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UZBEKISTAN: Muslim and Christian worship attacked

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

Uzbekistan continues to take action against peaceful meetings for worship, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Children in Namangan Region are banned from attending night prayers in mosques during Ramadan, the Deputy Hokim telling Forum 18 that "children of school age should not attend religious meetings at all." In Bukhara region, an imam confirmed to Forum 18 that women are banned from attending Friday prayers in mosques, claiming that "women are not to attend mosques according to Hanafi teachings". Raids continue on Protestant worship, with prosecutions of some congregation members and church leaders. After one such raid, police claimed that they had confiscated Muslim and Jehovah's Witness literature, but the Protestants maintain to Forum 18 that police invented this claim. Senior Lieutenant Farrukh Abduganiyev, Inspector of Crime Prevention in Almalyk, and Major Shavkat Aminov, Chief of the Criminal Investigation Department, were among 18 officers who took part in this raid. Six of the Church's members are due to be tried for unregistered religious activity tomorrow (18 September).

Uzbekistan continues to take action against peaceful meetings for worship, Forum 18 News Service has learned, the latest known incidents being attempts to stop women and children attending mosques and raids on Protestant churches with prosecution of some of their members. After one raid, police claimed that they had confiscated Muslim and Jehovah's Witness literature from Protestants. They have denied to Forum 18 that they possessed this literature. Attempts to stop people attending mosques are currently known to be taking place in both Bukhara [Bukhoro] and Namangan regions.

Children barred from attending mosques

Namangan Region in south-east Uzbekistan is the latest known region to have tried to stop children attending mosques. These moves follow the south-eastern Kashkadarya Region, where Muslim and Christian children and parents have been threatened for attending places of worship (see F18News 12 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1239).

A Muslim in Namangan, who wished to remain unnamed for the fear of reprisals from authorities, told Forum 18 that there is a ban on children attending night prayers in the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. This ban has also been imposed throughout Uzbekistan in the past, particularly in the Fergana [Farghona] Valley which Namangan is part of (see F18News 20 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1020). "Soon everybody in the country will become unbelievers," the Muslim complained to Forum 18 on 17 September. He said that the law does "not allow" children to attend mosques during the school hours but authorities "do not allow children even after school." "I agree that children should go to school but they also need to know about their faith," he stressed.

The ferghana.ru news agency reported on 31 August that police with the imams of mosques are enforcing the ban. "Children belong to the President [Islam Karimov, President of Uzbekistan] not to the religious leaders", the authorities tell imams in weekly meetings of imams," the agency reported. Bahadyr Irisov, Deputy Hokim (Head of Administration) of Namangan Region, is reported by the news agency to have given an order that the Deputy Chief Imam of Namangan should stand at the doors of the main mosque with Police, to bar children from the mosque.

Deputy Hokim Irisov told Forum 18 on 15 September that "the law" bans children from attending mosques or any other religious meetings during the school hours. "My personal opinion is that children of school age should not attend religious meetings at all but study," he stated.

"We are not going to put children in prison," Irisov said, when asked whether anyone would be punished if children were found attending mosques. He did not say whether teachers or parents would be punished.

Irisov claimed that voluntary courses on world religions are taught in schools and higher education institutions throughout the country. "Children can learn about religions in those courses," he said.

Asked whether children in Namangan would be allowed in the mosques for the end of Ramadan celebration, Irisov said he did "not see why not." "It is their choice after all, and we live in a democratic country," he said.

Orders to religious communities to suppress religious activity have often been issued in Uzbekistan (see F18News 27 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936). A document from Andijan [Andijon] regional administrations has revealed the extent to which the authorities issue orders to religious communities – which they are expected to obey (see F18News 21 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=959).

Women barred from attending mosques

Women elsewhere in Uzbekistan are, Forum 18 has been told, being dissuaded from attending mosques. Mutabar Akhmedova, a human rights defender from Tashkent told Forum 18 on 17 September that it is not widely socially acceptable for women to attend mosques, because of the presence of men. But the state authorities particularly disapprove of women who are active Muslims attending mosques.

The authorities in Bukhara Region, in central Uzbekistan, have banned women from attending Friday prayers in mosques, ferghana.ru reported on 17 August. Abdurahim Baltayev, Deputy Hokim of Bukhara Region, who oversees religious organisations, told Forum 18 on 17 September that he is "not aware" of such a ban, and the Hokimat (Administration) has not given such instruction. "Please, ask the mosques or medressahs [Islamic religious schools]," he responded. Asked whether women are allowed to attend mosques, he said, "I cannot say anything, I am not a specialist on that issue."

Janmuhammad Gulov, the Imam of the Piri Dastgir mosque, told Forum 18 on 17 September that around 20 women attend the mosque for prayers, and that they have not told women to stop coming. "Please talk to the Chief Imam [of Bukhara] Mukhiddin Nugmanov," he said, who issued the ban. He added that "women are not to attend mosque according to Hanafi teachings" for the Friday sermons.

