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UZBEKISTAN: Prisoner of conscience numbers increase

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

Following an alleged "anti-terror cleaning" raid, two Jehovah's Witnesses have been jailed, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Abdubannob Ahmedov was sentenced to a four year prison term and Sergey Ivanov to three and a half years. Four other Jehovah's Witnesses were also punished, Nazira Rahmanova being fined nearly a million Uzbek Sums. Svetlana Shevchenko, Aziza Usmanova and Raya Litvinenko were each given suspended three-year sentences. Court officials refused to tell Forum 18 the exact terms of the sentences, but stressed that Ahmedov was sentenced to "deprivation of liberty", not prison. This means he will probably serve his sentence in a labour camp. Following the anti-terror police raid, the authorities admit that literature found contains neither an "anti-constitutional tendency", nor calls to extremism. However, they claim that the materials "contradict the principles of tolerance, inter-religious accord and the laws of the Republic".

The number of imprisoned Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan has doubled from two to four with the sentencing on 23 July of two men in the town of Margilan in Fergana [Farghona] Region to terms of imprisonment, officials at Margilan Town Criminal Court and the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 News Service. Abdubannob Ahmedov was sentenced to a four year term and Sergei Ivanov to three and a half years to punish them for "illegal" religious activity. Three female Jehovah's Witnesses were each given suspended sentences, while another female Jehovah's Witness was given a massive fine. The sentences result from an "anti-terrorist" raid on the home of a Jehovah's Witness in Margilan in March.

The 31-year-old Ahmedov lives in Margilan, is unmarried and works in a warehouse. The 21-year-old Ivanov lives in Fergana, is also unmarried and works as a carpenter in a kindergarten.

The number of religious minority prisoners of conscience may soon increase further. One Protestant Christian, Aimurat Khayburahmanov, is awaiting criminal trial in Nukus, the capital of Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] Region of north-west Uzbekistan. Arrested on 14 June, he has been accused of "religious extremism" and has been beaten while in pre-trial detention. The investigator in the case told Forum 18 that his trial was expected to begin before the end of July (see F18News 14 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1158).

The Margilan sentences follow earlier prosecutions of Jehovah's Witnesses in Samarkand [Samarqand], when Olim Turaev was sentenced to four years in a labour camp (see F18News 29 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1122). In May of this year, police raided Jehovah's Witnesses in Navoi [Nawoiy], beating at least one. Several were fined under the Code of Administrative Offences (see F18News 21 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1176).

"The authorities have been hunting such meetings – at least in some parts of the country," one Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18 on 29 July. "First there was Navoi, then Samarkand, and now Margilan. There is a clear determination to secure big sentences."

The Jehovah's Witness pointed out that only one Jehovah's Witness congregation in Uzbekistan – in Chirchik near Tashkent - now has registration, after the stripping of registration from the congregation in the city of Fergana in August 2006 (see F18News 5 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=837). "The only freedom our people have in Uzbekistan is to meet in one building in Chirchik."

No officials in the capital Tashkent were available to explain why pressure on Jehovah's Witnesses is mounting. An official of the government's Religious Affairs Committee told Forum 18 on 29 July that its Acting Chairman Artybek Yusupov was out of the office for the next three days. The official referred Forum 18 to Committee Deputy Chairman Begzod Kodyrov. However, his telephone went unanswered.

An official at the government-sponsored National Human Rights Centre in Tashkent told Forum 18 on 29 July that Ikrom Saipov, who handles religious affairs, was not in the office and that no-one else could answer Forum 18's questions.

The trial of the two men and four women began on 16 July under Judge Mahmudjon Tojiev, with the six defending themselves. All six were charged with violating Article 216 of Uzbekistan's Criminal Code, which punishes "illegal organisation of public associations or religious organisations" with a penalty of up to five years' imprisonment. Ahmedov was also accused of violating

Article 216-1 of the Criminal Code, which punishes inducement to participate in an illegal religious organisation with a penalty of up to three years' imprisonment. However, the court removed this accusation and, like the other five, Ahmedov was punished solely under Article 216.

The 29 June indictment, of which Forum 18 has seen a copy, notes that the criminal case against the six was instigated on 2 April. The 12-page Russian-language indictment alleges that the six had been informed of the stripping of registration by the Justice Department from the Jehovah's Witness community in the city of Fergana in August 2006. It alleged that in the wake of this the six had engaged in a "criminal agreement [sgovor]". It said that they had committed a crime under Article 216 "by their criminal actions expressed in the renewal of the previously-halted activity of the illegal religious organisation of Jehovah's Witnesses and in their active participation in its activity as an illegal religious organisation".

