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UZBEKISTAN: "Anti-terror" raid on old people's home

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

Six Baptists who led Sunday worship in an old people's home near Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent face criminal and administrative charges after an "anti-terror operation" against their service, Baptists told Forum 18 News Service. Asked why the authorities halted the service and harassed participants, deputy police chief Major Sofar Fayziyev – who took part in the raid – told Forum 18: "They could not produce any proof that they had authorisation for their activity." Elsewhere, three Baptists were fined after police raided a Sunday morning church service. As happens frequently, the court verdict ordered the destruction of Bibles and other confiscated Christian literature. And Judge Abdumumin Rahimov who handed a massive fine to a young resident of Navoi for transporting Jehovah's Witness literature insists that "the main purpose of the punishment is not revenge against the offender, but teaching him to respect the law".

A Sunday worship service led by Baptists in an old people's home in Uzbekistan's Tashkent Region was halted by police and district administration officials on 13 March, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Police claimed they were on an "anti-terror operation" and are preparing criminal and administrative case against the Baptists. Elsewhere, in the central Syrdarya Region a court in late January fined a local Baptist 50 times the minimum monthly wage for holding an unauthorised meeting in his home. Police in the same region in early March raided the Sunday worship of an unregistered Baptist Church, whose leader and two other church members were later fined. In the central Navoi [Nawoiy] Region, a District Court handed down a heavy fine on a local resident for carrying officially permitted Jehovah's Witnesses literature.

"Anti-terror operation"?

On 13 March Tashkent Region's Ohangaron District Police raided a Sunday worship service for elderly residents in the Sakhovat (Kindness) old people's home in Ohangaron. "Police unexpectedly broke into the foyer of the nursing home during the service, and halted it, saying that they were carrying out an anti-terror operation," local Baptists told Forum 18. The raid was led by Bakhtiyar Salibayev, Head of Ohangaron District Administration, and Major Sofar Fayziyev, Deputy Head of the District Police, accompanied by District Police criminal investigators.

Six Baptists - Igor Voloshin, Larisa Lankina, Irina Abdurahimova, Lidiya Guseva, Tatyana Balantayeva and Elvira Khabibulina – were leading the service. When they told officials that they had verbal agreement from the District Administration for the services, the police insisted that the meeting was unauthorised.

The six are members of the congregation in the capital Tashkent of the Council of Churches Baptists, who refuse on principle to register their congregations with the state.

Insults, threats

During the next four hours at the old people's home, police officers insulted the Baptists and threatened them with punishment, Baptists complained. Forum 18 notes that such insults usually consist of accusations that they are "traitors" and "spies", and are frequently accompanied by swearing.

The officials filmed everybody present with cameras and cell phones, despite their objections. Police then searched the Baptists and their car, and confiscated Christian cassette-tapes, CDs, song books, notebooks, leaflets, a digital camera, a personal Bible and money. The police did not give the Baptists a copy of the confiscation records.

Each church member was then separately photographed, and their personal data recorded. They were finally put in the police car and taken to Ohangaron City Police. The elderly residents of the nursing home accompanied the six Baptists to the door "with tears in their eyes," the Baptists told Forum 18.

At the Police Station the Baptists were asked to write statements, which they refused to do. Police brought charges against the six under Criminal Code Article 195 ("Resisting the orders of police officers") and Article 201 of the Code of Administrative Offences ("Violation of the procedure for organising and conducting meetings, street processions or demonstrations"), Baptists told Forum 18.

The Baptists were not released until after midnight, being given a written summons to return during the day on 14 March. When the six Baptists returned as instructed, they were detained for the whole day. Police only released them after taking Voloshin's fingerprints, and returning some of the personal items confiscated the previous day.

Police told the Baptists that there would be a trial in a few days.

"I don't know"

Salibayev of Ohangaron District Administration refused to discuss the raid and prosecutions, saying he was newly appointed to his position and "just familiarising" himself with the area. "I don't know if they [the Baptists] had agreement with the Administration, and I don't know what charges the [state] agencies will bring," was all he would tell Forum 18 on 17 March.

Police Major Fayziyev was also reluctant to talk. "We don't know whether we will open a criminal or an administrative case yet," he told Forum 18 on 17 March. "It will all depend on the results of the expert analysis of the literature we confiscated from them."

Asked why the authorities halted the service and harassed participants, he responded: "They could not produce any proof that they had authorisation for their activity." When Forum 18 repeated the question he said: "Look, I don't know you, and I already gave enough information." He then put the phone down. Forum 18 was unable to ask why an "anti-terror operation" had been launched against a religious service in an old people's home.

Charges follow raid on Sunday worship

In Syrdarya Region, twelve officers of Gulistan District Police broke into the building of the Baptist Church in the village of Dustlik on 6 March at 9.45 am. Members of the congregation – which is not registered - had already begun their worship service.

The officers did not identify themselves, but Baptists told Forum 18 one was the local Police Chief. Police confiscated 20 Christian songbooks, 3 Bibles, a New Testament and 20 copies of the magazine Herald of Truth. This was sent to the state Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent for an "expert analysis".

Police also opened an administrative case against Bayram Muradov, the church's leader, Baptists told Forum 18.

The Religious Affairs Committee's chief specialist who produces "expert analyses" is Begzod Kodyrov. Local Protestants who asked not to be identified claimed that each time Kodyrov produces an expert analysis, he violates the procedure laid down in Article 184 of the Criminal Procedure Code ("Opinions from an Expert Examiner").

