

9 October 2003

UZBEKISTAN: Perpetual raids on village Baptist church

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Almost two months after eight church members were sentenced for their activity with the church, Forum 18 has been unable to find out from officials why they are still preventing a local Baptist church from meeting for worship in the village of Khalkabad in Namangan region. "We are doing this at the request of the Baptists' parents, who are unhappy that their children have changed their faith," local police officer Bahtier (who refused to give his full name) claimed to Forum 18 News Service. "Police officers come to virtually every meeting we hold," Aleksandr Tyan – one of five church members imprisoned for ten days in August - told Forum 18.

Nearly two months after five church members were imprisoned for ten days and three fined, the local authorities are still preventing a local Baptist church from meeting for worship in the village of Khalkabad in the Pap district of Namangan region, in Uzbekistan's section of the Fergana valley. "Police officers come to virtually every meeting we hold," church member Aleksandr Tyan – one of those imprisoned in August - told Forum 18 News Service in Khalkabad on 7 October. "The police are also stopping our fellow-believers in Fergana from coming to Khalkabad."

Forum 18 has been unable to find out from officials why they are still preventing the church from meeting. The divisional police officer for Khalkabad, Bahtier, even refused to give Forum 18 his full name. "I have a junior job. Why do you want to talk to me? Go to Pap, and talk to my superior," he told Forum 18 on 7 October in Khalkabad. However, Bahtier admitted that the police were indeed still attending the Baptists' meetings. "We are doing this at the request of the Baptists' parents, who are unhappy that their children have changed their faith," he claimed. "Personally, I cannot understand these Baptists either. Why do they think it is a sin to watch television and read newspapers?"

The most recent problems for the church began on 15 August, when police arrested eight church members – five men and three women - during a service in a home in Khalkabad. The following day the Pap district criminal court sentenced the five men – E. Kim, S. Stanislavsky, Nikolai Zulfikarov, and Odiljon Solijonov, in addition to Tyan - to 10 days' imprisonment, with each being ordered to pay 816 sums for each day of detention in temporary cells in Namangan (63 Norwegian kroner, 8 Euros or 8 US dollars for the total of 10 days). The women Baptists, Irina Boiko, N. Stanislavskaya and the owner of the apartment A. Osnovina, were each handed down a fine of 6,440 sums (51 Norwegian kroner, 6 Euros or 7 US dollars) (see F18News 25 August 2003).

Tyan told Forum 18 that although initially he and his four fellow Baptists had been ordered to pay for their detention in temporary cells, the authorities had now retracted this demand, although they were still forbidding them to meet.

The Khalkabad congregation belongs to the Council of Churches (or unregistered Baptists), which split from the All-Union Council of Baptists in 1961, when further state-sponsored controls were introduced by the then Baptist leadership. It has refused state registration ever since in all the post-Soviet republics where it operates, believing that such registration leads to unwarranted state interference. According to one of its pastors in Moscow, it has 3,705 congregations throughout the former Soviet Union.

Khalkabad is a village attached to a rubber factory. The average monthly wage for a factory worker is around 25,000 sums (180 Norwegian kroner, 22 Euros or 25 US dollars), and even this is only paid with a six month delay. When the Soviet Union collapsed, most of the factory workers were ethnic Russians and today the majority of them have emigrated to Russia. Almost all the people who remain in the village are pensioners and alcoholics.

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