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UZBEKISTAN: Raids, fines, literature confiscations, and police bullying of children

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Raids, fines and literature confiscations against religious minorities across Uzbekistan are continuing, Forum 18 News Service has found. One church raid was justified by a court as "anti-terrorist activity," although the police officer concerned was unable to specify to Forum 18 what threat the raid was supposed to stop. There are also reports of Protestant services in Uzbek – a state language – being barred and of a Protestant higher-education student being threatened with expulsion, unless he either renounces his faith or spies on his church for the NSS secret police. There has been no change in the status of Chief Rabbi Abe David Gurevich, who is faced with the possibility of deportation. Police and a schoolteacher have also directly threatened the children of Baptists at a school, telling them that if they attended churches they would be put into prison. The children were also interrogated about what their parents taught them, what books they read, what films they watched, what music they listened to and what songs they sang, and whether they liked this.

Raids and fines against religious minorities across Uzbekistan are continuing, Forum 18 News Service has found. In one violation of children's human rights, police and a schoolteacher directly threatened the children of Baptists at a school, telling them that if they attended churches they would be put into prison.

The authorities have also banned Protestant services in Uzbek, a Protestant told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 23 April. Even though Uzbek is a state language, worship in the language has also in the past attracted state hostility (see F18News 9 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=890).

Chief Rabbi Abe David Gurevich – who faces moves to oust him from Uzbekistan after his accreditation renewal was denied – told Forum 18 on 29 May that there has been no change in his status, or the possibility of his being deported (see F18News 1 May http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1124).

Along with the latest raids, higher education students in religious communities may also be being targeted. Protestant sources told Forum 18 that a student was told by the National Security Service (NSS) in early April that, if he did not renounce his faith or agree to report to them on activities within his church, he would be expelled from his college.

The NSS invests great effort in spying on religious communities (see F18News 5 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1014). Christian university students in Karakalpakstan have long been targeted by the authorities (see F18News 26 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=719). Hare Krishna students in Khorezm region, also in north-western Uzbekistan, have been targeted as well (see F18News 22 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=368).

The latest attacks on religious minorities coincided with a broadcast by state-run TV of a film inciting intolerance of religious minorities and freedom of thought, conscience and belief. Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Presbyterians and Methodists were all accused of conducting unspecified "illegal missionary activities," which were described as "a global problem along with religious dogmatism, fundamentalism, terrorism and drug addiction." Sharing beliefs with others is a criminal offence in Uzbekistan, in defiance of international human rights standards (see F18News 23 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1133).

Elsewhere in Uzbekistan, fines continue for unregistered religious activity which is – against international human rights standards – an offence. In the southern town of Mubarek north-west of Karshi [Qarshi], the Criminal Court on 6 May fined two members of the town's unregistered Baptist church, Baptists told Forum 18 on 10 May. The judge had – unusually – earlier sent both cases back to the police for further investigation.

However, Sayid Tursunov was fined 372,600 Soms (1,430 Norwegian Kroner, 180 Euros and 280 US Dollars) and Vladimir Khanyukov was fined 279,450 Soms (1,070 Norwegian Kroner, 135 Euros and 210 US Dollars). Both were fined under the Administrative Code's Articles 240, part 1 (breaking the Religion Law) and 241. This latter article punishes "teaching religious

doctrines without specialist religious education and without the permission of an agency of the central administration of a religious organisation, and equally teaching religious doctrines in a private capacity."

Both were forcefully stopped by police while going to work that morning and then taken direct to the court. "Our brothers were not given a chance to complain in the court against the actions of the police," Baptists complained. No court documents on the case were given to the two accused. The court also decided to hand confiscated religious literature, audio cassettes and other materials to the state Religious Affairs Committee, and did not provide any documentation on this to the owners (see F18News 10 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1112).

Church members had earlier complained about the police interrogating children during the raid, and about regional TV broadcasting a hostile programme using footage filmed during the raid. However, the court justified the raid as "anti-terrorist activity." The church has also written to President Islam Karimov, in a letter which Forum 18 has seen, about the unlawful actions of District Police Captain K. Muminov and Police Inspector Musalamov against their children.

Captain Muminov had earlier threatened the Baptists that he would first take measures against them and then "take care of" their children's education. On 24 April, Muminov and Inspector Musalamov arrived at 11:30 a.m. at the children's school. He then – without the knowledge or permission of their parents - took the children out of the school premises to question them under pressure. The children were asked what their parents taught them, what books they read, what films they watched, what music they listened to and what songs they sang. Both policemen then asked the children whether they liked this kind of upbringing.

Yelena Tursunova, the wife of Tursunov, complained to the court that Captain Muminov had forced their daughter to write a "confession" against her parents. Tursunova also complained that, after Muminov left the school, B. Anaeva (the Deputy Headteacher) had deliberately scared the children. She went to her daughter's class and told them that if they attended churches they would be put into prison. None of her complaints were considered by the court, the Baptists stated.

Captain Muminov denied all claims of bullying and intimidation to Forum 18 on 22 May. "I only told the school's Deputy Head to warn the children against the dangers of those groups," he claimed. However, he also would not specify what danger the Baptists posed – despite the court having justified the church raid as "anti-terrorist activity". Muminov stated that he was authorised to take Tursunov and Khanyukov to court, but would not comment on the Baptists' other statements.

Prosecutions for unregistered religious activity continue elsewhere. An official of the Syrdarya [Sidare] regional Criminal Court was reported by the press-uz.info state agency on 15 April as stating that four Seventh-day Adventists from Gulistan [Guliston] in central Uzbekistan had been fined. Nadezhda Kozhina, Rita Madaminova, Eduard Yugay and Viktor Klimov all held unregistered meetings in their homes (see F18News 10 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1112).

Kozhina, the 53 year old leader of the Adventists in Guliston, was accused of illegally spreading Adventist teachings, the official stating that this was "tantamount to illegal missionary activity." Kozhina had held weekly meetings in her home, attended by Russians, Tatars, Uzbeks, and Koreans, at which religious literature had been read and there had been discussion of how to be involved in missionary activity.

Mamedali Karimov, head of Syrdarya regional Religious Affairs Committee, refused to discuss the Adventist case. Asked by Forum 18 on 23 May why Adventists could not get registration in Syrdarya, Karimov said that religious organisations had no problem in gaining legal status in Uzbekistan. He promised to answer Forum 18's questions about the Adventists in writing, but has not until now replied.

Following an earlier raid, the Navoi [Nawoiy] Criminal Court in central Uzbekistan has fined two members of the town's unregistered Baptist Church, local Baptists Forum 18 on 12 May. Alisher Abdullaev, was sentenced on 25 April under article 240 of the Administrative Code and fined 1,043,250 Soms (4,010 Norwegian Kroner, 510 Euros and 790 US Dollars) with confiscation of 40 books seized (see F18News 29 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1122).

On 24 April, 18 days after the raid, Senior Lieutenant Zafar Buranov of the Criminal Investigation Unit went to Abdullaev's work place. "Buranov told Abdullaev to follow him to the court to receive back the books seized from him," a Baptist source reported. Abdullaev was kept waiting for the day and the next day was then sentenced. Judge Tahir Safarov stated that he could have fined Abdullaev double the amount, but he had decided to "spare" him.

When Forum 18 called Senior Lieutenant Buranov on 22 May, the man who answered the phone stated he was Buranov's superior. "The activity of the organisation to which Abdullaev belongs is prohibited in the territory of Uzbekistan," he said. He refused to explain the reasons of the prohibition. "For further questions please, call the court," he stated.

In another case, on 23 April the Karshi [Qarshi] city Criminal Court fined Sergey Shadybaev and Andrei Serdyuk, members of the unregistered Full Gospel Church, 186,300 Soms (715 Norwegian Kroner, 90 Euros and 140 US Dollars) and 55,890 Soms (215 Norwegian Kroner, 30 Euros and 40 US Dollars) respectively. They were charged with violating the Administrative Code's articles 201 (breaking the law on how an organisation should operate and on holding public rallies, street marches and demonstrations), 240

and 241. Judge Abdukhafis Boybilov on 22 May refused to talk to Forum 18 about the case, or why he had ordered 62 Christian books which are legal in Uzbekistan to be confiscated. Such legal material – imported through severe censorship – is often confiscated (see F18News 24 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1039).

Bobur Aslamov, a charismatic Protestant from Samarkand [Samarqand] whose whereabouts were unknown and whose case had been handed to the NSS secret police, has now been fined. Under the Administrative Code he was fined 200,000 Soms (770 Norwegian Kroner, 100 Euros and 150 US Dollars) and freed on 10 April after being detained for 7 days in prison, Protestants told Forum 18 (see F18News 10 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1112).

In another case, the Chairman of the Chilanzar district Criminal Court in the capital Tashkent, F. Atabaev, upheld on 2 May a fine the court imposed on members of the Eskhol Full Gospel Protestant Church members. Church members had hoped that the court would reverse its decision, as police had falsified documents and witnesses' signatures (see F18News 29 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1122). (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>.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
[f18news @ editor.forum18.org](mailto:f18news@editor.forum18.org)

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY