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UZBEKISTAN: Threats, raids and violence against religious believers

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Three members of the unregistered Greater Grace Protestant Church have been given heavy fines in Samarkand in central Uzbekistan, Forum 18 News Service has learned. The fines followed a police raid on a private home, after which children and teenagers were illegally interrogated without their parents being present. A church member was also threatened with jail unless he confessed that he taught the Bible, which would have rendered him liable to prosecution for teaching religious doctrines without the permission of the state and a registered religious organisation. The church has been unsuccessfully seeking state registration since 2000. Church members also complained that the NSS secret police has been closely watching them recently. A Muslim refugee has also complained to the BBC of NSS attempts to recruit him as an informer. In a separate case, two Protestant women in eastern Uzbekistan are facing charges after a raid, and one of the women was beaten up when she refused to confess to missionary activity, a criminal offence in Uzbekistan.

Three members of the Greater Grace Protestant Church were given heavy fines on 2 February by Samarkand [Samarqand] City Court in central Uzbekistan, church members told Forum 18 News Service. The fines followed a police raid on a private home. Church members complained on 19 February that the National Security Service (NSS) secret police had been closely watching them in recent months and collecting information about them. "After the earlier raids and questionings of our pastor by police, we would only meet a few times a month and even then in a low-profile way. Now we have cancelled all our meetings and Bible classes."

Greater Grace Church has been seeking state registration since it first lodged an application for this in March 2000. However the authorities have refused to allow the church to register. Unregistered religious activity is – in defiance of international human rights standards - a criminal offence in Uzbekistan. Greater Grace Church members lament the long refusal of officials to grant them registration. "Many times in the past we applied to the Samarkand authorities to register us but we were refused," one church member complained to Forum 18. "We even went all the way in person to the state Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent in 2005, and they also refused us registration."

Police and the National Security Service (NSS) secret police raided the church in April 2009, after which church members became afraid to meet publicly (see F18News 7 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1322).

Begzod Kodyrov of the government's Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent refused to discuss the latest harassment of religious communities with Forum 18 on 19 February.

Illegal interrogation of teenagers and children after raid

On 24 January, police raided the home of a mother and son, Pavel and Tatyana Posrednikov, who are both members of Samarkand's Greater Grace Church. Police took Pavel Posrednikov, who works with young people, together with five young adults aged between 19 and 22 as well as two boys and a girl aged between 12 and 15 to Samarkand City Police. All nine were held for five hours and forced to write statements, church members told Forum 18. Parents of the underage children were not present during their interrogation. "From the interrogation at the Police it became clear to us that the Police knew all the places where we gathered and those flats were under surveillance," a church member who wished to be anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18.

The teenagers were interrogated without their parents being present. "The fact the three juveniles were made to write statements in the absence of their parents is against the law," a church member told Forum 18. "Police made the children write down the names of those in the church who preached and taught the Bible."

Forum 18 was unable to find out why the children were questioned at the police station for up to five hours without parents, guardians or their teacher being present, and without parental permission. This appears to violate several articles of Uzbekistan's Criminal Procedure Code, legal experts told Forum 18.

Article 121, which covers "Special features of questioning minor witnesses or victims", requires parents, guardians or a teacher to be

present during questioning of witnesses or victims who are not yet 16. In addition, Article 116 of the Code says that "close relatives" of suspects can be questioned as witnesses or victims only with their consent. "These Articles apply both in court and at a police station," one legal expert told Forum 18.

Church member threatened with jail

The following day, another church member, Tohir Bakaev, was questioned at the local Police Station by the local Police officer Orif Safarov and other police officers whose names are not known, church members told Forum 18. Officer Safarov and the other officers asked Bakaev: "You are [an ethnic] Tajik. Why did you convert to Christianity? Why do you teach others the Bible?" The officers tried to compel him to confess in writing that he taught the Bible to others. "Tohir was warned that if he did not confess then he would be put into prison," church members added.

Article 241 of the Administrative Code bans "teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately". A recent high-profile case, which has been used by the authorities to incite intolerance of freedom of religion and belief and of Baptists, as well as to remove the country's registered Baptist leadership, featured the use of this Article to impose a heavy fine for peaceful religious activity (see F18News 22 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1411). Bakaev may have been pressured to confess this "offence" to allow the authorities to use this Article against him.

Safarov, the local Police officer, denied that he threatened Bakaev with prison. "I only accompanied the officers from the Anti-Terrorism Department of Samarkand Police while they questioned Bakaev," he told Forum 18 on 19 February. Asked why Anti-Terrorism Police should question peaceful Christians, Officer Safarov said, "Look, I don't know what is going on, and why the Anti-Terrorism Police do that." Asked if he was going to raid or check up on church members again, he responded: "I have no problem with them."

