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UZBEKISTAN: Appeals by prisoners of conscience rejected

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Uzbekistan has rejected appeals by nine Muslim prisoners of conscience against their harsh jail terms, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Ikrom Merajov and eight other followers of the approach of theologian Said Nursi had their sentences confirmed on 2 June. Merajov was in April given nine years in jail, with terms of between five and a half years and six years imposed on the others. 25 Nursi-related prisoners of conscience have so far in 2009 been given almost 200 years in jail. Merajov's brother Ilhom told Forum 18 that "no proof of any guilt was presented in court" and that written verdicts have not been given to the nine prisoners of conscience and their lawyers. An appeal to the Supreme Court is being prepared. Meanwhile, a Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience, Irfon Khamidov, has been freed at the end of his sentence but almost immediately deported to Tajikistan. He was allowed to see his two-year-old son for the first time for one night only. Short-term imprisonments for up to 15 days and massive fines continue to be used to punish Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses. No state officials were willing to discuss the cases with Forum 18.

Appeals by Ikrom Merajov and eight other followers of the Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi against their harsh jail sentences were rejected by Bukhara [Bukhoro] Regional Criminal Court on 2 June, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Merajov's original sentence of nine years' imprisonment was upheld, as were the sentences of between five and a half years and six years imposed on the others. Meanwhile, Jehovah's Witness Irfon Khamidov, who was freed on 14 May after two years in jail for teaching religion, was deported to his native Tajikistan the following day, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. During the one night he had at home after getting out of jail before being deported, he saw his two-year-old son for the first time.

Begzod Kodyrov, Deputy Chair of the state Religious Affairs Committee refused to answer any questions about these cases on 3 June. "No one else from the Committee will answer you either," he told Forum 18 before putting the phone down. Calls to other numbers at the Committee went unanswered.

No-one from the Bukhara Regional Criminal Court would comment on the Nursi-related cases. Nasriev (he did not give his first name), the Secretary of the Panel of Judges of the Regional Court, said he knew of the case but did not want to comment. "It is not in my competence to answer your questions," he told Forum 18 on 4 June. He then referred Forum 18 to Feruz (the last name was not given), the Secretary of the Court's Chair. Feruz did not want to comment and referred Forum 18 to the Chancellery of the Court. Calls to the Chancellery went unanswered on 4 June.

Merajov and his colleagues were tried and sentenced on 29 April at Bukhara Regional Criminal Court. Of the other defendants, Muzaffar Allayorov, Botir Tukhtamurodov, Shuhrat Karimov, Salohiddin Kosimov and Yadgar Juraev were each given six year terms of imprisonment. The other three, Bobomurod Sanoev, Jamshid Ramazonov and Alisher Jumaev, received sentences of five and a half years' imprisonment each. After the trial the nine prisoners of conscience were held in prison in Bukhara (see F18News 29 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1289).

Ikrom Merajov's brother Ilhom, who now lives in Russia, said that at the appeal hearing the young men and their lawyers established the nine men's innocence. "No proof of any guilt was presented in court," he told Forum 18 on 3 June. "Ikrom asked them to bring the books that they found in our family home and show which pages contain anti-government and extremist statements, bring the discs and his papers and show where there is something wrong." Ilhom Merajov told Forum 18 that the judges – Komilov, Mirzoev and Toshev (first names unknown) - "had no response to that".

Ilhom Merajov told Forum 18 that the nine men are still being held in Bukhara. He said they intend to lodge a further appeal in Uzbekistan's Supreme Court. He also pointed out that the written verdicts from the original trial of 29 April have never been given to the nine prisoners of conscience and their lawyers.

Other prisoners of conscience on grounds of freedom of religion or belief

The sentencing of Merajov and his eight colleagues brought to 25 the number of followers of Said Nursi known to have been sentenced to long prison terms under various articles of the Criminal Code in 2009. The sentences total nearly 200 years' imprisonment (see F18News 29 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1289).

Abdulaziz Dadahonov was among a group of residents of the capital Tashkent sentenced on 26 February. Forum 18 has learned that after his appeal against his eight-year sentence was rejected, he was transferred to serve his term in a labour camp in Navoi [Nawoiy].

Among other prisoners of conscience still serving sentences are a Pentecostal Pastor from Andijan [Andijon] in eastern Uzbekistan, Dmitry Shestakov, who is serving a four year sentence, and three Jehovah's Witnesses: Abdubannob Ahmedov, Sergei Ivanov, and Olim Turaev (see F18News 6 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1280).

Appeals against the convictions of the three Jehovah's Witnesses, and a formal request on their behalf to Uzbekistan's state Religious Affairs Committee for an amnesty have been unsuccessful. Lawyers for the three are preparing further appeals to the Supreme Court.

