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UZBEKISTAN: "Joy" children's holiday camp attacked

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

Uzbekistan's Baptist Union is facing criminal charges for allegedly unlawfully teaching children religion, and for supposedly misusing their property as a summer camp, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. As a result, Baptist Union Chair Pavel Peichev faces huge fines, the confiscation of the property, imprisonment, or some combination of these penalties. Baptists have vehemently denied the allegations. The authorities have also instituted checks on the tax and other obligatory payments by the Baptist Union. The first sign of trouble for the Baptists were two articles published by a government-sponsored news agency. Independent human rights defender sources think that the agency is sponsored by the NSS secret police, and that the author may be an NSS officer. The authorities have refused to discuss the details of the case, although the main prosecutor claimed to Forum 18 that "we have nothing against the [Baptist] denomination". Repeated attempts to contact the author of the articles and the news agency have been unsuccessful.

Uzbekistan's Baptist Union is facing criminal charges brought by Tashkent City Prosecutor's office for allegedly unlawfully teaching children religion, and for supposedly misusing their property in a resort area as a summer camp, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Local Baptists are very concerned by the claims and think that Pavel Peichev, the Baptist Union's Chair faces huge fines, the confiscation of the property, imprisonment, or some combination of these penalties. No officials from either the state Religious Affairs Committee or Uzbekistan's Ombudsperson's office were willing to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 28 July.

The criminal charges brought by Tashkent City Prosecutor's are against the Baptist leaders in charge of "Joy," a children's summer camp run in Bostanlyk in the Tashkent Region, which belongs to Uzbekistan's Union of Baptists. The charges relate to the Criminal Code's articles 145 part 2 and 190 part 2 point b and accuse the Baptists of:

- violating the rules of arrangement and maintenance of children's health camps;
- violating the fire-prevention rules in the period 2006-2009;
- unlawfully using Baptist property for a children's camp;
- selling vouchers for the camp in cash;
- and "involving under-age children in religious organisation as well as teaching them religion against the will of the children, their parents or persons substituting them".

Part 2 of Article 145 of Uzbekistan's Criminal Code punishes with a fine between 50 and 75 times the minimum monthly salary, or correctional labour of between two and three years, or three years deprivation of liberty for violating the Religion Law. The Criminal Code's article 190 Part 2 point b stipulates punishments of a fine of between 75 and 100 times the minimum monthly salary, or detention for 6 months for "activity, which is subject to licensing, without a license, committed by a group of persons on a prior collusion."

A source in the Uzbek capital Tashkent, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that Pastor Peichev was summoned on 21 July as the main defendant, and questioned by Prosecutor Anatoliy Tajibayev, who is leading the prosecution.

Prosecutor Tajibayev has also issued an order to check the financial-economic activity of and correctness of calculation of tax and other obligatory payments by the Baptist Union on their summer camp, the source said. A Baptist member of a church, which belongs to the Union, who wished to remain unnamed, said Uzbekistan's Tax Authorities had already begun checking the Union's books and accounts. A number of leaders from the Union have also been summoned and questioned by the Tashkent Prosecutor's Office in July. "The authorities will at best strip the Union of its property in the resort area and punish with heavy fines, at worst imprison the Chairman [Pavel Peichev] for 3 years, I am afraid," he told Forum 18 on 27 July.

Prosecutor Tajibayev refused to tell Forum 18 on 22 July the details of the criminal investigation, and would not clarify who exactly was being prosecuted or what the charges were. "It is an investigation secret," he responded. He also said "he cannot say" when the

investigation will end. He went on to claim that "We have nothing against the [Baptist] denomination."

The Ombudsperson's Office told Forum 18 that neither Sayora Rashidova nor any of her assistants were available to talk about the case. Similarly, Artyk Yusupov, the Chair of the state Religious Affairs Office, was not available to talk. Begzod Kodyrov, a leading specialist at the Committee told Forum 18, "We have already told you that we will not talk to you a hundred times."

The first sign of trouble for the Baptists were two articles, with the same title "Grievous and Criminal Acts of 'Joy'," published on the government-sponsored Gorizont.uz news agency. The last article was on 21 July and both articles attacked the Union of Baptists of Uzbekistan for holding children's summer camps. The author makes a number of allegations which Baptists categorically deny.

Independent human rights defender sources in Uzbekistan, who wish to remain anonymous, have told Forum 18 that the Gorizont agency is sponsored by the National Security Service (NSS) secret police. The NSS maintains very close surveillance of religious communities (see F18News 5 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1014).