As a result of a previous police and NSS secret police raid on 1 April 2009 the church lost its place for holding Sunday worship services and Bible classes (see F18News 8 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1282). In the aftermath of that raid, some church members became "afraid to meet in people's homes" one member told Forum 18 in June 2009 (see F18News 7 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1322).

Three church members fined

Judge Nizamiddin Ernazarov of Samarkand City Criminal Court on 2 February found Tohir Bakaev, Pavel Posrednikov and Tatyana Posrednikova guilty of breaking Administrative Code Article 241 ("teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately"). According to the verdict seen by Forum 18, Bakaev and Posrednikov were each fined eight times the minimum monthly wage or 301,440 Soms (1,154 Norwegian Kroner, 143 Euros or 195 US Dollars). Posrednikova was fined five times the minimum monthly wage or 188,400 Soms (721 Norwegian Kroner, 90 Euros or 122 US Dollars).

The verdict says that all three defendants had gathered eight persons on 24 January "in their home" to teach religion without official permission. However, church members insisted to Forum 18 that Bakaev had not been present that day.

The court verdict does not say in whose home the Protestants taught, who exactly taught, and who took note of the participants. The court decision does not give any names of officials who raided the meeting, merely stating that these three had an unauthorised meeting with eight people on 24 January.

The court also confiscated from the Posrednikovs fourteen Christian books in Russian and eleven in English, three Bibles, one Bible commentary, 117 CD discs, 67 audio-cassette tapes, 29 notebooks with notes, and one Compaq notebook computer. It ordered the confiscated items to be sent to the Committee for Religious Affairs in Tashkent to study the legality of the contents.

Dilshod (he did not give his last name), the Assistant to Judge Ernazarov, said Ernazarov was hearing a case, and was not available to talk. "He will not talk to you anyway since they are not allowed now to go public about court cases by new procedural regulations," he told Forum 18 on 19 February when he found out that Forum 18 was asking about the case of the three Greater Grace Church members.

The three appealed against the verdict. The case is due to be heard on 25 February in Samarkand Regional Criminal Court.

Two Protestants facing charges?

In another case, two Protestant women in the eastern Andijan [Andijon] Region are facing possible charges of "violating the law on religious organisations" under Article 240 of the Code of Administrative Offences, Protestants who asked not to be identified for fear of reprisals told Forum 18. The women – Dilrabo Hurmatova and Madina Turdieva – were detained on 9 February when five police officers – led by Daniyoz Rahimov of the Karasu District Police Investigation Department – raided a private home in Karasu

District.

At Karasu District Police Station, officers tried to force the women to write statements that they were conducting missionary activity. This activity is a criminal offence in Uzbekistan, despite the human rights standards the country has agreed to be bound by. Protestants told Forum 18 that police prevention officer Bahodir Tuhtarov, who had taken part in the raid, beat Turdieva when she refused to write a statement.

The UN Committee Against Torture found in November 2007 that the use of torture by state officials is "routine" in Uzbekistan.

On 17 February, after Turdieva felt worse, she sought treatment in a clinic in Andijan. The doctor who treated her declined to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 24 February, citing patient confidentiality.

Protestants say a case against the Hurmatova and Turdieva under Article 240 has been prepared and the documents have been handed to Karasu District Criminal Court.

However, reached on 24 February, police officer Rahimov denied absolutely that the two women had been detained. "Detention would have been a violation of their human rights," he told Forum 18. Asked why the two had been pressured to write statements and whether officer Tuhtarov had beaten Turdieva, he insisted neither was true. He also denied that any administrative case has been prepared against them.

Spies in religious communities

Meanwhile, the NSS secret police continue to use spies inside religious communities. NSS covert and overt surveillance of religious communities is very widespread. "The NSS especially tries to recruit among the leaders, trying to find out how what's going on within each community, who is going where, how much money each gets, where the community gets its money from," one source told Forum 18 (see F18News 5 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1014).

An Uzbek Muslim in his early 20s, who asked not to be identified, told a BBC Central Asia correspondent that he had fled Uzbekistan after being forced by the NSS to become an informer. Since arriving in Kazakhstan he has been registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as an asylum seeker and is currently living in the city of Almaty. He claims he was targeted by the NSS because of an Islamic education he received abroad.

"Under a false pretext they took me to their headquarters, they beat me and questioned me for many hours. They said that they would let me go if I agreed to serve my country," the BBC on 30 January quoted the man as saying. He added that he was told one of his tasks would be to provide a list of people who attended prayers at mosques. But when he received his first orders he decided to leave the country. (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all 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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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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