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UZBEKISTAN: Asking about religious freedom violations is "stupid"

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Seven days after charismatic Christian Bobur Aslamov was detained during a raid on a religious meeting in Samarkand, his whereabouts remain unknown, one Protestant told Forum 18 News Service on 10 April. Church members fear he could face criminal charges. Police beat some church members during the raid. Police, secret police and Justice Department officials raided a Full Gospel congregation in Tashkent on 9 April, just before the Justice Department was due to rule on the congregation's long-stalled registration application. Five church members face administrative penalties. Amid renewed media attacks on religious communities, Baptists objected to regional television coverage of a police raid in March. "This programme aimed to stir up society against church members," they told Forum 18. "And all this is being done in defiance of the law." Begzot Kadyrov of the government's Religious Affairs Committee refused to discuss this and other recent harassment of religious communities. "Don't disturb us with stupid questions about religious liberties," he told Forum 18.

Several Protestants have been detained in separate raids on churches since the beginning of April, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Following a raid on a meeting of a charismatic Protestant church in a private home in the central city of Samarkand on 3 April, church member Bobur Aslamov remains in detention at an unknown location, one Protestant told Forum 18 on 10 April. And in a raid on a Full Gospel service in the capital Tashkent on the evening of 9 April, church leader Serik Kadyrov and four others were held in custody overnight before being freed, another Protestant told Forum 18 on 10 April. They now face administrative punishments, as do Protestants elsewhere in Uzbekistan.

The last few months have seen intense pressure across Uzbekistan on religious communities of a variety of faiths. Two imams and a local leader of the Muslim Board (Muftiate) in Namangan were sacked after the imams taught their faith to teenagers without state permission. In Samarkand Jehovah's Witnesses have faced particular pressure, with a coordinated series of raid and interrogations. Criminal charges were launched in late March against one local Jehovah's Witness, Olim Turaev, who faces up to eight years' imprisonment if convicted. Eleven others were fined and others assaulted (see F18News 9 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1111).

The Justice Ministry is also taking steps to expel the head of the Jewish community, Chief Rabbi Abe David Gurevich, from the country (see F18News 11 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1113).

Begzot Kadyrov, the leading specialist of the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent, refused to discuss the detention of the Protestants in early April or any of the other recent harassment of religious communities. "Don't disturb us with stupid questions about religious liberties," he told Forum 18 on 10 April. "How many times do I have to explain to you stupid people: write an official letter to the Foreign Ministry."

The 9 April raid on the Full Gospel service in Tashkent's Chilanzar District was conducted by the police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police, accompanied by officials of the district Hokimat (administration) and the city's Justice Department, Protestants told Forum 18. They complain that during the raid – which they described as "illegal" – 51 Christian books, including Bibles, as well as other Christian material was confiscated.

Serik Kadyrov and the four other church members held overnight at the Chilanzar District police station were accused of violating two Articles of the Code of Administrative Offences: Article 240, which punishes "violation of the law on religious organisations"; and Article 194, which punishes "failure to carry out the lawful demands of a police officer". The five were brought to court on 10 April, but the case was then postponed until 11 April. The five lodged official complaints against what they regard as "illegal" actions by the police.

The Full Gospel congregation had lodged a registration application with the Justice Department on July 2007. A decision was to be given on 11 April and it is possible the raid was timed to give the authorities a reason not to register the congregation.

During the 3 April raid on the charismatic church in Samarkand, police seized Christian literature, as well as a laptop computer,

several Protestants told Forum 18. Protestants reported that the police detained all those present, beating at least some of them. All but one – Aslamov - were soon freed. His case was then handed over to the secret police.

Church members initially believed that officials wanted to prosecute Aslamov under Articles 240 and 241 ("failing to observe the correct procedure for teaching religious beliefs") of the Code of Administrative Offences. However, one Protestant told Forum 18 that they are now afraid that the police might open a criminal case against him.

Nosir Berdiev, the head of Samarkand city Religious Affairs Department, told Forum 18 on 10 April that he was not aware of the 3 April raid and the detention of Aslamov. He took down Aslamov's name.

However, asked about why official pressure is mounting on religious communities in the city, given the recent raids on Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses, Berdiev responded that he did not know of any pressure. "We don't have any pressure on the religious communities here in Samarkand," he claimed.

Elsewhere, two members of the small Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Mubarek in the southern Kashkadarya Region, Vladimir Khanyukov and Said Tursunov, were summoned to face an administrative court on 8 April, Protestant sources who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18. The summons followed a raid on the church on 16 March and the two are facing punishment under Article 240 and Article 241 of the Code of Administrative Offences. However, in an unexpected move, the judge decided after reviewing the documentation to send the cases back to the police for further investigation.

Council of Baptists congregations refuse on principle to register with the authorities, insisting that registration leads to unwarranted state interference in their activity. This leaves them vulnerable to harassment by the authorities. Uzbek law – in defiance of the country's international human rights commitments – bans all unregistered religious activity.