The indictment notes that Ahmedov was involved in an illegal 10 March meeting, for which he was brought to account under the Code of Administrative Offences. It said that the group were then detected during a raid on the home of Nazira Rahmanova on the evening of 12 March by anti-terrorist town and regional police, which found that the six were "illegally" meeting. Those present were questioned about whether they were Jehovah's Witnesses, when they had joined the group and whether they ever spoke about their faith to others. Literature, videos and CDs "containing propaganda for the ideology of the illegal Jehovah's Witness religious organisation" were confiscated from Rahmanova and from the bags of her visitors.

The raid was billed as part of "special measures" in an "Anti-terror-Tozalash" ("Anti-terror-Cleaning") campaign. Accompanying the police was Sharofatkhon Allovidinova, the religious affairs official from the committee of the Turon mahalla (urban district). Such operations are frequently conducted against anyone the government is suspicious of.

The indictment adds that two expert analyses conducted on the confiscated material in May found no "anti-constitutional tendency", nor calls to extremism. However, the analyses claimed to find that the materials "contradict the principles of tolerance, inter-religious accord and the laws of the Republic of Uzbekistan".

The indictment reveals that the police were brought in by Sanobar Jumaniyozova, head of the mahalla committee. She complained that during the 2007 presidential election, Rahmanova and her family had said the election did not concern them and that they would not vote, "thereby showing their indifferent attitude to the fate of the people and country". She also said she had heard the Jehovah's Witnesses were "illegally" meeting again on 12 March and wrote a note to the police, who acted the same day. The mahalla committees are part of Uzbekistan's extensive web of state control of its citizens (see F18News 27 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936).

Judge Tojiev handed down his verdict on 23 July. The men were taken into custody directly from the courtroom immediately after their terms of imprisonment were announced. Of the women, Nazira Rahmanova was fined 931,500 Sums (3,640 Norwegian Kroner, 456 Euros, or 710 US Dollars). The other three, Svetlana Shevchenko, Aziza Usmanova and Raya Litvinenko, were each given suspended three-year sentences.

Officials at the court – who did not give their names – refused to tell Forum 18 on 29 July the exact terms of the sentences. They merely confirmed the length of the sentences and stressed that Ahmedov was sentenced to "deprivation of liberty", not prison. This means he will probably serve his sentence in a labour camp. Officials refused to specify where Ivanov will serve his sentence. Nor would they say what conditions are attached to the three women's suspended sentences, such as the docking of pay.

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that throughout the court proceedings the five refused to admit their guilt in violating any laws but tried to explain what they believe. "In the beginning of the hearing on 16 July, those who were called to give testimony against them in fact talked in their favour, and Judge Tojiev appeared to be favourably disposed," they report. However, they say the representative of the Fergana Region Justice Department made "a lengthy statement" against Jehovah's Witnesses, explaining how their religious organisation in the city of Fergana was liquidated in 2006, which he insisted therefore banned all Jehovah's Witness activity.

"When the hearing continued after some delays next day, the judge's disposition appeared to have changed as if he had been put under pressure to rule against the Witnesses," Jehovah's Witnesses added. "Further he was hesitant and let the prosecution and police rule the proceedings without following the protocol." They report that new witnesses who had not been involved in the investigation were called. "Some of them gave false testimonies as they did not even know the defendants and some gave evidence about other Witnesses who were not among the defendants."

Officials at Fergana Region Justice Department – who would not give their names – refused to discuss with Forum 18 on 29 July why they had stripped the Fergana city Jehovah's Witness congregation of registration in 2006 and why their representative had spoken against the group in court.

The Jehovah's Witnesses also complained about the local media, which tried to acquire interviews from those present in the courtroom.

Of the other religious minority prisoners of conscience, Pentecostal Pastor Dmitry Shestakov was in May 2007 sentenced to four years in a labour camp for illegal religious activity and distributing religious material. Also sentenced in May 2007 was Jehovah's Witness Irfon Khamidov, who is serving a two-year labour camp sentence for "illegal religious teaching" (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=982).

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that Turaev is now being held in prison camp No. 69/74 in Guzalkent in Samarkand Region. They report that from 6 July his wife was allowed to see him for three days.

Jehovah's Witnesses also report that at the end of June, Khamidov was moved to a prison camp in Jizak. "Maybe that is connected with the fact that the Court received a petition for amnesty from him and they do not want to act upon this," one Jehovah's Witness speculated to Forum 18.

Other Jehovah's Witnesses serving suspended or corrective labour sentences have had a large part of their salaries deducted and handed to the state. (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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