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UZBEKISTAN: Unregistered Hare Krishna devotees and Protestants raided

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

Uzbekistan is continuing to raid members of religious minorities who the authorities think are conducting unregistered religious activity, Forum 18 News Service has found. A Hare Krishna festival in Samarkand, and a birthday party for a Protestant in the north-western Karakalpakstan region have both been raided, Uzbek police confirmed to Forum 18. The people who police found during the raids may be prosecuted for religious activity without state permission. This is a criminal offence, in violation of Uzbekistan's international human rights commitments. Describing one raid, a Protestant told Forum 18 that police "secretly planted" two religious books, the names of which they could not identify. The officers then "seized" the books. Police confirmed that NSS secret police officers took part in this raid. Police Captain Zhasur Kamalov told Forum 18 that the raid took place to see whether church activity was being conducted. Also, it remains unclear whether imams arrested in the second half of 2008 have been tried for the offences officials accused them of.

A Hare Krishna festival in Uzbekistan's central city of Samarkand [Samarqand] and a birthday party of a Protestant in Nukus, in the north-western Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpog'iston] region, were raided and halted by the authorities, police have confirmed to Forum 18 News Service. Police are gathering evidence to open administrative cases against Zafar Kasimov, a Hare Krishna devotee in Samarkand, and against Eleonora Zhumaniyazova, a member of a Protestant church in Karakalpakstan's central city Nukus. Both are likely to be accused of religious activity without state permission. In violation of the country's international human rights commitments, this is a criminal offence in Uzbekistan. Three other members of Zhumaniyazova's church were fined in early December 2008, by Khodjeli District Criminal Court, for unauthorised religious activity.

Samarkand Regional Criminal Police raided the Hare Krishna gathering in Samarkand on 7 February as devotees were about to celebrate a religious festival, the appearance day of Sri Nityananda. Police detained Kasimov and several other devotees and held them overnight. "All devotees except Kasimov were released the next morning, 8 February," a source from Samarkand, who wanted to remain unnamed, told Forum 18 that day. Kasimov was released from detention late in the evening on 8 February, another source told Forum 18 on 9 February.

Samarkand's Regional Criminal Police confirmed to Forum 18 on 9 February that Kasimov was released from detention. The officer who answered the phone said that Kasimov is "only" being investigated for an administrative violation. "I don't know when the case will be brought to court," he said. The officer also refused to say under what article Kasimov is being investigated. "I can only tell you that for a second such violation, Kasimov will be made criminally liable."

The Samarkand Regional Police told Forum 18 that alongside the Criminal Police, the National Security Service (NSS) secret police are also involved in the case.

A source from Samarkand told Forum 18 that the Hare Krishna devotees had rented a small hall, and invited some fellow devotees and friends for the celebration of their festival. "When the celebration started, several police officers broke in and stopped the programme," the source reported. "The police arrested Kasimov and some of the devotees." The source pointed out that the Hare Krishna community is still prohibited in Samarkand, as it is not registered. "Probably Kasimov will be charged with organising unauthorised religious activity," the source stated.

In the north-eastern region of Karakalpakstan, police raided Eleonora Zhumaniyazova's flat "unlawfully" while she was celebrating her birthday with friends on 31 January, Protestants told Forum 18 from Nukus. A group of five unidentified people, among whom two were in police uniform, broke into the flat in the early evening "under the guise" of an identity document check. Zhumaniyazova was celebrating her birthday with her Christian friends – Yesemurat Duysenbayev, Yerkinay Zhumaniyazova, Makset Ibrahimov, Klara Rauazheva and Larisa Kiricheva.

Officials in Karakalpakstan region are particularly harsh violators of Uzbekistan's international human rights commitments, as all religious activity that is not either state-controlled-Islamic or Russian Orthodox is banned and a criminal offence (see eg. F18News 17 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1019).

Describing the raid, one Protestant told Forum 18 that they noticed that the police officers "secretly planted" two religious books, the names of which they could not identify. The officers then "seized" the books. "We were outraged by the behaviour of the police. We refused to write statements or sign official records written by the police." The Protestant said they were later told that NSS secret police officers alongside Nukus City Police took part in the raid on Zhumaniyazova's flat.

