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UZBEKISTAN: Four Protestants jailed, three more detained in homelessness centre

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

As well as imposing long prison sentences on Muslims accused of following the theologian Said Nursi, Uzbekistan has since the beginning of March imposed short jail terms on four Protestants, as well as detaining three more in a centre for the homeless, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Three Protestants were each jailed for 15 days, after police raided a meal in a private home where the three were present, and three more were held in a homelessness centre for between four and eleven days. Asked why individuals must ask for permission to gather for a religious purpose, the judge told Forum 18 that "I am not a law-maker, and I don't want to discuss the law." In a separate case, a Baptist was jailed for 10 days after some 20 officials from various state agencies – including the Presidential Administration – raided a prayer meeting in a registered church. Officials told church members that they need special permission for any services apart from those on Sundays, though Forum 18 can find no requirement for this in published laws or regulations.

Three Protestant Christians have each been sentenced to 15 days in prison in Andijan [Andijon] Region of eastern Uzbekistan after police raided a meal in a private home where the three were present, Protestants who preferred not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 News Service. A further three Protestants present were held in a centre for the homeless for between four and eleven days, for not having identity documents with them. In a separate case, a Baptist in the capital Tashkent was given a ten-day term in prison after some 20 officials from various state agencies – including the Presidential Administration – raided a prayer meeting in a registered church. Officials told church members that they need special permission for any services apart from those on Sundays, though Forum 18 can find no requirement for this in published laws or regulations.

Attempts to discuss this upsurge in detentions of Protestants, and of Muslims, since the beginning of March with any official at the Uzbek Parliament's Human Rights Ombudsperson's Office were unsuccessful. On 18 March Forum 18 was told that Ombudsperson Sayora Rashidova was "unavailable" to talk about the detentions since she was "receiving citizens with complaints." Forum 18 was referred to Jamshid Yusupov, but he was also unavailable to talk. Forum 18 was asked to call back several times on 18 March and was finally told that Yusupov was "receiving complaints from citizens and was unavailable."

The religious freedom situation is worsening in Uzbekistan. A country-wide campaign against followers of the Muslim theologian Said Nursi is underway, with harsh jail sentences being given to five Nursi followers (see F18News 27 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1262). Nine others accused of following Said Nursi remain in prison awaiting trial (see F18News 10 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1265). Other prisoners of conscience include one Pentecostal Christian and two Jehovah's Witnesses (see F18News 21 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1176), who are being held in a labour camp under harsh conditions (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=982).

Members of other Protestant churches, as well as Hare Krishna devotees and Jehovah's Witnesses are currently also being detained or harassed (see F18News 10 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1265). In north-west Uzbekistan, officials attempt to obstruct the burials of Protestant Christians and those related to them (see F18News 16 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1268).

Officials have also stepped up pressure since late 2008 on school children who attend places of worship – including mosques and Christian churches – as well as on their parents (see F18News 12 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1239).

Following the raid on the meal in the town of Kurgantepe in Andijan Region, Judge Shavkat Shadmanov of Kurgantepe District Criminal Court on 3 March handed down 15-day jail terms to three members of an unregistered Protestant church – Mahmudjon Turdiev and Mahmudjon Boynazarov, both residents of Andijan Region, as well as Ravshanjon Bahramov, a resident of the adjoining Namangan Region. The three were found guilty of violating Article 241 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes violating the procedure for teaching religious doctrines.

Protestants from Andijan told Forum 18 that the arrested church members are being held together with criminal offenders at the Temporary Detention Centre of Kurgantepe Police Department. "They should instead have been sent to the Detention Centre for administrative violators at Andijan Regional Police Department," one Protestant complained to Forum 18.

Judge Shadmanov told Forum 18 that, because the defence did not appeal against the court decision within the allowed ten days, the three Protestants can now only complain to the Panel of Judges for any violation of court procedures. "My decision was based on the Law," he insisted from Kurgantepe on 17 March. Asked why individuals must ask for permission to gather for a religious purpose, he responded: "I am not a law-maker, and I don't want to discuss the law." Shadmanov said the three are due to be released on 18 March.

Shadmanov refused to say whether the detained Protestants would receive any compensation were the Panel of Judges to overrule his decision to imprison them. "I don't think 15-day administrative detention is a very strict punishment for such a violation," he insisted. He warned though that if caught a second time for another administrative violation, the three would then face criminal charges.