This states in part that: "The opinion of the expert examiner shall include: his last, first name, patronymic, background, education, academic specialisation, length of service, academic degree and/or academic title, work position; notification of liability for refusal to draw up an opinion as well as for an opinion known to be false; grounds to conduct an expert examination and time taken; persons who were present during the expert examination; case papers studied by the expert examiner; physical evidence, samples, and other objects examined, methods applied and their reliability; valid answers to the questions posed and the relevant circumstances established on the initiative of the expert examiner."

Local Protestants claim that Kodyrov usually omits to give his full name, education, academic specialisation, his work experience, his occupation within the Committee, and on what criteria he - for example - "deems that a certain book could be used for missionary purposes among the native population and thus its import into Uzbekistan and its use is banned".

Article 187 of the Criminal Procedure Code ("Evaluation of an Opinion from an Expert Examiner") states in part that: "The expert examiner's opinion shall be evaluated by the inquiry officer, investigator, or the court, together with other evidence on the case, in terms of its scientific validity and compliance with all established procedural rules".

Kodyrov refused absolutely to discuss his analyses – or anything else – with Forum 18 on 22 March. "Anything you want to learn about our activity or our decisions, you can ask the Foreign Ministry." He then put down the phone.

"Expert analyses" are routinely used as an excuse to confiscate any book the authorities decide to confiscate (see eg. F18News 20 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1298). A very strict censorship regime is applied against religious literature and other material of all faiths (see F18News 1 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1153).

Fines, Bibles and hymnbooks ordered destroyed

On 16 March, Judge Ulugbek Jumayev of Gulistan Criminal Court found Muradov and two other church members – Natalya Utyaganova and Nadezhda Davydova – guilty under Administrative Code Article 240 Part 1 ("violation of the law on religious organisations") and 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, each was fined one month's minimum wage, 49,735 Soms (165 Norwegian Kroner, 21 Euros or 30 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

Testifying to the church members' guilt in addition to the police was V. Akramova, the head of the mahalla committee, the lowest level of administration in Uzbekistan.

The verdict also ordered that the Bibles, hymnbooks and other Christian literature confiscated during the raid on the 6 March service be destroyed.

Courts in Uzbekistan frequently order that religious literature – including Bibles - confiscated during raids be destroyed (see F18News 18 February 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1542).

Gulistan District Police referred Forum 18 to Deputy Police Chief Bahodir Kushbakov on 18 March. However his phone was not answered that day. The duty officer later told Forum 18 that Kushbakov was "in a meeting and unavailable".

Fine for literature "teaches respect for the law"?

A young resident of Navoi, Pavel Slivin, was stopped at a bus station in the town by Karmana District police officers while carrying a package of books. He was taken to the nearby Police Station where he was asked to show the contents of the package. This had 24 copies in Russian and 13 copies in Uzbek of "The Watchtower" magazine, as well as 17 copies of another publication, "Awake!" All the literature had been officially approved by the Religious Affairs Committee.

Despite this, Navoi Region's Karmana District Criminal Court fined Slivin 70 times the minimum monthly wage, 3,481,450 Soms (11,500 Norwegian Kroner, 1,455 Euros or 2,065 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). This was under Administrative Code Article 240 for carrying Jehovah's Witnesses literature, Znamya Druzhby (Banner of Friendship), Navoi regional administration's official newspaper, reported on 18 February. Judge Abdumumin Rahimov, who signed the article, did not give the date or other details of the trial.

Judge Makhpirat Shodiyeva, Chair of Karmana Court, confirmed that Judge Rahimov tried Slivin but declined to comment further on the case. "I cannot explain his decision," Judge Shodiyeva responded on 18 March when asked why such huge fine for religious literature officially allowed in Uzbekistan. She said Rahimov is not available to talk, and that he is "on vacation". She also refused to give other details of the case.

"The authorities found out that the literature found on Slivin may be used for the internal use of officially registered religious organisations [Jehovah's Witnesses] but the intention was to use it in homes and other premises illegally," the judge noted in his Znamya Druzhby article, without explaining why he believed the publications were for distribution outside the Jehovah's Witness community. Slivin told the police that he was only carrying the books for someone else, and that he was paid to deliver the books, but the judge claimed that the police "did not believe his fairy story".

Referring to the fine, the judge wrote that his Karmana Court verdict "shows that first of all no law-breaking will be unpunished, secondly that ignorance of laws does not free one from responsibility, and thirdly that the main purpose of the punishment is not revenge against the offender, but teaching him to respect the law."

Fine for unregistered worship, Bibles ordered destroyed

On 6 January police raided Andrei Shevchenko's flat in Syrdarya and opened charges against him (see F18News 9 February 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1538). On 19 January Judge Batyr Sorabekov of Syrdarya City Court fined Shevchenko under Administrative Code Article 240 ("violation of the law on religious organisations"). The fine was 50 times the minimum monthly wage, 2,486,750 Soms (8,215 Norwegian Kroner, 1,040 Euros or 1,475 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

The verdict, which Forum 18 has seen, also orders the destruction of several Christian books in Uzbek, Tajik, Kazakh and Russian, a Bible and New Testament in Uzbek, and a New Testament in Tajik. All the literature was confiscated from Shevchenko during the raid.

Judge Sorabekov's assistant (who did not give his name) on 18 March told Forum 18 that Judge Sorabekov was busy and asked Forum 18 to call later. After several calls he told Forum 18 that he could not comment on the case, and that Judge Sorabekov was not available to talk. (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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