The raids on Hare Krishna devotees and Protestants come as Uzbekistan continues to confiscate religious literature across the country (see F18News 17 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1256).

Another Protestant, who asked to be unnamed, told Forum 18 on 9 February that the police have already visited the homes of some of those who had attended the birthday party. "The believers were compelled to explain in writing why they visited Zhumaniyazova's flat," the Protestant complained, adding that the police also questioned them about Zhumaniyazova's role in their group. "It looks like the police are collecting materials to bring charges against Eleonora." The Protestant said the authorities are likely to charge Zhumaniyazova with unregistered religious activity.

Captain Zhasur Kamalov of Nukus City Police, who took part in the raid, said they raided Zhumaniyazova's flat to see whether she was conducting church activity. "We have submitted the case to the city Prosecutor already," he told Forum 18 on 6 February when asked whether his Department was bringing a law-suit against Zhumaniyazova.

The officials raiding Zhumaniyazova's flat asked her why she "still" was meeting with people from the church, a source from Nukus told Forum 18. "Zhumaniyazova had been earlier told by the Nukus authorities not to meet with fellow Christians," the source reported.

Police Captain Kamalov said the court will "decide" whether or not Zhumaniyazova was having a church meeting or a birthday party. He refused to say whether Zhumaniyazova is allowed at all to meet with her friends from the church. Kamalov also refused to say whether others present at the birthday party would also be punished. "That also will be decided by the court." He refused to tell Forum 18 what the charges brought against Zhumaniyazova were.

Repression against both minority religious communities and the majority Muslim community in Karakalpakstan continues. Mystery surrounds the fate of imams arrested in the second half of 2008 (see eg. F18News 30 September 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1195). It remains unclear whether all the imams have been tried, and whether they are innocent or guilty of official allegations of embezzlement and drug possession. Officials have not been willing to discuss these cases with Forum 18. As is routine throughout Uzbekistan, severe restrictions are imposed on which Muslims are allowed to make the haj pilgrimage to Mecca (see F18News 5 December 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1226).

Khanmurat Mirbek, head of the Karakalpakstan Justice Ministry department registering religious organisations, confirmed to Forum 18 on 10 February that only Muslims and the Russian Orthodox Church are officially registered in the region. Asked why other religious communities are not registered, he claimed, wrongly: "Other groups have not asked us for registration."

Mirbek said that in order to register a community, members need to collect a list of documents and submit them to his department. "We then have three months to officially respond to their application," he said. Asked whether his department would register any community provided all the documents were in order, Mirbek said his department "still needs permission" from the Interior Ministry and the Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent.

In contrast to Mirbek's statement, Protestants from Nukus told Forum 18 on 10 February that many of their churches in Karakalpakstan have tried to get registration since 2003 with no success. One Protestant said they have now started the process of collecting documents to register the group to which Zhumaniyazova belongs. "We will probably officially apply in March," the Protestant reported.

In early December 2008, Karakalpakstan's Khodjeli District Criminal Court upheld earlier punishments imposed on three members of a Protestant church in Khodjeli.

Church members Vladimir Kim, Darkhan Toremuratova and Ulash Bazarbaeva had been found guilty at Tokhtakupir District Court on 24 November of violating Article 240 of Uzbekistan's Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes breaking the Religion Law. They were each fined 25,040 Soms (120 Norwegian Kroner, 14 Euros or 18 US Dollars), a source from Nukus told Forum 18. In addition to the fines, the court ordered the confiscation of a Bible, a New Testament in Kazakh and a Christian brochure. The Protestants were not given a copy of the court confiscation order.

"Kim has appealed against the fines," Forum 18 was told. "The appeal process is still ongoing." The three Protestants have not yet paid the fines.

Prosecutors have brought administrative charges against Kim several times before, the source from Nukus told Forum 18. Kim was also questioned in the criminal case against Makset Jabbarbergenov, a local Protestant who escaped Uzbekistan to avoid possible

imprisonment in Nukus. When they were hunting him in Uzbekistan, police told Forum 18 that this was because "he gathers people in his home for religious activity" (see F18News 27 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1150).

Forum 18 knows of several active Protestants who under pressure from the authorities left Nukus in late 2008 fearing that they might face arrest. (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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