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UZBEKISTAN: Baptist camp ordered seized, Protestant pressured to inform

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A court in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent has ordered expropriated a Baptist summer camp it bought legally 13 years ago, according to court documents seen by Forum 18 News Service. Baptists have made an appeal against confiscation of the camp for children and families to the General Prosecutor's Office. The judge and the government department which brought the expropriation case refused to discuss the case with Forum 18. Religious communities have long faced insecurity of ownership over their property. Meanwhile in Andijan, an NSS secret police officer tried to pressure Protestant Murot Turdiyev to inform on his community, Protestants told Forum 18. The officer put the phone down when Forum 18 called him. Turdiyev is also facing possible punishment because he had a Christian book in his car when stopped by traffic police.

Thirteen years after Uzbekistan's Baptist Union bought a property near the capital Tashkent to use as a summer camp venue, a Tashkent court has ordered the site's confiscation, according to court documents seen by Forum 18 News Service. The camp is currently still in the hands of the Baptist Union, which has lodged an appeal against the Court ruling to the General Prosecutor's Office, Baptists told Forum 18 from Tashkent. The judge and the Department which brought the expropriation case refused to discuss the case with Forum 18.

Uzbekistan's religious communities – whether registered or not – and individuals have long faced insecurity of ownership over their property. Officials regularly seize religious literature, computers, musical instruments and other items. In July, court bailiffs seized the piano, pulpit, carpet, refrigerator and benches from a Baptist congregation in Karshi [Qarshi] in Uzbekistan's southern Kashkadarya Region (see F18News 18 September 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1878).

Meanwhile in Andijan [Andijon] Region in eastern Uzbekistan, police and secret police officers have harassed and pressured Murot Turdiyev, a local Protestant, and his acquaintances to admit in writing that he is engaged in "illegal" missionary activity, local Protestants, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, complained to Forum 18 on 21 October. An officer also pressured him to inform on his fellow Christians.

The Protestants said that they believe that Andijan City Police is preparing an administrative case against Turdiyev for "illegal storage of religious literature" because of a Christian book they found in his car. Andijan City Police as well as the National Security Service (NSS) secret police officials on 23 October declined to discuss the case with Forum 18 (see below).

Fines have continued against individuals to punish them for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. In 2013 these are known to have included Muslims, Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees (see below).

Baptist camp confiscation

Tashkent City Economic Court on 20 September ruled to expropriate the plot of land in Bostanlyk belonging to the state-registered Baptist Union, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. The Baptist Union, which bought the site in 2000, uses it as a summer camp for holidays and recreation for its members and guests. Judge Malika Kalandarova upheld the claim of Tashkent Regional Department of Privatisation and Deregulation of Property (DPD), and ruled that the land is to be returned to its "lawful owner", in other words to the State.

Both Judge Kalandarova and Bobur Mukaddamov, who legally represented the Privatisation and Deregulation Department in the Court, refused to comment to Forum 18 on the case and why the claim was brought 13 years after the Baptist Union bought the site.

The case reached the Court on 19 July and was heard in five separate sessions. Judge Kalandarova "ignored" all the evidence the Union presented to the Court during the hearings on the legality of the purchase of the land, Baptists from Tashkent, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 22 October.

When the Baptists saw that Judge Kalandarova ignored their arguments and evidence that the Union was the lawful owner of the

land, and was "intent" on satisfying the claim of the Tashkent DPD, the Union's representatives petitioned the Court to admit that the case should be taken up by a Criminal Court, Baptists from Tashkent told Forum 18.

The Baptists argued that if Judge Kalandarova deemed the purchase contract between the Union and Chirchik Restaurant Chain, which previously owned the land, and its registration by Tashkent Property Exchange void of legal force, this meant that the contract and its registration were acts of fraud. The Baptists said that Judge Kalandarova ignored this petition as well and ruled to expropriate the land.

In a mid-July complaint to the Prosecutor General, the Baptists insisted that "the future of Uzbekistan cannot be built on the plundering of religious organisations". (see F18News 9 August 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1863).

