devotee.

The persecution of Krishna devotees appears to be routine in Khorezm region. Some two years ago the head of Urgench [Urganch] University threatened to expel students who were Krishna followers. On occasion, teachers at the university have forced Hare Krishna students to eat meat and drink vodka "for pedagogical reasons" (see F18News 22 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=368).

University students in Nukus in Karakalpakstan, north-west of Urgench, have also been attacked and expelled for religious activity – in their case because they were Protestants (see F18News 26 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=719).

The past year has seen increased government control of all religious activity in Uzbekistan. New restrictions have been proposed to

punish religious leaders if any members of their communities share their faith with others (see F18News 21 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=833) and censorship of religious literature has been intensified (see F18News 29 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=805), while massively increased fines for unregistered religious activity were introduced at the end of 2005 (see F18News 27 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=720).

Foreign non-governmental organisations with any kind of religious affiliation or suspected of having a religious affiliation have been closed down (see F18News 10 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=852) and foreign citizens involved in religious activity have been deported (see F18News 21 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=833). (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 see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

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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