Prisoner of conscience released, then deported

Jehovah's Witness Irfon Khamidov was released on 14 May after completing two years' imprisonment, but was then deported to his native Tajikistan the following day, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. During the one night he had at home in Samarkand [Samarqand] after getting out of jail before being deported, he saw his two-year-old son for the first time. He was ordered to report to the police at 9.00 the following morning, who deported him that day to Tajikistan, the country of his citizenship.

Khamidov was sentenced in May 2007 for "illegal religious teaching". The Samarkand Jehovah's Witness community to which he belongs has been seeking state registration in vain for almost a decade (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=982).

Short term imprisonments for conscience

In addition to these long-term prisoners of conscience, the Uzbek authorities are increasingly using imprisonment for up to 15 days to punish members of minority religious communities. Four Protestants were so imprisoned in March, with three more been forcibly detained in a centre for the homeless (see F18News 18 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1270).

Forum 18 has learned that five Jehovah's Witnesses have also been given short prison terms in 2009.

On 5 February, police in Tashkent's Yakkasarai District raided the Akhmedov family home, where three family members and four guests were present. Police officers interrogated the seven, and searched the flat. They confiscated several of the Akhmedovs' books, including the Jehovah's Witness Yearbook for 2005 and a copy of the Bible.

Six of those present faced trial at Yakkasarai District Court on 21 February under various Articles of the Code of Administrative Offences and all were found guilty, according to the verdict seen by Forum 18. Dilshod Akhmedov was sentenced to 15 days' imprisonment. His mother Fatima Akhmedova and father Ilhamjan Akhmedov were each sentenced to ten days' imprisonment. The three were all given prison terms as they had already been sentenced under the Code of Administrative Offences. Fines imposed under separate Articles were subsumed into the prison terms and they did not have to pay them.

The other three defendants at the trial – Marzia Kucharova, Lidia Mullajanova and (in absentia) Gavkhar Khafizova – were each fined fifty times the minimum monthly wage, or 1,402,000 Soms (6,600 Norwegian Kroner, 745 Euros or 990 US Dollars) each.

The minimum monthly salary in Uzbekistan is, from 16 November 2008, 28,040 Soms (128 Norwegian Kroner, 15 Euros or 20 US Dollars). The majority of Uzbekistan's population is poor, and has to exist on incomes that are very low, so the fine is an enormous amount.

Thirteen Baptists from Almalyk [Olmalik] were also fined this enormous sum in April, after the police with a local Russian Orthodox priest, Father Igor Skorik, raided a Sunday morning worship service (see F18News 8 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1282).

The verdict in the Jehovah's Witness trial reveals that the state Religious Affairs Committee provided the court with an "expert analysis" of two books confiscated from the Akhmedovs' flat – a book entitled "Revelation" and the Jehovah's Witness Yearbook 2005 – that the books had been produced by the Jehovah's Witnesses and "contain their ideas". The Committee insisted that such books were only for "internal use" of a registered Jehovah's Witness community. As the Jehovah's Witnesses have only one registered community in Uzbekistan – in the town of Chirchik – the Committee claimed these two books could only be used there. Such "expert analyses" are a routine part of Uzbekistan's extremely severe censorship regime (see F18News 1 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1153).

All six appealed to the head of the Yakkasarai District Court, but on 25 February their appeal was rejected and their sentences upheld.

More raids on and fines for "illegal religious activity"

In a separate case, on 22 February six Jehovah's Witnesses were gathered at the Tashkent home of Galina Fris. Police officers gained entry to her flat by claiming that they were from the gas company. Police confiscated her religious literature.

According to the court verdict seen by Forum 18, Fris was found guilty by the Mirzo-Ulugbek District Court on 28 February of violating Article 201 part 1 and 202 of the Code of Administrative Offences. The court ruled that she had held an "illegal meeting" where "illegal religious activity" was taking place, an accusation she rejected. She was sentenced to 15 days' imprisonment. She was freed only once she had served the full sentence, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Like the other Tashkent Jehovah's Witnesses and the Almalyk Baptists, she was fined fifty times the minimum monthly wage, 1,402,000 Sums.

Also tried at the same hearing, according to the verdict, was Ayshe Setablaeva, who was found guilty of violating 201 part 1 and Article 240 part 1 of the Code of Administrative Offences. She too was sentenced to 15 days' imprisonment. She was freed only once she had served the full sentence, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. She was also fined fifty times the minimum monthly wage, or 1,402,000 Sums.

The Jehovah's Witnesses point out that no "expert analysis" of the confiscated religious literature was provided to the court. Forum 18 notes that the authorities have this year been particularly hostile to people found with religious literature (see eg. F18News 2 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1278). (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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