

12 October 2007

UZBEKISTAN: Police still hunt "wanted" Protestant

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

Uzbekistan is still engaged in a nationwide manhunt for a "wanted" Protestant Christian, Makset Djabbarbergenov, police have told Forum 18 News Service. Asked why Djabbarbergenov is being hunted, a police officer stated that: "He gathers people in his home for religious activity. Let him believe on his own, but this is agitation and he shouldn't do it," the officer complained. "He doesn't have permission. He must have an official religious community to be able to do it." Asked why religious believers are not allowed to practice their faith freely he responded: "That's the law." A "wanted" poster issued nationwide states that "If the whereabouts of M. Djabbarbergenov are established I ask you to detain him and inform our office. We will send an escort immediately." Religious believers continue to be fined for unregistered religious activity, the latest known case being a group of five Seventh-day Adventists fined about two weeks wages for "unlawful" religious activity.

More than seven weeks after they circulated a wanted announcement nationwide, Uzbekistan's police are still hunting for Protestant Christian Makset Djabbarbergenov. "We issued the wanted announcement, but since then we have had no reports of his whereabouts," an officer at Nukus town police told Forum 18 News Service on 9 October from the capital of the Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] Autonomous Republic. The 27-year-old Djabbarbergenov, whose wife gave birth to their third child on 4 October, has gone into hiding to evade arrest.

Asked why Djabbarbergenov is being hunted, the Nukus police officer – who would not give his name – insisted to Forum 18 that the Protestant has broken the law. "He gathers people in his home for religious activity," the officer complained. "Let him believe on his own, but this is agitation and he shouldn't do it. He doesn't have permission. He must have an official religious community to be able to do it." Asked why religious believers are not allowed to practice their faith freely he responded: "That's the law." He then put the phone down.

The Russian-language wanted announcement for Djabbarbergenov, of which Forum 18 has received a copy, is headed "of special importance". Dated 20 August by hand, it is signed by the head of Nukus town police, Lieutenant-Colonel S. O. Hojanazarov. It states that Djabbarbergenov is wanted for an offence under Article 229-2 of the Criminal Code, which punishes "violation of the procedure for teaching religion" and carries a maximum term of three years' imprisonment.

Alongside what appears to be Djabbarbergenov's passport photo are personal details, including his date of birth and home address, and information that he moves around in a dark blue Lada car. "He is an active member of the 'Isa Masih' [Jesus Messiah] religious movement," it declares, in a reference to the way Protestants are described locally.

"In connection with the above," the announcement states, "I ask you to brief all the staff, the general public and other forces. If the whereabouts of M. Djabbarbergenov are established I ask you to detain him and inform our office. We will send an escort immediately. In the negative case, I ask you to check all available reports and put up information on the wanted man on 'wanted' notice boards and at checkpoints. I ask you to send information about the search to our office."

The "other forces" mentioned are possibly the National Security Service (NSS) secret police. The NSS has stepped up its covert and overt surveillance of religious communities in recent years (see F18News 5 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1014).

Djabbarbergenov has long faced harassment for his Christian work. He was among a group of Protestants who faced administrative charges after a raid in January on a private home in Nukus. The latest charges against him were lodged after a 9 August raid on his Nukus home by 30 police and prosecutor's office officials. Christian books, videotapes and CDs were seized, as well as money and his passport (see F18News 30 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1012).

Klara Alasheva, Karakalpakstan's First Deputy Justice Minister, refused to discuss Djabbarbergenov's case. "We are not involved with unregistered persons," she told Forum 18 from Nukus on 11 October. Asked why the local police interfere with peaceful religious activity she put the phone down. The telephone in Nukus of Nurula Jamolov, the Karakalpakstan representative of the government's Religious Affairs Committee, went unanswered on 11 October.

Officials who answered the phone on 11 October at the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent gave the usual responses to evade Forum 18's questions. One official said he could not hear what Forum 18 was saying. Another said Committee chairman Artyk Yusupov was away on a work trip and that he was only a trainee. He referred all enquiries to Committee specialist Begzot Kadyrov. Kadyrov's phone went unanswered.

The same day Forum 18 also tried to reach Ikrom Saipov, an official at the government's National Human Rights Centre involved in religious issues. But twice the person who answered his phone indicated that he could not hear Forum 18's questions, even though at Forum 18's end the line was very clear.

The authorities in Karakalpakstan, in north-western Uzbekistan, have adopted a very harsh approach to non-Muslim and non-Russian Orthodox religious communities. Over 20 Protestant congregations in the region, as well as Jehovah's Witness congregations, have been arbitrarily refused legal status, making all of their activity illegal in the eyes of the authorities. However, local officials have denied to Forum 18 that legal status has been removed or refused arbitrarily (see F18News 17 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1019).

Under Uzbekistan's highly restrictive religion law – and in defiance of the country's international human rights commitments – all unregistered religious activity is illegal and subject to administrative and criminal penalties.

On 29 August two members of the Peace Protestant Church in Nukus were fined the equivalents of a year's average wages to punish them for their activity with the unregistered congregation (see F18News 17 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1019).

Meanwhile, a group of five Adventists were fined by a court in the capital Tashkent on 27 September under the Code of Administrative Offences, for what the authorities claim was "unlawful" religious activity.

Adventists, who asked that the five men not be identified, told Forum 18 that two pastors were each fined 80,000 Sums (340 Norwegian Kroner, 44 Euros or 63 US Dollars) under Article 240, which punishes "violation of the laws on religious organisations". The Adventists say the fine represents about two weeks' wages for the men. The three others were given smaller fines under Article 241, which punishes "violation of the procedure for teaching religion". Adventists told Forum 18 that the five were due to lodge appeals against the fines on 11 October.

Adventist News Network reported that two men in plain clothes originally came to an Adventist home meeting and identified themselves as being from the Anti-terrorism Department. The two plain-clothes policemen also appeared in the court's first hearing on 26 September.

About 1,300 Adventists worship in 19 churches in Uzbekistan. Adventists also report that the congregation in Samarkand [Samarqand], stripped of its legal status in 2006, has still been unable to regain it. An official of the regional Justice Administration told Forum 18 last year that it had closed down the church, and the Korean-led Miral Protestant church, because they had persistently violated the religion law and the terms of their statutes (see F18News 19 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=784).

"The Samarkand church has tried to get its registration back, but despite good promises unfortunately it has not yet been restored," one Adventist told Forum 18 on 9 October. "Even though the church has its own prayer house it cannot meet now for worship. The prayer house lies unused."

The Uzbek authorities have repeatedly increased penalties in recent years for what they regard as "illegal" religious activities. Fines were sharply increased for a number of "offences" in amendments to the Criminal and Administrative Codes in late 2005 (see F18News 27 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=720). These were followed by further amendments to the Criminal and Administrative Codes which came into force in June 2006 instituting new penalties for the "illegal" production, storage, import and distribution of all unapproved religious literature (see F18News 29 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=805). (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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