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UZBEKISTAN: Protestant sentenced for "violating the procedure for teaching religion"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Following the jailing for four years of Protestant Pastor Dmitry Shestakov, Pentecostal Christian Salavat Serikbayev was today (10 May) in Uzbekistan given a two-year suspended jail sentence for teaching religion illegally, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Serikbayev has now been allowed home, but he could be jailed if he commits any further "crime," such as any religious activity the authorities do not like. He was also banned from travelling abroad and the court ordered that 20 per cent of any salary he earns be taken from him. Serikbayev does not have a job, and lives in a town with about 80 per cent unemployment. Last month, another Protestant was given a fine totalling more than most people in his home city earn in a year. Police continue to target Protestants, recently detaining six Christian women and one man who were celebrating a birthday in a private home. All seven people were handcuffed and detained overnight, Forum 18 has learnt, some being beaten up by police.

Pentecostal Christian Salavat Serikbayev was today (10 May) has been given a two-year suspended prison sentence in Nukus, the capital of the Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] autonomous republic in north-western Uzbekistan, on charges of teaching religion illegally, Protestant sources who asked not to be named told Forum 18 News Service. Although he has now been allowed home, he could be jailed if he commits any further "crime," such as any religious activity the authorities regard as an offence.

The court banned Serikbayev from travelling abroad during the two-year period. It also ordered that 20 per cent of the salary of any job Serikbayev gains be taken from by an employer. He currently does not have paid employment, so this fine does not yet apply.

Although the prosecutors' accusations have varied, Serikbayev was finally prosecuted under Article 229-2 of the Criminal Code, which punishes "violating the procedure for teaching religion" and carries a maximum term of three years' imprisonment. He denied the charges, claiming that police officers who testified that they had seen him teaching religion were lying. Forum 18 has learnt that Serikbayev had to defend himself, as he could not afford to pay a lawyer.

The chancellery of the Nukus Criminal Court refused to discuss the case or the verdict with Forum 18 on 10 May.

The same day, Forum 18 also tried to reach Nurula Jamolov, the regional representative of the government's Religious Affairs Committee, to find out why the Karakalpak authorities are prosecuting believers merely for engaging in peaceful religious activity and why the authorities have refused to grant legal status to any non-Muslim and non-Russian Orthodox religious communities in the region. All unregistered religious activity by other communities – such as Protestants – is illegal in the region and a criminal offence (see eg. F18News 22 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=918). However, a colleague in the Religious Affairs Committee told Forum 18 that Jamolov was not at his desk.

Serikbayev, who is from the town of Muynak [Muynoq] north of Nukus close to the Aral Sea, was among a group of 18 Protestants held when police raided the Nukus home of Grigory Ten of a local Presbyterian church on 15 January. Many were charged under the Administrative Code. On 9 April, Nukus Criminal Court found Ten guilty of a variety of religious offences under the Code of Administrative Offences. It fined him 621,000 Sums (2956 Norwegian Kroner, 365 Euros or 496 US Dollars), a massive sum in Karakalpakstan and more than many local people earn in a year (see F18News 20 April 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=945).

A former seaport, Muynak is now 100 kilometres (60 miles) from the Aral Sea following the man-made ecological disaster of that Sea. Unemployment has reached 80 per cent, and the standard of living here is lower than almost anywhere in Central Asia (see F18News 3 July 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=807).

In the wake of the 15 January police raid, Nukus-based Protestant Makset Djabbabergenov also faced criminal charges, but these were later downgraded to charges under the Code of Administrative Offences.

The 32-year-old Serikbayev has long faced harassment for his Christian activity. In 1999 he spent four months in prison, while last year he was fined. Since then he has been repeatedly warned, threatened and harassed. Since the latest case began, the committee of

his local mahalla (residential district) began proceedings to deprive him, his wife and their five children of social protection payments, including childcare benefits. Mahalla committees are part of an extensive apparatus of state control and repression (see F18News 27 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936).

Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees – all of whose activity is a criminal offence in the region - have faced particular persecution in Karakalpakstan. For example, Protestant students in the regional capital Nukus have long been singled out for pressure (see eg. F18News 5 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=774 and 26 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=719).

In the latest known instance of harassment, police detained six Protestant women in Nukus on Sunday 29 April for gathering to celebrate a birthday in a private home. Protestant sources who preferred not to be identified, for fear of reprisals, told Forum 18 that the six – together with one man - were handcuffed. Some of the detainees were beaten up by police in custody. All six of the detainees were held overnight, before being freed on the morning of 30 April.

Elsewhere in Uzbekistan, concerns continue to be expressed by friends and family about the decline in the health of jailed Protestant Pastor Dmitry Shestakov. The state-run mass media also continues to attack religious minorities, particularly targeting Protestants (see F18News 3 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=950). (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.

Full reports of the religious freedom situation in Uzbekistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>.

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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