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UZBEKISTAN: Imams arrested and Protestant freed

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A Justice Ministry official in Karakalpakstan has confirmed to Forum 18 News Service that several imams have been arrested in the region in north-western Uzbekistan in recent months. However, it remains unclear whether the authorities' accusations against the imams of financial irregularity or drugs possession are true or an excuse to punish them for their religious activity. "No imams were arrested in Karakalpakstan," an official of the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent told Forum 18 categorically. Other Muslims in Karakalpakstan have reportedly been arrested for reading the works of Al-Bukhari, a noted Islamic scholar whose works can no longer be published in Uzbekistan. Surveillance of mosques increased during Ramadan. Meanwhile, Protestant Christian Aimurat Khayburahmanov was freed by a Karakalpak court on 26 September after religious extremism charges were dropped. "I thank everybody who thought about me while I was in custody and gave their support," he told Forum 18. In Fergana a Baptist was fined for giving out Christian literature, which has been ordered destroyed. In Tashkent, nine Baptists are awaiting administrative trial for holding an open-air baptism.

Mystery surrounds the fate of imams arrested since the summer in Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpog'iston] Region in north-western Uzbekistan. One official has confirmed the arrests to Forum 18 News Service, but it remains unclear whether all have been tried and whether they are innocent or guilty of accusations against them of embezzlement and drug possession. Meanwhile, the criminal trial of Protestant Christian Aimurat Khayburahmanov was ended on 26 September and he was freed from the courtroom, as he told Forum 18 the same day from Nukus, the capital of Karakalpakstan. He was released after Judge Yelena Medetova at Nukus City Criminal Court dropped religious extremism charges and amnestied him on the remaining charges of teaching religion without official approval.

The judge's decision to drop the accusation against Khayburahmanov under Article 244 part 2 came as a surprise. It remains unclear why he was freed.

Khayburahmanov could not hide his happiness over his release after more than three months' detention. "I thank everybody who thought about me while I was in custody and gave their support," he told Forum 18. Other local Protestants echoed his joy to Forum 18.

Khayburahmanov was arrested on 14 June. His trial began on 15 August at Nukus City Criminal Court under Judge Medetova. He was tried under Article 229-2, which punishes teaching religion without official approval, and Article 244 part 2, which punishes establishing or participating in a "religious extremist" organisation with a sentence of up to 15 years' imprisonment. The court was expected to pass sentence on 21 August, but on that date the trial was postponed. Judge Medetova has repeatedly refused to talk to Forum 18 about the case (see F18News 22 September 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1191).

Meanwhile, few Muslims or officials have been prepared to talk to Forum 18 about the arrests of imams in Karakalpakstan in recent months. It remains unclear whether the authorities' accusations of financial irregularity or drugs possession are true or an excuse to punish them for their religious activity. The region has about 50 officially-approved mosques under the control of the government-controlled Muslim Board.

Umida Niyazova, a human rights advocate, told Forum 18 from Berlin on 19 September that before she left the country three months earlier she began investigating the arrests. "Because I had no way of travelling to the region, I could not independently identify who had been arrested, when and for what." Niyazova said she could not complete the investigation since she was forced to leave the country. She added that she had received reports that about 30 imams had been arrested in Karakalpakstan.

Ilhom-khodji, the imam of Nasimjon-bobo mosque in Ellikaly District, was arrested on 20 August, independent news website Uznews.net reported on 29 August. Ilhom-khodji was accused of failing to transfer 90 million Sums, collected in his mosque as offerings, to the appropriate bank.

The news agency reported that this was the second such recent case on the same charges in Karakalpakstan. The law-enforcement agencies arrested Abdurakhmon-eshon, the imam of the Sulton Uways – bobo mosque in Beruni District. He was accused of appropriating 100 million Soms. The agency added that Kuchkar Bekimbetov, an imam in Amudarya region, was also arrested and

sentenced to fifteen years in jail recently by the Supreme Court of Karakalpakstan "for keeping 20 kg of narcotic drugs in his home".

Asked on 19 September about the arrests of these and other imams, Alimbetov Kydyrniyaz, the Chief Kazi of Karakalpakstan, referred Forum 18 to Ikrom Shirmiyazov, the imam of the main mosque of Nukus. He said he could better explain about the arrests of the imams. Reached by Forum 18 the same day, Imam Shirmiyazov said he did not have time to talk. Asked whether he could confirm the arrests of the imams, he put down the phone. Other imams in Karakalpakstan also declined to discuss the arrests with Forum 18.

Yernazar Duszhanov of Karakalpakstan's Justice Ministry's Department for the Registration of Religious Organisations told Forum 18 he was informed about the cases but had not received the court decisions on those individuals yet. "I am not sure the court cases are over, otherwise we would have received the court decisions," he told Forum 18 on 17 September from Nukus. He claimed that officials do not investigate the financial activity of imams. Duszhanov said he could not comment on whether or not two of the imams were arrested solely for alleged embezzlement and referred all enquiries to the city criminal court.

An official at Nukus City Criminal Court, who did not give his name, took down Forum 18's questions about the cases on 17 September and then put the phone down without any explanation. Forum 18 was unable to reach any officials at Karakalpakstan's Religious Affairs Committee.

Despite Duszhanov's confirmation of at least some arrests, an official at the government's Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent, who would not give his name, categorically denied any arrests to Forum 18 on 17 September. "No imams were arrested in Karakalpakstan," he insisted.

Vasila Inoyatova, a Tashkent-based independent human rights advocate, told Forum 18 that she believes the imams in Karakalpakstan are the victims of the authorities. "It has become a tradition in Uzbekistan to secretly plant money, drugs and bullets to arrest people," she pointed out. She said she has observed numerous court cases in Uzbekistan where opposition, civil society and religious representatives have similarly been accused of embezzlement.