At 10 o'clock in the morning on 16 March, a group of six police officers arrived to break up the Mubarek church's Sunday morning service. Leading the raid was the deputy head of the local police A. Saidov, church members told Forum 18. Accompanying the police was the chair of the local mahalla (neighbourhood) committee, R. Gaipov.

"Without any warning and without identifying themselves and without presenting any documents, they started to film," church members complained. After they insisted, the seven intruders identified themselves. When church members asked them not to interrupt the service, the six police officers withdrew, leaving only the cameraman, Yu. Salomov. They say he stayed to film the entire service, against the wishes of church members.

After the service, church members found the police waiting in the yard with two official witnesses and a man in civilian clothes who said he was from the Prosecutor's Office, but would not show any identity card.

Church members say the police went back into the house and began questioning the children about how often they come to church. They also confiscated six Bibles, 35 copies of the New Testament in Uzbek and Russian, as well as other books, magazines and audio-cassettes. They say police drew up an official record of the confiscated material but would not give them a copy. A camera crew then arrived from the regional television station and filmed the yard and inside the house where the church meets. They also tried to interview church members. Five hours after they arrived, the police, other officials and the television crew left.

Church members complained that a hostile television programme using footage filmed during the raid was shown on regional television on 23 March.

"It maintained that they had found banned literature, cassettes and discs with the believers and that parents were banning their children from watching television, using computers and forced them to go to services, thus depriving their children of a normal happy childhood," they told Forum 18 on 5 April. "The believers were also accused of conducting propaganda of their faith among the population. This programme aimed to stir up society against church members. And all this is being done in defiance of the law."

Church members point out that Uzbekistan's Constitution and international human rights conventions ban incitement to religious hatred and guarantee the right to practice a faith freely. They call for prayers and support so that not only they but all churches in Uzbekistan would be able to hold services, educate their children in their faith and preach their faith to others without obstruction. They also demanded the return of the confiscated literature.

Khanyukov was also singled out for criticism in an anonymous article published on 29 March in the local Russian-language paper Novosti Kashkadari. It complained that he had "launched widescale propaganda activity". "This is confirmed not only by the composition of those joining the praying – which include children – but the presence of an extensive library of printed, audio and video materials on a religious theme." It said 9,606 items had been removed from this "illegal" library. It said the church failed to abide by the law requiring religious communities to register and that the law-enforcement agencies and the court would be dealing with Kanyukhov.

In an earlier case, Eduard Kim, a member of a Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Fergana [Farghona], failed in his attempt

to have his punishment for unregistered religious activity overturned, a Protestant who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18. Kim was fined 372,600 Sums (1,468 Norwegian Kroner, 186 Euros or 287 US dollars) on 26 February for holding what the court said were "illegal religious meetings" in his house. This represents about nine months' average wages for the city (see F18News 12 March 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1099).

Kim lodged an appeal against the verdict, but on 17 March Judge A. Madalimov of Fergana Regional Criminal Appeal Court rejected the appeal.

A Seventh-day Adventist, Nadezhda Kozhina, was punished in the central town of Gulistan [Guliston] under the Code of Administrative Offences for conducting "missionary activity", Adventist sources told Forum 18 on 7 April. Missionary activity is illegal in Uzbekistan.

Last September an Adventist service in Tashkent was broken up and five of their leaders were the subsequently fined (see F18News 12 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1034). The Adventists report that their legal challenge to the fines has so far been unsuccessful, but has now reached the third legal level.

Ogoh, the weekly newspaper of the Tashkent branch of the Interior Ministry, reported on 29 February of moves by the State Customs Committee "to prevent the import of materials promoting religious extremism, separatism, fundamentalism as well as shamelessness". It reported that Tashkent city customs directorate's staff at the country's main international post office intercepted a parcel of 13 religious magazines, the Herald of Salvation, sent to a local citizen M. Sanafeyeva from Australia. "The Religious Affairs Committee under the Cabinet of Ministers said that the magazines contained missionary reports and it is not appropriate to bring them into the country," the paper reported.

Uzbekistan has long maintained strict censorship of all religious literature published in the country and imported into it. Customs officials have told Forum 18 that they open all parcels and send religious books to the Religious Affairs Committee for them to decide whether to allow them in or not (see F18News 24 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1039).

Like much of the recent coverage of religious issues in the state-run media, the Ogoh article and the Kashkadarya regional newspaper article and television broadcast on the Baptists leave ordinary people with the strong impression that religion is dangerous and must be controlled. Uzbekistan has witnessed a resurgent media campaign smearing religious communities. Government-supported media, such as the websites Press.uz.info and Gorizont.uz, have published a series of articles attacking and casting doubt on various religious communities.

Ironically, the state-sponsored media attacks on local religious communities coincided with a report from the Foreign Ministry's Jahon news agency on 31 March, condemning the Dutch film Fitna which, it said, "insults the religious feelings of Muslims". "Such hasty and irresponsible attacks undermine the fundamental principles of peaceful co-existence, run counter to the universally adopted norms of international law, morals and ethics, and cannot be justified by any motives and persuasions," the agency added. (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 on freedom of thought, conscience and belief 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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