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UZBEKISTAN: Muslims jailed, lawyers, church and Christian former prisoners of conscience threatened

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

Following a closed trial, Uzbekistan has imposed prison sentences of up to six years and fines on 19 Muslims, Forum 18 News Service has learned. "The case was fabricated," human rights defender Surat Ikramov complained, stating that the trial was conducted in "flagrant violation" of the Criminal Procedure Code. In a separate trial 10 other prisoners of conscience, who read works by the Muslim theologian Said Nursi, were jailed for between eight years and five years and two months. Lawyers defending three former prisoners of conscience from Tashkent's Protestant Church of Christ have been threatened by the authorities that "they could be stripped of their licences if they continue to defend these cases." Similarly, the Religious Affairs Committee has threatened to strip the registered church of legal status if church members continue to complain about the jailings and other human rights violations. Two Protestant former prisoners of conscience in the south have also been threatened by police, and have had to leave their homes. "In one instance one of them was told by a police officer that they will always breathe down their necks, as long as they continue their Christian activity," Forum 18 was told.

Uzbekistan has jailed and fined more Muslims engaged in peaceful religious activity, and threatened recently jailed and released Protestant Christians and those defending them, Forum 18 News Service has learned. It has also threatened to strip a church in the capital Tashkent of legal status, if church members continue to speak out about a raid, arrests, fines, jailings, book and equipment destructions and confiscations, as well as interruption of their worship service.

The state Religious Affairs Committee refused to comments on any of the cases. Through his Secretary, Committee Chair Artyk Yusupov told Forum 18 on 3 June to talk to Begzod Kodyrov, their leading specialist. Kodyrov stated that he did not want to make comments and put the phone down. The assistant of Muzaffar Akhmedjanov, advisor on Nationalities and Religions to Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov, on 3 June refused to comment any of the cases. She referred Forum 18 back to the Religious Affairs Committee. "We have not received any complaints," she stated. "Please talk to the Religious Affairs Committee." She commented that "I don't know what to say", when told that Committee officials refused to discuss the cases.

Muslims jailed, fined and given suspended sentences

Following a closed trial, which took place outside the capital Tashkent, the Tashkent Regional Court under Judge Ikhtiyar Doniyarov on 27 May imposed prison sentences of up to six years and fines on 19 Muslims. Roadblocks were set up by the authorities around the court building (see F18News 10 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1442).

Six defendants were given sentences in a labour camp. Well-known Muslim religious journalist Hairulla Hamidov, as well as Abdukarim Inamutdinov, Orol Togoymuratov and Bahodyr Batyrov were each given six year terms. Anvarjon Kayumov and his son Mukhamadniyoz Kayumov were each given four year terms, human rights defender Surat Ikramov told Forum 18 on 1 June.

Eight defendants - Umid Inamutdinov (Abdukarim's son), Zoir Jurayev, Gulom Ziyoyev, Abdurahim Bayboyev, Ulugbek Payziyev, Doniyor Ibrahimov, Abrar Turakulov and Davlatjon Ibrahimov - were given three year suspended prison terms and freed in the courtroom, Ikramov said.

Five defendants - Aziz Saidov, Saidhuja Erhujayev, Jahongir Hikmatov, Izzatulla Saidullayev and Tohirjon Ismoilov - who were not put in custody during the prosecution, were each fined 25 times the minimum monthly wage, 841,125 Soms.

All 19 defendants faced a variety of serious Criminal Code charges (see F18News 10 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1442).

A Tashkent Regional Court official asked Forum 18 to call back in three hours, when asked to comment on the case. Called back later, the same official said it was a wrong number.

"The case was fabricated," human rights defender Ikramov complained. He said that the trial was conducted in "flagrant violation"

of the Criminal Procedure Code. Ikramov complained that the defendants were subjected to physical and psychological torture by police during the pretrial investigation. "The court did not prove the guilt of the defendants, and none of the defendants pleaded guilty of the charges brought against them." Lawyers in the case have said that the defendants will appeal against the court decision, Ikramov told Forum 18.

Fergana Muslims following Nursi's approach jailed

Uzbekistan frequently prosecutes and jails readers of the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi (see eg. F18News 10 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1442). The latest victims of this policy are 10 Muslims sentenced by Judge Sherali Komilov of the Fergana [Farghona] Regional Criminal Court on 31 May. The 10 were all jailed: Suhrob Zokirov was jailed for eight years; Islom Alikulov was jailed for seven years; Islom Manopov, Alisher Karimov, Farhod Sarymsokov, Botyr Sheraliyev and Kudrat Sultonov were jailed for six years; and Nosyr Mamazhanov, Muhammad Yarmatov and Ramzhon Abdukodyrov were jailed for five years and two months.

