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UZBEKISTAN: Prisoners of conscience still held for their faith

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Nine followers of the Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi, who are awaiting criminal trial in Uzbekistan after being detained in December 2008 for their faith, have still not had a trial date set, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The detentions are part of a nationwide crackdown on Muslims who follow Nursi's approach to Islam. In separate cases, verdicts are imminent at the trial of three other Nursi followers who have been under arrest since mid to late 2008. Also, a court has rejected appeals by five Muslim prisoners of conscience, contributors to the Irmoq Islamic-inspired journal, against their long prison sentences. Among the other prisoners of conscience jailed for their faith is Pentecostal Pastor Dmitry Shestakov, who marks his 40th birthday on Thursday 9 April. There are also four Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience. No officials have been prepared to discuss with Forum 18 why these prisoners of conscience are being held for peacefully practising their faith.

At the end of March, seven followers of Muslim theologian Said Nursi awaiting criminal trial in the central city of Bukhara [Bukhoro] were transferred from the National Security Service (NSS) secret police investigation prison to the city's Interior Ministry investigation prison. "They were transferred because the NSS has arrested so many people that all the cells are full," Muslims told Forum 18 News Service. The eighth, Ikrom Merajov, remains in the NSS investigation cells, while the ninth is awaiting trial at home. No date has been set for their trial.

In a separate case in the capital Tashkent, the city Criminal Court on 31 March rejected the appeals lodged by five Muslim prisoners of conscience, who are contributors to the Irmoq Islamic-inspired journal, against their long prison sentences, human rights defenders told Forum 18.

Also, an appeal has been made public from the eight-year-old daughter of Pentecostal prisoner of conscience Pastor Dmitry Shestakov, who has served two years of a four year sentence to punish him for his religious activity. He marks his 40th birthday in prison in Navoi [Nawoiy] on 9 April. There are also four Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience, who are imprisoned for their faith.

No officials nationally or locally have been prepared to discuss with Forum 18 why these prisoners of conscience are being held for peacefully practising their faith. In line with their usual practice, an official at the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent – who did not give his name – told Forum 18 on 6 April that no comments would be given by telephone. "Come to our office," he said before hanging up the phone.

The cases against the Bukhara nine and the Tashkent five are part of a wider crackdown on followers of the Turkish Islamic theologian Said Nursi across Uzbekistan. Verdicts are imminent at the trial in Tashkent of three others who have been under arrest since late 2008: Muhammadali Shahobiddinov (an imam from Namangan arrested in August 2008), and two men associated with the Yetti Iqlim (Seven Climates) Islamic-inspired periodical, Davron Tajiev and Shavkat Ismoilov arrested in November 2008 (see F18News 27 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1262 and 24 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1286).

Russian translations of the works of Said Nursi have been banned in Russia, following controversial claims by the authorities that they are "extremist" (see F18News 29 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1136).

The Bukhara nine detainees of conscience

On 22 December 2008, police and NSS secret police burst into the Merajov family home in Bukhara. They arrested Merajov and eight other men: Muzaffar Allayorov, Botir Tukhtamurodov, Alisher Jumaev, Abdurahmon Musaev, Bobomurod Sanoev, Jamshid Ramazonov, Salohiddin Kosimov and Shuhrat Karimov. Religious books and other materials were confiscated in what the family insists was an "illegal" raid.

Muslims have told Forum 18 that another man, Yadgar Juraev, was arrested several days later. They say that since his arrest, Juraev's mother died. "She could not bear this injustice," they reported. They complained that prison authorities refused to allow him to attend his mother's funeral.

Jumaev and Musaev were freed after 15 days' detention, Jumaev to await proceedings at home. No charges were lodged against Musaev.

Although prosecutors promised to produce the written accusations against the nine on 25 March and then on 1 April, Muslims say that this did not happen and they have still not been issued. "It is very difficult for our brothers - they are completely innocent," one Muslim who knows them told Forum 18. "It's very difficult indeed for their parents too – they brought them up well."

Expressing concern for 38-year-old Ikrom Merajov, a university lecturer, is his brother Ilhom Merajov, who now lives in Russia. "His wife was allowed to visit him last week, but they refused to let our parents visit," he told Forum 18 on 3 April. He too insists his brother is innocent of any accusations. "He has a very good reputation and most important of all is a devout Muslim."

Ikrom Merajov's father Zavkidin Merajov has written to many state agencies to ask about his son. A 24 March response from Lieutenant-Colonel B. Sadullaev of the Bukhara Regional NSS secret police, seen by Forum 18, claimed that on 22 December, Merajov had gathered eight people in his home for an "illegal meeting" teaching religious ideas from the books of Said Nursi, the founder of the Nursi movement. It said this was established after audio-video tapes, leaflets and two computer hard drives confiscated from his home were examined, and recorded. It said Merajov signed the official records saying he did not object to their content.

Sadullaev of the NSS secret police wrote that charges were lodged against Merajov under Criminal Code Article 244-1 Part 2, which punishes preparing and distributing materials threatening social security and social order, and Article 244-2 Part 1, which punishes creation or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations. Forum 18 has been unable to find out if the other nine arrested men are facing the same accusations.

In a 25 March written response also seen by Forum 18, Ibadullo Nurov, an assistant to Bukhara's Regional Prosecutor, told Zavkidin Merajov that his son is still being investigated by the NSS about his involvement with the "religious extremist" Nursi movement.