Azamat Karimov, the author of the article, depicts the alleged experience at the Baptist camp of Askar, a fifth grade pupil of Secondary School No. 210. Karimov claims that although "good people" offered Askar's mother a voucher at "a symbolic price of 7,000 Soms" [29 Norwegian Kroner, 3 Euros, or 5 US Dollars] for her son to attend "Joy," the end result of it was that parents of Askar have been in "shock ever since." After the camp Askar is claimed to have "dramatically changed, became serious, taciturn, and a little absent-minded, and stopped associating with friends (..) Not only that, but also he began to say that he is sinful, that his parents are not living according to God's laws, and that their way is leading them to hell," Karimov claims.

Independent human rights defender sources in Uzbekistan have told Forum 18 that "Azamat Karimov" may well be an NSS secret police officer, using another name.

The article claims children are given Bible lessons at the camp. "Children attend religious meetings every evening. They study various Protestant books. They ask Jesus for forgiveness of their so-called sins. Children become psychologically traumatized in the camp." The author claims that parents who send their children to "Joy" do not know that it is a Baptist camp.

The author also claims that in addition to the "psychological trauma" that Askar suffered at the camp, he also had to live in "brutal conditions." It claims that sanitary-hygiene or fire-prevention rules are non-existent in the camp, and children are underfed. The author also claims to have been told by a Baptist leader, whose name he does not give, that Pastor Pitirimov "received 18,000 US Dollars [27,000,000 Uzbek Soms, 110,700 Norwegian Kroner, or 12,610 Euros] for the camp from foreign sponsors, and more contributions were supposed to be made."

Karimov says in the article that he could not enter the camping area for an interview earlier, but he "happened" to be there while on 26 June a State Commission was holding a "surprise check-up" on the activity of the camp. "How could Pitirimov hold the camp in such conditions when he had received so much finance," asks the author. A state inspection had earlier concluded that "the resort area is not fit for children to rest," he reports, "because of which all activity in the resort area was suspended." "But apparently Mr Dmitri Pitirimov is neither afraid of the authorities, nor the devil, nor God. Despite the suspension, a new group of children had come there to rest, when the authorities decided to do the surprise check-up. The fact is that Pitirimov has totally ignored the official demands."

The author then concludes that "in Uzbekistan, optimal conditions have been created for representatives of various faiths, who live in peace and accord. However, the concept of freedom does not mean that a 'paradise' will be created here [Uzbekistan] for all kinds of missionaries, no matter what they propagate, protestant or other teachings, who draw the youth of this country into their ranks by deceitful ways. Parents also need to be vigilant so their children do not fall under the influence of such missionaries."

Pastor Pitirimov told Forum 18 on 26 July that he was indeed in charge of the camp and was aware of the article. However, he did not know the author. "I or no one else from the Union has ever been interviewed by anyone named Karimov," he stressed. But he remembered that "someone" was actively taking pictures during the "surprise check-up" on 26 June.

Pitirimov categorically denied the allegations in the article. "I have not received any very large contributions for the camp let alone such a huge amount of money," he stated. "We are taking excellent care of children in our camp, and follow all the sanitary-hygiene rules."

However, he confirmed that there was a state inspection earlier in May, which had indicated to him a few shortcomings in the area of fire-prevention. "We had gathered some volunteers from among some young adults to help us to correct that on 26 June, when the authorities paid us a surprise visit," he said, "At that time not everything which needed to be corrected was ready," Pitirimov added.

Pitirimov categorically stated that: "All the parents whose children attend our summer camp know that we are Baptists, and they sign an agreement with us to allow their children to be taught at our camp." Pitirimov said that usually the children of Baptist church members are the children who attend the camp. "In the case of the boy mentioned in the article, his mother has not become a member but attends our church, and knows very well who we are and what we believe."

He also commented that he "would not be surprised to find that the mother was compelled to sign a complaint against the Baptist Union." "Some other Baptist parents were also summoned for questioning at the Prosecutor's office where they were told to sign complaints against us but they have refused to do so."

The authorities have bullied and harassed schoolchildren who attend places of worship – including mosques and Christian churches - as well as their parents elsewhere in Uzbekistan. The mass media has been used as part of this (see F18News 12 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1239). Similarly, state TV has also been used by the authorities to encourage intolerance of freedom of religion and belief and to encourage religious hatred and intolerance (see F18News 25 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1148).

Forum 18 has made repeated efforts between 21-28 July to speak to "Karimov" or anyone else from the Gorizont news agency. No contact phone numbers are available and there has been no reply to a written request from Forum 18 through the feedback form on their website. Uzreport.com, which is associated with Gorizont.uz, told Forum 18 that they did not recognise a reporter called "Karimov". They also could not arrange for Forum 18 to talk with the author of article. "They do not give interviews over the phone, we have been told. You can only contact them through their website," Forum 18 was told by Uzreport.com on 21 July. (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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