All the prisoners of conscience were charged under Uzbekistan's Criminal Code's articles 244-1 ("preparation or distribution of materials threatening public security and public order") and 244-2 ("creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist or fundamentalist or other banned organisations"), human rights defender Ikramov told Forum 18.

Although the Court did not prove the guilt of the defendants, some of them asked for forgiveness, which was ignored by the court, Ikramov complained. "Close relatives of the defendants consider that the criminal case was fabricated, and that the defendants' only guilt was that they were Muslim and prayed regularly," he stated.

Manopov's family on 1 June confirmed his conviction to Forum 18. They said they were not going to appeal since the court made a decision "based on the law" and "nothing can be changed now." The relative thanked Forum 18 for its concern, and said that "we live in this country, and we need to obey its laws."

Relatives and friends of those sentenced for peaceful religious activity are often reluctant to speak publicly, for fear that this may attract state reprisals against themselves or those known to them.

The official who answered the Fergana Court Chair's telephone on 3 June referred Forum 18 to Judge Komilov. Judge Komilov's phone went unanswered. When Forum 18 tried to reach him through the other phones of the court, it was given several responses. These varied between him hearing a case, or being on a business trip in the region.

More jailings

A court in the southern Surkhandarya Region has punished Obidjon Toshpulatov, Chori Tagayev, and Shavkat Mengniyazov, for "spreading fundamentalist religious ideas among the population," two government sponsored news agencies reported on 19 May. Both of the agencies - press-uz.info and 12.uz - published identical articles under two different headings: "Wolves in Lamb skins" and "Nursi extremist organisation's followers convicted in Uzbekistan". The agencies stated that the three were given prison sentences of between four and eight years.

The Chair of Surkhandarya Regional Court through his Assistant (who did not give their names) on 3 June listened to Forum 18's questions on when the three were tried and what charges were brought against them. Forum 18 was asked to call back in two hours, but when the Assistant answered the phone then they hung up the phone as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself.

"Instead the lawyers were threatened"

Three members of Tashkent's Protestant Church of Christ - Assistant Pastor Artur Avanesyan, Vyacheslav Dechkov and Bahodiyr Adambaev - who were given 15-day administrative arrests were all released on time on 2 June, Forum 18 was told by a church member on 3 June (see F18News 18 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1445).

However, their lawyers have been threatened by the authorities that "they could be stripped of their licences if they continue to defend these cases." Similarly, the Religious Affairs Committee has threatened to strip the registered church of its legal status if church members continue to complain about the raid, arrests, fines, jailings, book and equipment destructions and confiscations, as well as interruption of their worship service.

The Church of Christ has been able to meet for worship for the last two weeks, after the raid and the arrests. But electricity to the church building has been cut off by the Tashkent Fire Brigade, and the church cannot use its offices as they were sealed by law-enforcement agencies, a church member told Forum 18 on 3 June.

Assistant Pastor Avanesyan was held in custody separately from the other two prisoners of conscience. Although he was not physically harassed, he was put under "psychologically strenuous" conditions as the two non-Protestants he was held with were later given prison sentences. "We believe it was done to make the Pastor think that he would also be imprisoned," a Protestant told Forum

18 on 3 June. "He has lost a lot of weight because of this pressure."

A church member complained on 3 June that the authorities have not taken seriously the church's complaint of 26 May against unlawful actions by law-enforcement agencies. "Instead the lawyers were threatened." The complaint was sent to President Karimov, the Religious Affairs Committee, and law-enforcement agencies.

Two Protestant former prisoners of conscience threatened

Two Protestant former prisoners of conscience, Azamat Rajapov and Abdusattor Kurbonov, have had to leave their homes in Termez, in the southern Surkhandarya Region, because of pressure on them by the police, a local Protestant told Forum 18 on 3 June. "They both saw unidentified persons in plain clothes around their homes often, and they were followed when they were on the street," the Protestant complained (see F18News 29 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1438).

"In one instance one of them was told by a police officer that they will always breathe down their necks, as long as they continue their Christian activity," Forum 18 was told. Several times since the Protestants' release, copies of newspaper articles attacking them by name have been anonymously sent to them. Local Protestants strongly suspect that this is an attempt by the authorities to intimidate the two former prisoners of conscience.

Uzbekistan frequently uses the mass media to encourage intolerance of religious minorities and freedom of religion or belief, and has used this tactic against the two former prisoners of conscience specifically (see F18News 29 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1438).

The two Protestants were each sentenced to jail terms on 23 April after Uzbekistan resumed short-term jailings of members of religious minorities (see F18News 29 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1438). (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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