Quoting sources in Karakalpakstan, Uznews also reported that during the summer over 50 Muslims were arrested in Turtkul District on charges of extremism. It said they were accused of reading the books of Al-Bukhari, the compiler of what Sunni Muslims regard as one of the most authoritative collections of the sayings of the Islamic prophet Mohammed, and also the books of Muhammad Sadik Muhammad Yusuf, the former Mufti of Uzbekistan and Central Asia.

Imam Obidkhon Nazarov, the former imam of Tashkent's Tukhtaboi mosque who had to flee Uzbekistan because of threats to his life, complained to Forum 18 in July that the authorities were refusing to allow the works of Al-Bukhari, among other Islamic authors, to be published. Extremely strict censorship is imposed on religious literature of all faiths (see F18News 1 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1153).

Duszhanov of Karakalpakstan's Justice Ministry could not tell Forum 18 whether the books of Al-Bukhari and Muhammad Yusuf are banned in Uzbekistan. "I am not a religious person - I do not know what is written in those books."

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).

The crackdown on mosques in Karakalpakstan came as Muslims faced tighter controls from the authorities during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, which began in early September and is now ending. Police points were established within mosques in Tashkent and at least some other cities, Muslims told Forum 18. One Tashkent resident reported seeing cars parked close to the entrance of mosques, with plain clothed persons sitting inside and watching the people coming in and going out. "We heard that an instruction was given by the Interior Ministry to the police to mingle with people outside and inside the mosques and also during prayers," the resident told Forum 18. Foreign news agencies covering Central Asia, including ferghana.ru, reported similar accounts.

However, a man who did not give his name but identified himself as the assistant of Usman Alemov, Uzbekistan's Chief Mufti, denied that police points were opened at mosques. "Nothing like that has happened, and it is totally untrue," he told Forum 18 Uzbekistan's Spiritual Office of Muslims on 16 September. The official at the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent also categorically denied police surveillance of mosques.

The Uzbek authorities have long kept religious communities of a variety of faiths under close scrutiny, which includes overt surveillance and covert spying on their activity (see F18News 5 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1014).

Elsewhere in Uzbekistan, punishments continue to be imposed under the Administrative Code for peaceful religious activity. Fergana [Farghona] City Criminal Court, presided over by Judge Shukhrat Akhmedov, on 13 September fined local Baptist Aleksandr Avdeev 208,650 Soms (907 Norwegian Kroner, 109 Euros or 154 US Dollars). He was found guilty of violating Article

184 of Uzbekistan's Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes the distribution of materials promoting "religious extremism, separatism or fundamentalism".

Baptists told Forum 18 that Avdeev was summoned to the city court on 13 September, and he was allowed to come with four co-believers. They say the trial, which lasted just ten minutes, took place in Judge Akhmedov's office.

District police arrested Avdeev on 30 August during an "Anti-terror-Tozalash" ("Anti-terror-Cleaning") operation, as he was offering Christian books to passers-by on the streets to read free of charge. Avdeev was taken to the police station, forced to write a statement, and all his religious literature was confiscated, Baptists told Forum 18.

The court decision recorded that 33 religious books were seized from Avdeev. The decision claimed that Avdeev "without proper permit passed out books in the Uzbek language". The court ruled that all the confiscated books are to be destroyed.

Judge Akhmedov's assistant, who did not give his name, insisted that the books have not yet been destroyed. "The Baptists' complaint will be considered by the Fergana regional court first," he told Forum 18 from Fergana on 29 September. "Then a new decision will be made on the future of the books."

Jehovah's Witnesses in the town of Margilan were raided in March as part of a similar "Anti-terror-Tozalash" ("Anti-terror-Cleaning") operation. Two men were subsequently sentenced to prison terms, while three more were given suspended sentences (see F18News 29 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1164).

Meanwhile, Bektemir district Police of Tashkent city detained nine Baptists on 28 September, a Protestant who asked not to be indentified for fear of reprisals told Forum 18. The Baptists had just held a baptism of their new members in a local river when twelve officers of the Regular, Criminal and Secret Police arrived.

The detained Baptists were taken to the Bektemir district Police station. The Baptists refused to write statements or sign any papers, the Protestant told Forum 18. Dmitri Belan, a 45-year-old church member, was beaten by officers of the Bektemir criminal Police, the Protestant added. Belan was taken to the Old Tashkent Hospital at 9 pm, where he was diagnosed with soft tissue bruising of the face.

Administrative charges are being prepared against the Baptists under Uzbekistan's Administrative Code Article 201, which punishes violating the procedure for holding mass events, and Article 240, which punishes violating the law on religious organisations.

Major Odil Opirov of the Bektemir District Police, who also participated in the operation, was not available to talk on 30 September. Opirov's assistant, who did not give his name, confirmed the detentions but refused to talk about the case or the beating of Belan. He asked Forum 18 to wait on the phone while he reached Opirov on his cell phone, but Opirov declined to talk to Forum 18. The assistant stressed that the Baptists had been released but refused to clarify how long they had been held. He confirmed that administrative charges would be brought against them.

Both Avdeev in Fergana and the church members in Tashkent belong to the Council of Churches Baptists, who reject registration on principle in all the former Soviet republics where they operate.

In central Uzbekistan, the Samarkand [Samarqand] Regional Criminal Court turned down on 9 September a renewed appeal by Parvina Khodjaeva, a local Protestant Christian. Khodjaeva was fined 104,325 Soms (410 Norwegian Kroner, 51 Euros, or 78 US Dollars) by Samarkand City Criminal Court on 17 May for violation of the procedure for teaching religious doctrines. Samarkand Regional Criminal Court upheld the City Court's decision on 17 July (see F18News 8 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1169). (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=1170.

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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