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RUSSIA: Officials deny harassing Muslim women's study group

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Exactly two years ago, officials in the Volga republic of Tatarstan began harassing a group of 50 women who study the writings on the Koran of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi. Group members have told Forum 18 News Service that flats were raided and searched, often without a warrant, books and notes confiscated and several of the women subjected to forced psychiatric examinations. After ailing 62-year-old Fakhima Nizamutdinova was warned in autumn 2006 that she would be taken to the FSB secret police if she failed to cooperate, she suffered two heart attacks. One group member told Forum 18 that Nizamutdinova has still not recovered and rarely leaves her flat. Asked why sweeping searches, involving the FSB and a helicopter, had been conducted at the group's meeting places, Valeri Kuzmin of Tatarstan Public Prosecutor's Office told Forum 18 that "the aim of the searches was to find the literature", even though no court had then deemed it "extremist".

Officials in the Volga republic of Tatarstan have denied to Forum 18 News Service that any force has been used in a long-running official campaign against a group of about 50 Muslim women who get together to study the writings of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi. However, the women have told Forum 18 of a catalogue of harassment which began exactly two years ago. The harassment has included raids, searches, book confiscations, forced psychiatric evaluations and an attempt to launch a criminal prosecution.

In May a Moscow court banned as extremist the Russian translation of Said Nursi's book *Risale-i Nur* (Messages of Light), a fourteen-part commentary on the Koran and Islam more broadly. In the wake of the ban, and given the history of harassment, the group of women fear a new crackdown (see F18News 11 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=991).

At 8am on 12 July 2005, as documented in a statement to Forum 18 from the women's study group, FSB secret police and public prosecutor representatives raided four flats belonging to Nursi followers in Naberezhnyye Chelny. At the same time their colleagues searched at least a further five flats in the Tatar capital, Kazan. At the Naberezhnyye Chelny flat where the women usually meet to study *Risale-i Nur*, the state representatives reportedly forced entry and refused to produce a search warrant or to remove their shoes, despite requests and the presence of numerous prayer mats.

The statement maintains that the state representatives then forced the women present – some of whom were not yet dressed – into one room for the duration of the eight-hour search. Even though children at the flat had not yet breakfasted, they reportedly also had no opportunity to eat until the search was over.

According to one group member, Alsu Khusayenova, 300 copies of *Risale-i Nur* were seized during that raid, along with personal notes and photographs. State representatives surrounded the apartment block and a police helicopter flew overhead, she told Forum 18, while film of the search was later shown as part of a local TV report about underground extremist groups.

On 17 December 2005 five of the Nursi women's study group – Rafiza Khikmatova, Sagadat Nasibullina, Khalida Sabirova, Rimma Shabanova and Elvira Sharifullina – were summoned for questioning by the republican FSB in Kazan. Told that the procedure would take 15 minutes, according to the women's statement to Forum 18, they were in fact subjected to a five-hour interrogation by local psychiatrists and psychologists.

In her 20 February 2006 statement to the Russian-language Islam-Info news agency, Khikmatova describes how she was asked in detail about her life history and to comment on drawings representing such concepts as fear, love and death. She then had to complete phrases such as "My fatherâ€", "My daughterâ€" and to answer questions including: "Who and what made you accept this belief in God?", "What has it given you?", "Who is in charge of you?", "Do you make anyone else read these books?", "Who are your enemies?".

"The number of tests and questions was endless," Khikmatova remarked. "Already in no state to answer, I fell silent. (...) These exhausting and demeaning questions resulted in a frightening loss of energy, my throat was dry, I found it very difficult to breathe, I had a bad headache and my legs gave way. Barely reaching home, I felt a strong pain around my heart that remained for a week, during which time I couldn't sleep and was profoundly depressed."

Local FSB representatives visited the homes of the five women following the tests, according to the women's statement to Forum 18, and demanded that they sign documents stating that they had consented to them. When the women refused, the FSB reportedly began to visit them at work, the entrances to their apartment blocks and to bombard them with telephone calls: "Four could not withstand the pressure and signed." The fifth, Rafiza Khikmatova, began to receive knocks on her front door for hours at any time of day and went into hiding with her children: "They were afraid of opening the door, answering the telephone or even going to the window."

According to Khusayenova, Rafiza Khikmatova has still not signed the documents but has not been harassed in recent months.

In their statement to Forum 18, the Naberezhnyye Chelny women stress that 90 per cent of their study group "are working in simple jobs. They have never come into contact with the law enforcement agencies, most are pensioners or have health problems. Some have never read secular books (..) and don't know their rights, although they know their civic duties and fulfil them conscientiously." One of the five subjected to the psychological tests, Elvira Sharifullina, has learning difficulties.

The tests were conducted as part of a one-year criminal investigation by Tatarstan Public Prosecutor's Office into the suspected extremist activities of "unidentified persons". The case was closed in March 2006 after it failed to establish "direct intent to incite religious hatred" by those producing, reading and disseminating Said Nursi's works. In the same month, however, Tatarstan Public Prosecutor's Office opened a further criminal case regarding "the creation of an organisation infringing the person and rights of the citizen" (Article 239, Part 1 of the Criminal Code).

On 17 July 2006 Dmitri Vagizov of Naberezhnyye Chelny Public Prosecutor's Office reportedly began to threaten another study group member. According to the women's statement, he told ailing 62-year-old Fakhima Nizamutdinova that she would be taken to the FSB if she refused to appear as a witness in the Nursi case, telephoning her several times a day over three days. FSB representatives visited Nizamutdinova several times during the following month, the statement continued, contributing to her two heart attacks in September 2006.

Khusayenova told Forum 18 that Nizamutdinova has still not recovered and rarely leaves her flat.

On 7 August 2006 Tatarstan FSB representatives took another two female Nursi readers from the town of Zainsk, 50km (30 miles) from Naberezhnyye Chelny, for psychological testing. In Nakiya Galimova's 15 August 2006 statement viewed by Forum 18, she writes that the FSB representative who summoned her tried to persuade her to sign a document stating that Nursi's books have harmed her health, "but I said that if I signed against books of the Almighty, I could go to hell."

In her 21 August 2006 statement also viewed by Forum 18, Siren Zakiyeva describes how a FSB representative escorted her from her workplace to a local psychiatric hospital, where she had to answer a series of questions in quick succession, including about her relationship with her husband and whether she punished her children or forced her daughter to wear a veil.

Khusayenova told Forum 18 that for a year following the July 2005 raids, the women responded to the authorities' summons for questioning and tried to assist. "We thought it was a misunderstanding (..) but alas, we did not know then that our honest answers would be turned against us."

Later, however, the women began to complain about the authorities' actions. On 8 August 2006 Khusayenova went with the study group's main teacher, Nakiya Sharifullina, and two other women to Naberezhnyye Chelny FSB. There, Khusayenova told Forum 18, the department's deputy head, Igor Vikentyev, asked why the women "did not adhere to traditional Islam or attend mosque, instead going to the Nurdzhular sect" (a russification of "Nurcular", Turkish for "Nursi followers"). Another staff member, she said, asked the four "when we had time to bring up children and look after our husbands, if we were doing religion?"

In their statement to Forum 18, the women explain that they choose to meet in private flats because "it is not desirable for women to attend mosque frequently according to sharia law, as they come into contact with unfamiliar men there." A further consideration is that their many small children disturb worshippers, they add.

In a 9 August 2006 letter viewed by Forum 18, Igor Vikentyev maintains to the women that he has forwarded their joint complaint to Tatarstan Public Prosecutor's Office. Yevgeni Vdovin, who heads Tatarstan FSB, issued a similar response on 14 August.

Contacted on 11 July 2007, a spokesman at Naberezhnyye Chelny FSB referred Forum 18 to his colleagues in Kazan. The same day, Eduard Ismagilov of the Tatarstan branch of the FSB staunchly denied to Forum 18 the women's allegations of abuse (see F18News 11 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=991).

Valeri Kuzmin of Tatarstan Public Prosecutor's Office – who initiated the criminal case that led to the Moscow court designation of Said Nursi's work as extremist – also defended officials' actions. Asked by Forum 18 on 11 July why such sweeping searches, involving the FSB and a helicopter, had been conducted at their meeting places in Tatarstan, he maintained that "the aim of the searches was to find the literature". Forum 18 then pointed out that the searches were conducted before any expert analysis of the literature had taken place, and wondered how the Public Prosecutor's Office could have then known that the literature was harmful.

"Well, we needed to get hold of the literature in order to conduct the expert analysis, right?" Kuzmin replied.

Regarding the Nursi followers' complaints that some summonses to interrogations were not issued in writing, Kuzmin maintained that this was not a legal requirement, and insisted that coercion had not been employed. He acknowledged that psychological-psychiatric tests did require their subjects' consent. However, he added that lawyers had been present at some, "and no one complained at the time". Kuzmin also claimed that there was documentation to prove that the five women subject to one set of tests had provided their consent. "If they say different, then that's deception".

Forum 18 asked whether the five women's complaint that they had given their consent under pressure only following the tests - and that one had still not given it - was therefore deception. "Well, the fact that they came voluntarily shows that they agreed to it," maintained Kuzmin, insisting that no force was involved. "We work within the law. If they say they were forced, if they say something different, that's up to them - we have democracy and freedom of speech."

In response to a complaint about the worsening of Fakhima Nizamutdinova's health following the actions of one investigator, Falikh Mustakimov of Tatarstan Public Prosecutor's Office wrote on 8 September 2006 that Dmitri Vagizov reached agreement with her by telephone that she would come for questioning at a certain time, but she failed to do so without good reason. This led Vagizov to telephone Nizamutdinova again and explain to her that if she did not attend, he would have to arrange for a police escort, insists Mustakimov: "There is no reason to doubt the explanation of Investigator Vagizov."

Moscow lawyer Yekaterina Smyslova told Forum 18 on 11 July that in Russia a legal summons for questioning must be issued in writing.

According to Khusayenova of the women's group, the items seized in the July 2005 raids have still not been returned. In a 27 September 2006 response to Nursaima Khadiullina viewed by Forum 18, Falikh Mustakimov of Tatarstan Public Prosecutor's Office explains that her 25 books, 30 brochures, two phials of aromatic oil and a computer hard disk have been lawfully certified as evidence by his colleague Valeri Kuzmin as part of a criminal case opened into "the activity of the religious-nationalist sect 'Nurdzhular'": "There has been no violation of your rights." (END)

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=947

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>

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