Earlier raids

The plot of land the Baptists use for summer camps for children and families is in Tashkent Region's Bostanlyk District. It was on 12 October 2000 bought from the Chirchik Restaurant Chain, in an auction organised by the Tashkent regional branch of Uzbekistan's Property Exchange. The restaurant chain had bought the land in 1993 from the DPD.

The land itself has an area of a little more than one hectare [two and a half acres], and has buildings on it with a total floor area of just over 145 square metres [1,560 square feet].

The Baptists have, throughout the time they have owned the land and buildings, fulfilled all related legal obligations such as paying utility bills on time. However, the summer camps for children and families were raided – and subjected to legal cases, pressure on children and parents, and media attacks - in 2009 (see F18News 15 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1362), 2011 (see F18News 3 August 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1600), and 2012 (see F18News 24 September 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1746).

Pressured to become secret police informer

Turdiyev, a Protestant from Andijan, was detained on the street on 9 October by officers he believes were from the NSS secret police. The officers took him to Andijan City Police Department, where he was interrogated in the Criminal Investigation Division (CID) by an Officer Avazbek, who did not give his last name. The officer told Turdiyev that he represented the NSS, Protestants from Andijan told Forum 18. Avazbek questioned Turdiyev on his Christian activities before releasing him the same day.

Both during the 9 October interrogation, as well as several times in September over the phone, Officer Avazbek "pressured Turdiyev to cooperate with him and report on his fellow believers, but he refused to do so", Protestants told Forum 18. The officer "even tried to entice" Turdiyev by offering him "free meals in good restaurants", the Protestants added.

Close surveillance of all religious communities by the NSS secret police, using a wide variety of open and covert methods including the recruitment of informers, is a standard part of Uzbekistan's mechanism of repression (see eg. F18News 5 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1014).

Forum 18 on 23 October reached Officer Avazbek on the same phone number from which he had phoned Turdiyev. He identified himself, but put the phone down when Forum 18 asked which state agency he represented and why he was pressuring Turdiyev. Subsequent calls on 23 October to his phone went unanswered, and later his phone was switched off.

Shukurullo Habibullayev, Chief of Andijan Police's CID, declined to comment on the case on 23 October, saying that he is "not very familiar with the case details," and that "I have several officers working for me with the name Avazbek." He claimed he did not remember which Avazbek conducted the interrogation, and asked Forum 18 to send questions in writing.

The duty officer at Andijan Regional Department of the NSS secret police declined to comment on the case to Forum 18 on 23 October. However, he took down Officer Avazbek's phone number and details, promising that an inquiry would be made about the case.

Collecting information

Turdiyev wrote complaints to a number of state agencies, including to Rustam Inoyatov, Chairman of Uzbekistan's NSS secret police in Tashkent, Andijan Protestants told Forum 18. He complained that NSS officials including Avazbek between September and October "pressured his friends and family members to write statements that Turdiyev is engaged in illegal missionary activity," as well as "illegally collected information on the religious activity and income of Turdiyev and his family."

Turdiyev wrote in his complaint that the Police and NSS officials "violated his religious freedoms and the privacy of his and his family members' lives" as well as "are attempting illegally to open a case against him to punish him."

Calls to the Head Office of the NSS secret police in Tashkent went unanswered on 23 October.

Administrative case over confiscated book?

Trouble for Turdiyev began on 31 August, when Andijan Traffic Police stopped his car. A Police Sergeant, who did not give his name, "immediately began searching his car, and found in the glove-compartment a Christian book in Uzbek", local Protestants told Forum 18. The Sergeant then called the "other law-enforcement agencies, which came with witnesses, and confiscated the book after drawing up a report."

The confiscated book belonged personally to Turdiyev and he had bought it in 2007 from the officially registered Bible Society of Uzbekistan.

Protestants told Forum 18 that they believe that Andijan Police are now preparing a case under Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons"). Punishments under this Article 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" (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Andijan Police's CID Chief Habibullayev declined to tell Forum 18 whether or not the Police will go ahead with an administrative case against Turdiyev. "I cannot say this because I need to study the case," he told Forum 18.

Hare Krishna fines

In spring 2013, police raided a Hare Krishna meeting in a private home in a town away from Tashkent, insisting that it was illegal because it was not registered. Officers took the names of all those present, fellow devotees told Forum 18, asking that the individuals and location not be identified. Two devotees were given large fines, with one of them having the money taken directly from state support.

Uzbekistan's Hare Krishna devotees have been able to register only one community, which is in Tashkent. Until 2004 they had two registered communities, but then lost the registration of the second. Because of the highly restrictive Religion Law, which bans all unregistered religious activity, this means that any Hare Krishna activity in Uzbekistan outside the registered Tashkent community is illegal, and anyone leading it or participating in it risks punishment.

Jehovah's Witness fines

Similarly, Jehovah's Witnesses have faced fines in 2013 for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief.

On 15 February, police in Samarkand summoned Farida Aminova. They then took her back to her home, which they searched without a warrant, Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18. Officers seized her religious literature and computer. Both she and her mother, Umida Rasulova, were subsequently handed administrative fines by a local court. Both are believed to have been fined 20 times the minimum monthly wage, 1,591,800 Soms (then 4,440 Norwegian Kroner, 600 Euros or 780 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

Another Samarkand Jehovah's Witness, Savlat Shakirov, was also summoned on 15 February. Again, police then took him back to his home, where officers confiscated his religious literature and computer' Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. On 5 March, a local court handed him an administrative fine. He is believed to have been fined 30 times the minimum monthly wage, 2,387,700 Soms.

On 8 April, Tashkent police came to the home of Jehovah's Witness Dinara Hosiyeva, ostensibly to check identity documents. Officers claimed she allowed illegal tenants to live in her flat. They entered without her permission, twisted her arms and "screamed obscenities at her", Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18. Without a warrant, police searched her home and seized her personal religious literature, notebooks and her computer.

Five days later, a Tashkent court handed Hosiyeva an administrative fine. She is believed to have been fined 40 times the minimum monthly wage, 3,183,600 Soms. The court ordered that her computer be confiscated for the state.

Like the Hare Krishna community, Jehovah's Witnesses had just two registered communities until August 2006, when their community in the city of Fergana was stripped of registration (see F18News 5 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=837). Now it has just one legally-registered community – in Chirchik in Tashkent Region. Dozens of other Jehovah's Witness communities have repeatedly been refused state registration.

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 they hope an 11 September meeting in Tashkent between two of their representatives from abroad and Artybek Yusupov, chair of the government's Religious Affairs Committee, will lead to improvements in the life of their

community.

"Not part of its obligations"?

Uzbekistan renewed its rejection of recommendations to bring its treatment of those exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief into line with its international human rights obligations. During the second part of its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva on 19 September, the Uzbek delegation formally presented its responses to recommendations put forward in April (see http://www.upr-info.org/IMG/pdf/recommendations_and_pledges_uzbekistan_2013.pdf).

Among the many recommendations Uzbekistan rejected was: "Amend the Criminal Code in order to decriminalize missionary activities and to put an end to religious persecution of non-registered religious groups". Uzbekistan claimed that the issue is "not part of its obligations under internationally agreed human rights standards".

Among other recommendations Uzbekistan rejected were: "Eliminate unjustified restrictions on the right to religious freedom and stop persecution of individuals for their peaceful religious activity"; and "End harassment and detention of persons who exercise their rights to freedom of assembly, association, expression and religion and release those currently held on such grounds". The Uzbek government said it was rejecting these because "it considers them factually wrong".

Uzbekistan's then First Deputy Justice Minister Esemurat Kanyazov had verbally rejected calls to end punishments for unregistered religious activity and sharing faith during the UPR consideration of Uzbekistan in April (see F18News 19 July 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1859). (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.

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