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UZBEKISTAN: Singing and reading Bibles on holiday prosecuted

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

Police in Uzbekistan on 1 December raided a group of about 80 Protestants on holiday together, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Charges under six different articles of the Code of Administrative Offences have been brought against four of the group, who were meeting together discussing their faith and singing Christian songs. Police confiscated three Bibles and 100 Christian songbooks, insulted the group, and took their fingerprints of all present. People must worship "only in registered places specifically set up for religious purposes", police insisted to Forum 18. In November three Protestants were fined sums of between 100 and 20 times the minimum monthly wage for meeting together, reading their Bibles, singing Christian songs, praying, and possessing religious books – all without state permission. The books, including Bibles, were ordered to be destroyed. And a Jehovah's Witness has been fined 10 times the minimum monthly wage for possessing religious books.

Uzbekistan continues to raid people exercising freedom of religion or belief without state permission, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Police on 1 December raided a group of about 80 Protestants on holiday together in the Simurg (Phoenix) resort, in Bostanlyk District in Tashkent Region around the capital. Charges under six different articles of the Code of Administrative Offences have been brought against four of the group, who were meeting together discussing their faith and singing Christian songs. Police also confiscated three Bibles and 100 Christian songbooks, insulted the group, and took their fingerprints of all present.

In November three Protestants were fined sums of between 100 and 20 times the minimum monthly wage for meeting together, reading their Bibles, singing Christian songs, praying, and possessing religious books – all without state permission. The books, including Bibles, were ordered to be destroyed. Timur Kholmatorov was fined 100 times the minimum monthly wage under the same six Administrative Code articles that the four Protestants charged after the raid on the Simurg (Phoenix) resort are being charged with breaking. And a Jehovah's Witness has been fined 10 times the minimum monthly wage for possessing religious books. He and his wife have also been subjected to attack in the state-controlled mass media.

Singing and reading Bibles on holiday prosecuted

On 1 December police in Bostanlyk District raided a group of Protestants on holiday together, Forum 18 has learned. The group of about 80 Protestants were on holiday at the Simurg (Phoenix) resort, in the village of Sailyk, when 12 police raided them as they were meeting together discussing their faith and singing Christian songs. "Only four of them were in uniforms, but the rest were in plain clothes", local Protestants who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 5 December. "The officials claimed that they came to check internal passports."

After confiscating three Bibles and 100 Christian songbooks, police "insulted the believers with abusive words like stupid asses, and threatened that they could bring criminal charges against the believers unless they wrote statements", local Protestants told Forum 18. Police then "took fingerprints from every holidaymaker".

Worship "only in registered places specifically set up for religious purposes"

People must worship "only in registered places specifically set up for religious purposes", police officer Kamil (who did not give his last name), the senior officer on duty at Bostanlyk Police, told Forum 18 on 17 December. He told Forum 18 that administrative charges have been brought against "some from the group who led the unapproved religious worship."

Local Protestants told Forum 18 that Gennady Chen, Vladimir Zhikhar, Aleksandr Lokshev and Gennady Timoyev have been charged under the Code of Administrative Offences' Articles Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import .. with a purpose to distribute or distribution of religious materials.."); Article 194, Part 1 ("Failure to carry out the lawful demands of a police officer.."); Article 201, Part 2 ("Violation of the procedure for holding religious meetings, street processions or other religious ceremonies"); Article 202 ("Granting to the participants of unapproved .. meetings .. premises or other property (means of communication, copying and other machines, equipment, transportation), or the creation of other conditions for conducting such activity"); and Article 240 ("Violation of the Religion Law") Part 1 ("Carrying out of unauthorised religious activity, evasion by leaders of religious organisations of registration of the charter of the organisation, the organisation and conduct of worship by religious ministers and of special children's and youth meetings, as well as vocational, literature and other study groups not relating

to worship"); and Article 241 ("Teaching religious beliefs .. without permission .. as well as teaching religious beliefs privately").

(See base of this article for the full text of Administrative Code articles and possible punishments.)

Why?

Asked why the authorities punish people whose only "offence" was to read their Bibles and sing Christian songs on holiday, police officer Kamil reiterated that people "must do it only in registered places specifically set up for religious purposes". He declined to comment further to Forum 18 on why police violate the right to freedom of religion or belief. "I am not authorised to give more comments", he stated.

Officer Kamil also refused to give more specific details of the case, including when a court hearing might be held.

Meeting for worship raided

Also in Tashkent Region, on 18 November Urtachirchik District Police raided an unregistered Full Gospel Protestant Church in Tuiteppa. Police broke into the private home of Timur and Irina Kholmatov when the couple together with four friends were reading their Bibles, singing Christian songs and praying. "Police arrived at 10.45 am, 15 minutes after they had begun their worship", local Protestants who did not wish to be named for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 14 December.