Problems for the three Protestants began in the evening of 1 March, when five police officers from Kurgantepe District Police – Shermetov, Halilov, Ergashev, Musaev and Mahammadov (first names unknown) - raided the home of a church member, claiming to be conducting a passport check-up. (Two of the officers were from the Anti-Terrorism Department.) At this time a group of Protestants and their families had gathered to have a meal together.

Six men out of those present – the three who were subsequently imprisoned, as well as Andijan resident Mahmudjon Dehkanbaev and Namangan residents Alisher Shorahmedov and Murod Rahimov - were detained and taken to the police station. Kurgantepe District Police and Prosecutor's Office "fabricated" administrative violations against the detained Protestants, Forum 18 was told.

The District Prosecutor approved the one-month detention of Dehkanbaev, Shorahmedov and Rahimov at Kurgantepe Rehabilitation Centre for Homeless Persons as of 2 March, since they did not have any identification documents on them, Forum 18 was told. The three were taken to the Centre that same day. However, after intervention on their behalf, Rahimov – whose health had deteriorated - was released on 6 March, and Dehkanbaev and Shorahmedov were released on 13 March.

Gulmira Turdieva – Mahmudjon Turdiev's wife – brought food every day to the Detention Centre for her husband and the other two detained men. However, she was not sure whether it was passed to them, Protestants complained to Forum 18. But on 14 March, Police Captain Abduvohid Ahmedov, the Chief of the Detention Centre, stopped her bringing any further food. "We are afraid that the prison officials may be keeping them hungry."

Captain Ahmedov "unlawfully" asked Turdieva that she pay 192,000 Soms (914 Norwegian Kroner, 104 Euros or 136 US Dollars) for "feeding and keeping" the three detained men in the Detention Centre, Protestants told Forum 18. "Otherwise he threatened not to release them until she paid the entire amount."

Captain Ahmedov denied that he was involved in any money extortion from Turdieva. "I will not tell you anything about this case," he told Forum 18 on 18 March.

In a similar case in Tashkent, Judge Jafar Kurbanov of Mirzo Ulugbek District Criminal Court on 11 March handed down a 10-day jail term to Roman Tsoi, a member of an ethnic Korean Baptist Church. He was found guilty under Uzbekistan Article 201 Part 1 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes "violating the procedure for arranging and holding gatherings, meetings, street marches and demonstrations."

The court decision, seen by Forum 18, records that the charges brought against the Church were based on three separate complaints from the Mirzo Ulugbek District Hokimat (administration), Tashkent City Justice Department and the State Religious Affairs Committee. All three agencies complained to the court that the Baptist Church did not specifically ask for permission to hold a meeting on 6 March. The Baptist Church has had official registration with the Tashkent City Justice Department since 27 October 1998.

Tsoi is being held at Tashkent City Police Department's Detention Centre for administrative violators, Forum 18 was told.

Judge Kurbanov's assistant, who did not give his name, told Forum 18 that Tsoi is due to be freed on 21 March. He said Judge Kurbanov was unavailable to talk and he could not comment on the case either.

The Church was raided on 6 March at 10.45 pm, while around 60 congregation members were holding a prayer meeting, Forum 18 was told. Most of those present were ethnic Korean citizens of Uzbekistan. Around twenty officials from various state agencies – including the police and the National Security Service (NSS) secret police - broke into the church, some carrying video-cameras.

Five officials gave their names: Bahtiyor Kudratov from the Presidential Administration; Bekzod (last name unknown, but not Deputy Chair Begzod Kodyrov) from the state Religious Affairs Committee; Umid Rasulov of Tashkent City's Justice Department;

and Police Inspectors Fayziev and Dustmuhamedov (last names unknown), Forum 18 was told. The officials told the congregation that they were looking for foreign missionaries. "They checked up and took video footage of everyone present."

Rasulov told church members that they may "only" come to services on Sundays, and that for other meetings they have to ask for specific permission from the Tashkent City Justice Department ten days in advance, the Baptists reported. Rasulov also "warned that it is prohibited at all to gather in the church building after 10 pm". Officials demanded that the pastor, Artur Kan, write a statement. When he refused to do so he was "threatened" that the church's registration would be stripped from it. The officials pressured Pastor Kan, his wife Natalya Kan, Yupiter Kim, Yelizaveta Ten, Dmitry Kim, Tatyana Kim, Anastasia Yudina, Roman Tsoi and Natalya Grifanova to write statements, Baptists reported.

Tashkent City's Justice Department on 18 March referred Forum 18 to one of their officials, Umid Shadiev, but he refused to discuss the case. (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>.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY