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UZBEKISTAN: Church closes because of official pressure

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Complaining that it was "too dangerous" to continue to meet, the Resurrection Full Gospel Pentecostal Church in the Fergana Valley town of Andijan – long denied state registration - has decided to close down. "We have faced such pressure from the leaders of the local mahallas [urban districts] and from the prosecutor, especially this year," the church's pastor Bakhtier Tuichiev told Forum 18 News Service. "It is too painful to talk about all the threats and insults we have had to endure." Fined last December, Tuichiev says he is now constantly monitored by police and is among a growing number of active Protestants denied permission to leave Uzbekistan. Eight members of another Full Gospel congregation in Andijan have had their appeals against fines imposed in May turned down. Their pastor, Dmitry Shestakov, is serving a four-year labour camp sentence.

A Pentecostal Full Gospel congregation in the town of Andijan [Andijon] in the Fergana [Farghona] Valley has decided to close down and halt all its activities in the wake of official pressure. "I and our church leadership decided to close the church two months ago – it was too dangerous to continue to meet," Bakhtier Tuichiev, pastor of the Resurrection Church, told Forum 18 News Service from Andijan on 19 June. "We have faced such pressure from the leaders of the local mahallas [urban districts] and from the prosecutor, especially this year. It is too painful to talk about all the threats and insults we have had to endure."

Protestant congregations elsewhere in Uzbekistan are among religious minority communities facing a new wave of pressure (see F18News 26 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=980). A growing number of active Protestants are on an exit blacklist and cannot leave their own country.

Pastor Tuichiev said that officials of the mahalla where the church building is based and the mahalla where he and his family live have been leading the campaign, though Prosecutor Ahmedov, the police and the National Security Service (NSS) secret police have joined the campaign.

Mahalla officials are a key part of the network of state monitoring and control, frequently pressuring Muslims and religious minority communities to prevent them from practising their faith freely (see F18News 27 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936). Similarly, state officials issue orders to religious communities - such as to co-operate with the state in suppressing religious activity - and expect those orders to be obeyed, despite the formal separation of religion and state (see F18News 21 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=959).

Tuichiev told Forum 18 that a police car is now permanently posted outside the former church building in the Yakhshi mahalla of the town, while police also keep watch outside his home in the Dostlyk mahalla.

Forum 18 was unable to reach any officials at Andijan town Hokimat (administration) on 19 June to find out why the Resurrection Church has been put under such pressure that it feels its only option was to close down. Likewise no-one at the government's Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent was available on 19 June. "The chairman Artyk Yusupov is not in the office," the official who answered the phone told Forum 18. "I'm just here to learn the job, and I know nothing of such events."

Tuichiev also told Forum 18 that he wants to leave Uzbekistan but cannot because the local visa and registration office refuses to stamp his new passport to authorise him to travel abroad. "I was in Russia in April and May, but my passport ran out soon after I returned. Now they won't stamp the new passport, saying the local Internal Affairs Directorate, the NSS secret police and the commission they form in such cases won't give permission for me to leave my own country."

Tuichiev said several Protestant leaders he knows have also been unable to get the stamp in their passport allowing them to leave the country, which is valid for two years. Other Protestants have told Forum 18 this is a growing problem for prominent activists, especially for those regarded as being of Muslim background. "I know of three people just in my part of the country," one Protestant told Forum 18 on 12 June. "No reason is given. They know they wouldn't be able to get through the border if they tried to leave as their names are on the computer exit blacklist."

Tuichiev's congregation has sought legal status since 2002 but in vain. "Officials have always refused us registration – and never given reasons," he told Forum 18. Under Uzbekistan's harsh Religion Law – which contradicts the country's international human

rights commitments – unregistered religious activity is illegal and subject to criminal penalty. Many religious communities of a variety of faiths have been denied registration. Uzbek official statistics on the numbers of religious communities allowed to function are used to camouflage this (see F18News 16 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=913).

Tuichiev was fined 109,500 Sums (550 Norwegian Kroner, 68 Euros or 88 US Dollars) by Andijan City Court in December 2006 under the Code of Administrative Offences for conducting "illegal" meetings (see F18News 1 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=906). He told Forum 18 he has refused to pay the fine and has appealed against it, but says that at any time court executors could come and seize property belonging to the church.

The moves against the Resurrection Church have coincided with moves to crush another Full Gospel congregation in Andijan, led by Pastor Dmitry Shestakov (also known as David). He was given a four-year sentence in an open work camp on 9 March, a sentence made harsher at a new trial on 25 May when he was ordered to serve the rest of his sentence in a labour camp (see F18News 12 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=973).

Members of the embattled congregation Shestakov led have faced continuing official pressure since he was imprisoned. Eight have had their appeals against fines rejected, Protestant sources told Forum 18 on 16 June. All eight – Damir Kamalidinov, Yuri Pan, Venera Muratova, Vadim Muratov, Luiza Bibisheva, Rima Bekmatova, Susanna Mukhtarova and Olga Fazylova - were found guilty on 16 May of violating Article 197 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes "obstruction of the legal activity of a prosecutor and failure to fulfil his orders". Each was fined 24,840 Sums (120 Norwegian Kroner, 15 Euros or 20 US Dollars). On 11 June Judge S. Siddikov of Andijan Criminal Court rejected their appeals against the fines.

The court decision rejecting Kamalidinov's appeal against the fine, of which Forum 18 has seen the text, was signed by Siddikov. It notes that the NSS secret police had reported on 23 March that Kamalidinov was a member of Shestakov's church. The decision adds that Kamalidinov failed to appear at the Prosecutor's Office for questioning despite summonses on 5 and 11 April.

Two other members of the same congregation were also fined the same amount on 16 May on the same charges (see F18News 12 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=973). All had refused to go to the prosecutor's office after receiving what they regard as "illegal" summonses.

Jehovah's Witnesses have also faced mounting pressure in recent months. Irfon Khamidov was sentenced on 14 May in the central city of Samarkand [Samarqand] to two years in a labour camp on charges of "illegally" teaching his faith to others (see F18News 13 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=974). (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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