Police entered the couple's home despite the objections of Kholmatov, and searched all the rooms and confiscated: 159 Christian books (35 in English, 34 in Korean, 5 in Uzbek, 85 in Russian), 20 booklets, 31 notebooks with personal notes, 55 slides, 500 leaflets, 315 audio-cassette tapes, and 54 video-cassette tapes. The books included three Children's Bibles. Police also confiscated a Toshiba laptop computer, four memory sticks, four guitars, an acoustic speaker, two sound boosters, and an over-head projector.

"Nothing to do with the case"?

Asked about the case, Urtachirchik Police on 14 December referred Forum 18 to Bakhtiyor Azimov, Chief of the Criminal Investigation Department. Azimov told Forum 18 that his Department has "nothing to do with the case". Deputy Police Chief Aziz (who refused to give his last name) claimed to Forum 18 that "our officials did not search the home". When told that a Court decision specifically indicates that Urtachirchik Police made the search, he replied: "Maybe, Tashkent Region police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department did it."

The telephone of Saidkarim Nishonboyev, Chief, and Akmal Jalilov, Deputy Chief, of the regional Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department went unanswered on 14 December. The person who answered Jalilov's mobile phone told Forum 18 that it is a "wrong number."

Fined

On 21 November Judge Tolibzhon Haidarov of Tashkent Region's Urtachirchik District Criminal Court fined three of those in Kholmatov's home during the raid. Timur Kholmatov was fined 7,235,500 Soms (about 21,500 Norwegian Kroner, 3,000 Euros, or 4,000 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate), 100 times the minimum monthly wage.

He was fined under the same six Administrative Code articles that the four Protestants charged after the raid on the Simurg (Phoenix) resort are being charged with breaking.

A similar large fine of 100 times the minimum monthly salary imposed on 9 November on Vadim Shim, for possessing Christian books, was upheld on 10 December by Judge Bakhtiyor Miraliyev of Tashkent Regional Cassation Court (see F18News 29 November 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1773). Forum 18 has seen a copy of the court decision.

Timur Kholmatov's wife Irina was fined 20 times the minimum monthly wage, 1,447,100 Soms (about 4,270 Norwegian Kroner, 580 Euros or 740 US Dollars) under three of the Administrative Code Articles her husband was fined under – 184-2; 201, Part 2; and 202. Marina Khvan was fined 2,170,650 Soms (about 6,450 Norwegian Kroner, 900 Euros, or 1,200 US Dollars), or 30 times the minimum monthly wage, under two of the six Administrative Code Articles used in the case – 201, Part 2; and 240, Part 1.

Judge Haidarov also ordered the destruction of all the confiscated books, including the Bibles. Courts have frequently order that confiscated religious literature - including Bibles and Islamic texts - be destroyed (see eg. F18News 16 March 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1679). He also ordered that the state should take over all the computer equipment, guitars, and other technical items.

Uzbekistan frequently punishes people for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief without state permission. For example, In November nine Muslim men who met to discuss their faith and to learn how to pray were sentenced, two being prisoners of conscience. Gayrat Khusanov and Shuhrat Yunusov were each given seven year jail terms (see F18News 23 November

2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1770). Also, a Protestant was fined 100 times the minimum monthly wage for distributing religious literature, including Bibles a court ordered to be destroyed. Fines were also confirmed against three Baptists who "had some of our neighbours, friends, and relatives with us. About 10 people met to read the Bible and pray together" (see F18News 29 November 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1773).

No comment

Judge Haidarov's assistant Ibrahim (who would not give his last name), asked if it was fair to punish people for holding or reading their own religious books privately in their own homes, replied "please call back in an hour, the Judge himself will answer you". Called back, Ibrahim said that Judge Haidarov is not available to comment.

Did not seek state permission for church to exist

The Court's decision states that Kholmatov told the Court that his local district administration refused to register the Church "a few years ago" as it needed 100 persons to sign their application. As they did not have that many members, Gairat (last name not given), Chair of the local Mahalla committee, is said by the Court decision to have given permission for up to 50 people to meet in the Kholmatov's home for worship.

Mahalla (local district) committees are the lowest level of government, and are used to suppress freedom of religion or belief both of those with state permission to exist and without such permission. Among their activities is vetting applications by religious communities for state permission to exist. All unregistered exercise of freedom of religion or belief by more than one person is a criminal offence (see eg. F18News 27 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936).

Kholmatov told the Court that only up to nine persons had ever met for worship. Those attending had "given money offerings to the Church, which it gave to the mahalla committee to buy food and distribute to the poor." Kholmatov told the Court that he has receipts from Gayrat for this.

Rustam (who refused to give his last name) of the Urtachirchik District Administration on 14 December refused to discuss why people are not allowed to hold meetings and read religious books in their homes. Subsequent calls to the Administration went unanswered.