No one at the Regional Prosecutor's Office was available to comment on the cases of the nine men awaiting trial. The official who answered the phone on 6 April – who did not give his name – said Nurov was away from the city. He said that the Prosecutor was not available either to talk about the cases. The official refused to put Forum 18 through to any other Prosecutor's Office official.

Bobir Karimov, the Regional Hokimat (Administration) official in charge of religious affairs, said he could say nothing about the men's activity since their cases are being investigated by the NSS secret police. "We have not been given any specific information," he told Forum 18 on 6 April.

The officer who answered the phone at Bukhara NSS secret police (who did not give his name) said Sadullaev was not available to talk about the case. "We cannot tell you anything," he insisted when asked about Merajov and the eight other men awaiting trial. "Please come to our office - only then will we talk to you."

The Tashkent five prisoners of conscience

Meanwhile, on 31 March the Appeals Board of Tashkent City Criminal Court rejected the appeals lodged by a group of people in Tashkent associated with the Irmoq (Spring) journal, the Ezgulik (Goodness) human rights defenders group told Forum 18 from Tashkent the following day. It said the five men are being held at Tashkent's central prison, known as Tashturma.

The five - Bakhrom Ibrahimov, Davron Kabilov, Rovshanbek Vafoyev, Abdulaziz Dadakhonov and Botyrbek Eshkuziyev - were all found guilty on 26 February of violating Criminal Code Article 244-1 Part 2, which punishes preparing and distributing materials threatening social security and social order, and Article 244-2, which punishes creation or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations. They received general regime labour camp sentences of between twelve and eight years (see F18News 27 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1262).

Irmoq magazine had been closely monitored, and the five contributors were arrested by the NSS secret police in June and August 2008, on "suspicion of being sponsored by a Turkish radical religious movement Nursi" (see F18News 17 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1256).

The five men's appeal noted that the case had been full of procedural violations and contradictions in testimony given. Ezgulik pointed out that the men's request for experts at the government's Religious Affairs Committee to be summoned to testify was refused. This was even though a key part of the prosecution case were claims by the Committee that articles published in Irmoq were a threat to social stability and social order.

Their appeal also complained that the men's allegations that they were tortured in pre-trial custody had been ignored at their first trial. They also complained of a 16 February television programme that branded the Nurcular movement of followers of Said Nursi as having "malicious intentions" (see F18News 10 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1265).

The Uzbek government frequently uses the state-controlled mass media to encourage intolerance of religious groups the government dislikes, and opposition to freedom of religion or belief in Uzbekistan (see F18News 12 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1239).

"Lawyers and human rights defenders again stressed that these facts point to the crude violation of internal laws and the presumption of innocence during the trial," Ezgulik told Forum 18. "Yet to the surprise of the lawyers and human rights defenders present at the appeal hearing, the Board paid no attention to the conclusions presented by the defence and left the first court decision unchanged."

One of those sentenced, the 31-year-old Dadakhonov, spent two and a half years from 2001 at Fairfield University in Connecticut in the United States as an exchange student. "During Abdul's time in the US, he consistently reached out to anyone who would work with him," Katherine Kidd, his then academic advisor, told Forum 18. She said he worked locally through the Council of Churches of Greater Bridgeport to help people suffering from hunger, visited churches and synagogues to share his understanding of Islam and his love for his country in the wake of the 2001 attacks in New York and Washington, and sought donations for books for libraries in Uzbekistan.

Another friend was Judy Skartvedt. "To me Abdul was my adopted son. I was his American mom," she told Forum 18 from Connecticut. "He shared holidays, dinners and special events with our family. He also shared his culture and religion with us and represented his country so well. My heart is breaking!"

The website <http://www.friendsofabdul.org>, which calls for Dadakhonov's immediate release from prison, notes that on returning to Uzbekistan in 2004, he was actively involved with several charitable organisations that promoted reading and English language literacy for young people in his country.

Kidd told Forum 18 that Dadakhonov has already been invited back to the United States, to resume work in an academic environment.

One Pentecostal and four Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience

Also still imprisoned is a Pentecostal prisoner of conscience, Pastor Dmitry Shestakov, who is due to mark his 40th birthday on Thursday 9 April. An undated appeal from his youngest daughter, Vera, who is eight years old, was recently published on the <http://www.freepastordmitry.com> website.

"He is good, fun-loving and generous. I really miss him," Vera wrote about her imprisoned father. "He used to take me to the park and bought me ice-cream. We all long for him to be here. Mum often cries and worries about him. When I wake up each morning I really want to see Dad. I ask God to bring Dad back to us. So that everything will be as it was before. Help us to get my Dad back!"

Pastor Shestakov was sentenced in March 2007 to four years in an open work camp (see F18News 23 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=935). The sentence was subsequently harshened to imprisonment in a labour camp where Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience are also held (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=982).

Four Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience are currently in jail for their religious activity. These are: Abdubannob Ahmedov, Sergei Ivanov, Irfon Khamidov and Olim Turaev (see F18News 29 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1164).

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 6 April that Khamidov, who is serving a two-year prison sentence imposed in May 2007 for "illegal religious teaching", is due for imminent release.

The other three still have years of imprisonment to serve. Turaev was jailed for four years in a labour camp from April 2008 for holding an unapproved religious meeting and teaching religion without state permission (see F18News 29 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1122). Ahmedov was sentenced in July 2008 to a four year term for "illegal organisation of public associations or religious organisations". And Sergei Ivanov was sentenced in July 2008 to three and a half years for "illegal organisation of public associations or religious organisations" (see F18News 21 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1176).

In another disturbing new development, short-term imprisonments of Protestants recently took place in March (see F18News 18 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1270). (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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