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UZBEKISTAN: Fifteen year sentence for reading "prohibited" Christian literature?

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

Aimurat Khayburahmanov, a Protestant from Nukus in Karakalpakstan, faces criminal trial later in July on charges of teaching religion without official approval and establishing or participating in a "religious extremist" organisation, the investigator in the case Bahadur Jakbaev told Forum 18 News Service. The latter charge carries a penalty for those found guilty of between five and fifteen years' imprisonment. Justifying the accusation of extremism, Jakbaev said that Khayburahmanov gathers people in his home to read "prohibited" Christian literature. Jakbaev said the Bible was not banned, but refused to specify what the prohibited books were. Protestants told Forum 18 Khayburahmanov's body is "covered with bruises" from beatings administered in isolation cell since his 14 June arrest. Meanwhile, the head of Uzbekistan's Jewish community, Chief Rabbi Abe David Gurevich, finally left Uzbekistan on 5 June after the Justice Ministry refused to renew his accreditation. "His return to the country depends on whether or not he will get a visa from the Uzbek authorities," a Jewish representative told Forum 18 from Tashkent.

A Protestant from the Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] Region of north-west Uzbekistan, Aimurat Khayburahmanov, faces criminal trial "in ten to twenty days", the investigator in the case Police Major Bahadur Jakbaev told Forum 18 News Service from the regional capital Nukus on 11 July. One of the two charges he faces – establishing or participating in a "religious extremist" organisation - carries a penalty of up to fifteen years' imprisonment. Jakbaev denied reports from local Protestants reaching Forum 18 that Khayburahmanov has been beaten in prison since his 14 June arrest. He claimed his health is "fine".

Karakalpakstan Region operates a particularly harsh religious policy, with all non state-controlled Muslim and non-Russian Orthodox activity being a criminal offence (see eg. F18News 17 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1019).

Asked what element in Khayburahmanov's activity characterises him as an "extremist", Jakbaev told Forum 18 that he gathered people in his home and read "prohibited" Christian literature, as the experts from the Karakalpakstan Religious Affairs Committee determined. "The Bible is not prohibited in Uzbekistan but there are Christian books that are," explained Jakbaev. Asked which "prohibited" books Khayburahmanov had been reading, Jakbaev refused to specify, merely repeating that the Religious Affairs Committee expert analysis had found them to be banned. He insisted that imprisonment is not too harsh a punishment for reading "prohibited" Christian books.

The import and production of all religious literature in Uzbekistan - including the Bible and the Koran - has long been and remains under severe state control (see F18News 1 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1153).

Jakbaev of the Police said that Khayburahmanov has been charged under two articles of the Criminal Code: Article 229-2, which punishes teaching religion without proper education or permission with a sentence of up to three years' imprisonment; and Article 244-2, part 1, which punishes establishing or participating in a "religious extremist" organisation with a sentence of between five and fifteen years' imprisonment.

Local Protestants believe Khayburahmanov is being prosecuted to allow the police later to charge another Nukus-based Protestant, Jandos Kuandikov. "Actually the police are mainly trying to put Jandos in prison," one Protestant who knows Khayburahmanov told Forum 18 on 11 July. "Aimurat would then be considered as Jandos' accomplice."

The Protestant reported that the police did not allow any visits to Khayburahmanov until two days earlier. "I heard that Aimurat was beaten many times and forced to write a statement implicating Jandos," he said. Khayburahmanov's body was "covered with bruises" from beatings, the Protestant said he was told.

Jakbaev, the investigator, denied that the police had not allowed visits to Khayburahmanov in the isolation cell. "His friend and father just came to visit him," he told Forum 18.

Eight police officers raided Kuandikov's home in Nukus on 14 June, claiming to be conducting an identity check. Although

Kuandikov was not at home, Khayburahmanov was there, helping the Kuandikov family prepare their contribution for a local wedding. After Kuandikov returned to his house, he asked the police to show documents authorising the identity check. The house search lasted until 9 pm. Police confiscated books, notebooks, videocassettes of weddings and a computer. They also took Kuandikov's passport. Kuandikov, Khayburahmanov and several relatives were then taken to the police station, where they were questioned. All but Khayburahmonov were freed at 1 am the next day (see F18News 27 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1150).

Forum 18 tried to find out from Karakalpakstan's Religious Affairs Committee why some Christian books are prohibited in Uzbekistan, but the phones at the committee went unanswered on 11 July. The man who answered the phone at the government's Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent on 11 July refused to answer any questions about Khayburahmanov's arrest and forthcoming trial. He told Forum 18 that they do not give interviews over the phone, and put the phone down.

One Protestant told Forum 18 from Nukus on 11 July that Kuandikov's passport, computer and other confiscated property have still been not returned to him. The passport had been confiscated by a police officer named Fayzulla (last name unknown). "He asked Fayzulla for his passport back," the Protestant reported. "But Fayzulla told him that Bahadur Jakbaev, the investigator in Aimurat's case, has it." The Protestant said that Kuandikov feels he is being "kicked around like a football" by the authorities.

Jakbaev claims that he has already given Kuandikov's passport to the local police. "Kuandikov should contact his local police and talk to them," he told Forum 18. Asked whether criminal charges are being brought against Kuandikov as well, Jakbaev said that only administrative charges are being brought against him. He refused to say what exactly the charges are.

Meanwhile, Protestants who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18 that several members of a Protestant congregation in the central city of Samarkand [Samarqand] have been facing renewed harassment from officials. They report that officials from the Prosecutor's Office have visited church members' homes since early July, threatened them and summoned them for questioning. "As they never present their summonses in writing the church members refuse to go," one Protestant told Forum 18. "But there's no guarantee that they won't seize people on the street."

The head of Uzbekistan's Jewish community, Chief Rabbi Abe David Gurevich, finally left Uzbekistan on 5 June after the Justice Ministry refused to renew the accreditation for him and his wife Malka to work in the country. Their visas also expired. "His return to the country depends on whether or not he will get a visa from the Uzbek authorities," a Jewish representative told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 14 July.

Russian-born Gurevich, who carries a United States and an Israeli passport, had worked in Uzbekistan since 1990. The refusal to allow him to continue working there came despite an appeal to the Justice Ministry signed in April by nearly ninety members of Tashkent's Jewish community (see F18News 1 May http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1124). (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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