Raid, confiscation

In mid-October, Tashkent Region's Bostanlyk District Criminal Court fined Alisher Artygaliyev, a Jehovah's Witness, 723,550 Soms (about 2,150 Norwegian Kroner, 300 Euros, or 400 US Dollars), 10 times the minimum monthly wage. He was fined under the Administrative Code's Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import .. with a purpose to distribute or distribution of religious materials..").

For some reason, the official media have given a very different account of the events leading up to the fine from local Jehovah's Witnesses. They told Forum 18 on 14 December that Artygaliyev was at work when he received a call from his sister (who is not a Jehovah's Witness) that police had come to search his home. During the search, police confiscated 26 religious books, 19 DVD discs, 35 leaflets, and two notebooks with religious comments.

Government-backed agency gorizont stated on 3 December that Bostanlyk Police stopped Artygaliyev at the Gazalkent open-air agriculture products market when he was "illegally distributing religious materials." Police then searched his home and made the confiscations.

The senior officer on duty at Bostanlyk Police, Kamil (who would not give his last name), on 17 December refused to comment on the case to Forum 18 or put Forum 18 through to other officials.

An official of Bostanlyk Criminal Court who would not give his name and Chancellery official who would not give her name both on 17 December refused to comment on the case. "Are you his lawyer", the Chancellery official asked Forum 18. "If you want our comments then you need to visit the court or send your questions in writing." She then put the phone down.

Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18 that Artygaliyev had "paid part of the fine, but he still has not received a copy of the Court decision."

"Illegal religious meetings of Jehovahists"

Gorizont's article, entitled "Hunters of human souls", claims that Artygaliyev and his wife distributed religious literature and "conducted illegal religious meetings of Jehovahists". [This is a derogatory name in Russian for Jehovah's Witnesses, which was used in the Soviet Union's state-controlled mass media.]

After attacking Jehovah's Witnesses refusal to do compulsory military service as "the most frightful thing", the article states that "Jehovah's Witnesses do not recognize any authority except the divine one, by which they mean the authority of the sect."

Jehovah's Witnesses, the article claims, "try to achieve rule of over people and make them their obedient puppets. Jehovah's Witnesses, active members of which have expanded their tentacles all over the world in Russia, USA, and Europe, in Middle East and Central Asia can be called hunters of human souls."

In strident tones the article claims that Jehovah's Witnesses "violate the right to the freedom and independence of human personality, it destroys the foundation of the constitutional order, statehood, culture, public morale and national mentality."

The state-controlled mass media has often been used to attack people exercising freedom of religion or belief. Baptists have been accused of turning people into zombies, and attacks have also been made against state-disfavoured groups such as Muslims practising their faith outside state control, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Baha'is (see eg. F18News 22 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1411).

Other raids and fines

Among other recent Jehovah's Witness raids, on 16 October, eight police officers raided the Tashkent home of Lyudmila Khomenko as she was hosting several other Jehovah's Witness friends. Without a warrant officers seized religious books from her home, fellow Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18. All were taken for questioning to the police station. On 18 October a local court gave Khomenko and two of her guests a massive administrative fine.

On 30 November police raided the Bukhara home of Jehovah's Witness Fazila Ibodova, Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18. She and five of her guests - all Jehovah's Witnesses - were detained. A local court subsequently handed all six massive administrative fines.

Administrative Code articles

- Article 184-2 bans: "Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan with a purpose to distribute or distribution of religious materials by physical persons". Punishments are a fine of between 50 and 150 times the minimum monthly wage, "with confiscation of the religious materials and the relevant means of their production and distribution";

- Article 194, Part 1 bans: "Failure to carry out the lawful demands of a police officer or other persons carrying out duties to guard public order". Punishments are a fine of up to twice the minimum monthly salary;

- Article 201, Part 2 bans: "Violation of the procedure for holding religious meetings, street processions or other religious ceremonies". This is punishable with a fine of between 60 and 80 times the minimum monthly wage, or administrative arrest of up to 15 days;

- Article 202 bans: "Granting to the participants of unapproved gatherings, meetings, and street demonstrations premises or other property (means of communication, copying and other machines, equipment, transportation), or the creation of other conditions for conducting such activity" is punished with a fine of between 50 and 100 times the minimum monthly salary for ordinary citizens, and between 70 and 150 times the minimum monthly salary for officials.

- Article 240 ("Violation of the Religion Law") Part 1 bans: "Carrying out of unauthorised religious activity, evasion by leaders of religious organisations of registration of the charter of the organisation, the organisation and conduct of worship by religious ministers and of special children's and youth meetings, as well as vocational, literature and other study groups not relating to worship". Punishments range from fines of 50 to 100 times the minimum monthly salary to administrative arrest for up to 15 days.

- and Article 241 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". Punishments range from fines of 5 to 10 times the minimum monthly salary, or administrative arrest for up to 15 days. (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=1862.

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://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Uzbekistan>.

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