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UZBEKISTAN: Entire community to be banned?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

If, as the Jehovah's Witnesses increasingly fear is likely, the authorities strip the last surviving registered Jehovah's Witness congregation of its legal status, the entire activity by the community in the country will become illegal. "This will return us to how it was in the Soviet period, when we were also banned," one Jehovah's Witness who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18 News Service. He said the congregation in Chirchik near Tashkent received a second letter on 13 August warning that it is violating the law, an accusation it rejects. No official was available to explain to Forum 18 why an entire religious community seems set to become illegal. "If the Soviet authorities were not able to prevent Jehovah's Witnesses from practising their faith, this ban won't stop them either," the Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18. Two Jehovah's Witnesses, Irfon Khamidov and Dilafruz Arziyeva, have already been sentenced this year for "illegally teaching religion". Many more have been fined.

Exactly a year after the authorities stripped their community in the eastern city of Fergana [Farghona] of its legal status, Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 News Service that they fear that registration is about to be stripped from their last surviving registered community - in the town of Chirchik [Chirchiq] near the capital Tashkent. "This means we will be without registration in the whole of Uzbekistan," one Jehovah's Witness who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18 on 21 August. "This will return us to how it was in the Soviet period, when we were also banned."

Under Uzbekistan's harsh controls on religion, legal status is vital for a religious community to be able to carry out any activity at all. Those leading or participating in unregistered religious activity risk fines or imprisonment.

The Chirchik and Fergana congregations are the only two of what the Jehovah's Witnesses say are "dozens" of congregations across the country that the Uzbek authorities have ever allowed to register. Registration was stripped from the Fergana congregation in August 2006 (see F18News 5 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=837). Other congregations have repeatedly been denied registration over more than a decade despite meeting all the registration criteria.

Two Jehovah's Witnesses are already serving sentences to punish them for peaceful religious activity and many others have been fined.

No official was available on 21 August to explain to Forum 18 why an entire religious community is on the verge of being deprived of the possibility to conduct any lawful activity. Artyk Yusupov, who chairs the Religious Affairs Committee under the Cabinet of Ministers, was not in the office on 21 August. The receptionist told Forum 18 that only Begzot Kadyrov, the Committee's specialist, was present. However, the man who answered Kadyrov's phone told Forum 18 that Kadyrov was away on holiday for several weeks.

Forum 18 was also unable immediately to reach Akmal Saidov, who chairs the Committee on Democratic Institutions, Non-Governmental Organisations and Self-Government Institutions of Parliament's Legislative Chamber. His assistant at Parliament told Forum 18 on 21 August that Saidov was in a parliamentary session which went on to the end of the working day. Saidov also heads the government's National Human Rights Centre and is a frequent defender of Uzbek government policy internationally.

The moves against the Jehovah's Witnesses come as raids on Protestant congregations of a variety of congregations have stepped up (see F18News 24 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1010).

Despite the likely ban on the Chirchik community - added to the existing ban on all other Jehovah's Witness activity elsewhere in Uzbekistan - the Jehovah's Witness maintained to Forum 18 that throughout history, bans on religious activity have never worked. "Believers were not deterred by bans in the first century, and this has not changed," he insisted. "If the Soviet authorities were not able to prevent Jehovah's Witnesses from practising their faith, this ban won't stop them either."

The Jehovah's Witness also pointed out that even with registration, the Chirchik community was so restricted in what it could do. "In practice, all this allowed was for the community to be able to meet legally in one designated place, nothing more," the Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18. "Even such a necessary thing as talking about our faith to others was not allowed."

The Chirchik congregation received an official "warning" dated 12 July, accusing it of violating the law by conducting missionary

activity. Uzbekistan's Religion Law - in defiance of the country's international human rights obligations - bans individuals and religious communities from spreading their faith.

The congregation filed its response on 10 August during a meeting with Hamdambek Rasulov, who heads the section of the Justice Department of Tashkent Region responsible for registering religious organisations, and his assistant. Rasulov had been present on 2 April, when the Chirchik community marked the Memorial of Christ's death.

Then the Chirchik congregation received a second letter from the Department of Justice repeating the accusations of the earlier warning. "The letter more and less rejects the reply to the first warning," the Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18. "It was issued on Monday, 13 August, very soon after our response had been delivered. This was really quick." He said the community is now preparing its response. He added that the Justice Department official who signed both letters, B. Atamatov, has refused to discuss the second letter with members of the Chirchik congregation.

The second letter repeats the allegation that the Chirchik congregation delivered imported literature to the Fergana congregation in 2006 without government permission. "But importing the literature was done with the authorities' permission," the Jehovah's Witnesses insist.

The second letter repeats the demand for updated documents from the community, even though copies of these documents were delivered to Rasulov on 10 August along with the community's reply. "It could be that Atamatov was not aware that copies of these documents were delivered on 10 August."

"The second letter does not contain the heading 'warning'," the Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18. "Yet if the officials view this second letter also as an official second 'warning' to the registered Chirchik congregation, this may be a prerequisite for the authorities to deregister it."

The telephones at the Tashkent Region Justice Department went unanswered when Forum 18 rang on 21 August.

Government officials have repeatedly boasted that 2,222 religious communities of 16 faiths have state registration, though these figures are impossible to verify independently. Yet officials have repeatedly denied registration to other religious communities they do not like, including many Jehovah's Witness congregations, as well as Muslim communities outside the framework of the state-sponsored Muslim Board and Protestant congregations, especially those led by ethnic Uzbeks and Karakalpaks. Many Protestant congregations have also been stripped of registration in the past two years (see F18News 16 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=913).

Meanwhile Dilafruz Arziyeva, a 25-year-old Jehovah's Witness from Samarkand in central Uzbekistan, has failed in her attempt to have her sentence for "illegal religious teaching" overturned.

Arziyeva was tried on 6 June under Article 229-2 of the Criminal Code, which punishes "violation of the procedure for teaching religious beliefs". She was sentenced to two years' correctional labour, with 20 per cent of her income to be deducted and handed over to the state (see F18News 20 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=977).

On 14 August the regional court in Samarkand rejected her appeal, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. As happened at her trial, international observers were barred entry to the courtroom.

"Arziyeva's lawyer filed evidence of clear violations of the law," the Jehovah's Witnesses reported. "No one testified that Arziyeva taught religion." The prosecutor present at her appeal told the court not to change her sentence. He said that the Constitution does not forbid belief. He added that the literature of Jehovah's Witnesses has been examined and does not have any anti-state content. He then asked why Arziyeva did not read the literature at home and believe. He asked, "Why do you go out on the street and tell others about your belief?"

On 4 August, even before Arziyeva's appeal was heard and before her sentence had come into force, police telephoned her home and threatened to take her into custody if she did not surrender herself to them that day to begin her two-year sentence.

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that Arziyeva is still at her Samarkand home awaiting the imposition of the sentence. They say that as she is unemployed, it is unclear whether the police will assign her to a job or whether she will be required to find one herself. However, the Jehovah's Witnesses complain that the docking of one fifth of her wages over two years is like "a continuing fine each month".

Fellow Samarkand-based Jehovah's Witness Irfon Khamidov was sentenced on 14 May to two years in a labour camp for the same "crime". He lost his appeal against his sentence on 21 June. Pentecostal pastor Dmitry Shestakov (also known as David) is serving a four-year sentence in a labour camp in Navoi [Nawoiy] in central Uzbekistan for "leading an illegal congregation" and propagating "religious extremism". He denies the charges (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=982). (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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