Shokhida Abdullayeva, the Director of Bukhara's women's medressah "Zhubori Kalon" had told ferghana.ru that "Women attend mosques because of their ignorance." She refused to talk to Forum 18 on 17 September and put the phone down as soon as she heard Forum 18's name. Called back minutes later, her Secretary (who did not give her name) said that "the Director is not here, please talk to Imam Mukhiddin Nugmanov," and put the phone down.

Chief Imam Nugmanov's phone went unanswered on 17 September.

Muslim religious activity has been particularly targeted by the authorities during 2009, with 47 known prisoners of conscience, who are followers of the approach of Turkish theologian Said Nursi, being sentenced to long prison terms this year (see F18News 31 August 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1344).

Raid, prosecutions, church disputes confiscated literature claims

In Almalyk [Olmalik], near the capital Tashkent, 18 police officers raided Sunday morning worship of the unregistered United Independent Protestant Church, on 16 August. On 12 September prosecutions against six church members - Sergei Galashin, Valentina Kotikova, Rustam Abdulhayev, Mahira Abdulhayeva, Denis Bush (who is a Russian citizen) and Sergei Zarubin – were brought before the town's Criminal Court. The six are being tried under part 1 Article 240 of the Administrative Code, which punishes violations of the Religion Law, a Protestant who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18.

Unregistered religious activity is – in defiance of international human rights agreements – a criminal offence in Uzbekistan.

The Chancellery of the Court referred Forum 18 on 16 September to Judge Islom Noyobov, who will try the case. "Please come to the trial on Friday (18 September) at 10 in the morning," he told Forum 18 when asked what the charges were. He refused to talk about the case further, and hung up the phone.

The raid was, Protestants told Forum 18, made under the guise of a passport check-up at 9 am. Police broke into the building used for worship – which is rented from an officially registered church – and among the officers taking part were Major Shavkat Aminov, Chief of Almalyk Police's Criminal Investigation Department, and Senior Lieutenant Farrukh Abduganiyev, Inspector of Crime Prevention.

Even worship by registered churches in registered buildings have recently been raided, with 15-day prison sentences being imposed for the "offence" of an allegedly "unauthorised" religious meeting (see F18News 26 August 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1341). Registration is in practice used by the authorities as a weapon against freedom of religion or belief (see F18News 4 August 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1334).

Almalyk Police confiscated a computer hard disk and some Christian books. However 10 of the books the police claimed to have confiscated were, Protestants maintain, neither at the church or taken during the raid. These include a book entitled "Koran, the holy book of Muslims", and copies of Jehovah's Witness Watchtower magazines.

Police refused to talk to Forum 18 about the case on 15 September. The officer on duty asked Forum 18 to wait and then claimed

that Major Aminov was busy and not available to talk. Senior Lieutenant Abduganiyev said – from the police station - that he "was on holidays" on 16 August. He denied taking part in the raid. "I have not checked up on that church," he claimed to Forum 18. Asked which of his colleagues participated in the raid, he stated that "I will not give you any information over the phone." He then terminated the call abruptly.

Fined for unregistered worship

Following a raid on Sunday worship of an unregistered Baptist church in Gazalkent, Tashkent Region, on 23 August, Judge Gulsara Buranova of the Bostanlyk District Criminal Court on 24 August fined church leader Aleksandr Yugay 33,645 Soms (130 Norwegian Kroner, 15 Euros, or 22 US Dollars) under the Administrative Code's article 240. The minimum monthly salary in Uzbekistan is, from 16 November 2008, 28,040 Soms (128 Norwegian Kroner, 15 Euros or 20 US Dollars). Most of the population is poor, and has to exist on incomes that are very low.

Judge Buranova claimed to Forum 18 on 17 September that she could have given Yugay "a huge fine" under the same article but she "took into account his financial status" when giving a "minimal" fine. She did not want to comment why the police interrupted the peaceful worship of the Baptists, or what kind of punishment the Baptists would be given if found guilty of a repeat "offence." "Please, send us an official inquiry," she told Forum 18.

Unsuccessful challenge to fine

Kashkadarya Regional Criminal Court in an appeal case on 7 August upheld the Region's Mubarek District Court's decision of 9 July to punish Said Tursunov and Vladimir Khanyukov – who belong to a local unregistered Baptist Church – the equivalent of ten times the minimum monthly salary, 280,400 Soms (1,150 Norwegian Kroner, 130 Euros, or 185 US Dollars) each. The two men were charged under the Administrative Code's article 240 part 1 and article 241. Article 240 punishes violation of the Religion Law, and article 241 punishes teaching religious doctrines without state permission (see F18News 31 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1333). (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