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UZBEKISTAN: Massive fine for Muslim prayer mat, Christian book raid ordered by NSS secret police

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

A hotel employee in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent has been fined 150 times the minimum monthly salary after a Muslim prayer mat was found at the hotel during an early January search by the authorities. A hotel employee, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, confirmed the fine to Forum 18 News Service on 5 February. Also, on 20 January the NSS secret police with the police Anti-Terrorism Department raided a private home in Tashkent. As well as hundreds of Christian books and other materials being confiscated from Natalya Gaiyer and ordered destroyed, she was fined three times the minimum monthly salary. The officer who led the raid told Forum 18 that the raid and confiscations "were ordered by Tashkent police Anti-Terrorism Department and the NSS secret police". Judge Davron Narbayev claimed to Forum 18 that he was not authorised to comment on his own decision. He also would not say why he fined someone for possessing legally purchased books, which he ordered to be destroyed.

An employee of a hotel in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent has been fined 150 times the minimum monthly salary after a Muslim prayer mat was found at the hotel during a search by the authorities. Also, on 20 January the National Security Service (NSS) secret police together with the police Anti-Terrorism Department raided a private home in Tashkent, Forum 18 News Service has learned. As well as hundreds of Christian books and other materials being confiscated from Natalya Gaiyer and ordered destroyed, she was fined three times the minimum monthly salary on 23 January. She is a member of an officially registered Baptist Church in the capital's Bektemir District.

Also on 20 January, the authorities issued a Decree tightening the already severe censorship regime (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Decree on printed, electronic and audio-visual religious materials

Entitled "Measures to improve order in the production, import and distribution of religious materials", the 20 January Decree imposes sweeping controls on the possession, production and distribution of all kinds of printed, electronic and audio-visual religious materials. It bans the distribution of these religious materials anywhere, apart from in fixed commercial points of sale equipped with cash registers. The Decree also bans the production, storage or distribution of religious materials intended to encourage people to change their faith or beliefs (see F18News 12 February 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1928).

Fined 150 times minimum monthly salary for prayer mat

Law-enforcement officials searched Tashkent's Miran International Hotel in early January and confiscated a Muslim prayer mat. The mat was left by a past guest, and kept in the hotel's lost and found section, Ferganews reported on 24 January. Despite the mat being identified as a past guest's property, Mirabad District Court fined a hotel employee 150 times the minimum monthly salary or 14,422,500 Soms (about 40,560 Norwegian Kroner, 4,815 Euros, or 6,550 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). An appeal against the fine was rejected, Ferganews reported.

The minimum monthly salary was increased from 15 December 2013 to 96,105 Soms (about 270 Norwegian Kroner, 30 Euros, or 40 US Dollars). Prices per night at the hotel start at about four times that amount. Most of Uzbekistan's population is in poverty.

A hotel employee, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, confirmed the fine to Forum 18 on 5 February. They declined to say whether another appeal to higher authorities will be made.

An official who refused to give his name of the Mirabad inter-District Court on 6 February claimed to Forum 18 that the Court did not consider the case. He referred Forum 18 to Mirabad District Criminal Court, whose phones on 6 February went unanswered. Another official who did not give his name of Tashkent City Criminal Court on 6 February refused to tell Forum 18 why it upheld the fine. "Please send your questions in writing", he said before putting the phone down.

It is possible that the past guest left the prayer mat in the hotel for fear of themselves being punished if the prayer mat was found by the authorities. For example, Zuboyd Mirzorakhimov, a Tajik citizen, was jailed for five years for "smuggling" Koran verses and a sermon into Uzbekistan. His "offence" was to have the verses and Uzbek-language sermon on his mobile phone while on a business trip to South Korea via Uzbekistan (see F18News 16 December 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1907).

Anti-terrorism passport raid?

Tashkent's Bektemir District police Anti-Terrorism Department on 20 January at 6.30 pm raided the flat of Natalya Gaiyer, a member of a local officially registered Baptist Church. Three plain clothes and two uniformed officers were on the raid, Tashkent Baptists who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 24 January. Police claimed they were carrying out a passport check, but without showing the necessary legal authorisation for this.

Raushan Zakirov of the District police Anti-Terrorism Department led the raid. Gaiyer "possessed some unauthorised books" which were confiscated, he told Forum 18 on 5 February. Asked why this was relevant to the alleged passport check, Zakirov stated that the raid and confiscations "were ordered by Tashkent police Anti-Terrorism Department and the NSS secret police". Zakirov refused to say how the authorities knew she possessed religious books.

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).

Fine and book destruction

Judge Davron Narbayev of Bektemir District Court on 23 January fined Gaiyer three times the minimum monthly salary, or 288,315 Soms (about 810 Norwegian Kroner, 95 Euros, or 130 US Dollars). The judge's decision, which Forum 18 has seen, states that this was under the Code of Administrative Offences' Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons").

Judge Narbayev also ordered the destruction of 593 leaflets and 119 Christian books, booklets, magazines, and notebooks with her personal notes. Courts routinely order that confiscated Muslim, Christian, Jehovah's Witness or other religious materials be destroyed (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Baptists state that most of the books were "purchased legally from the officially registered Bible Society of Uzbekistan".

"Confiscation from Gaiyer's home was lawful"?

Judge Narbayev on 23 January claimed to Forum 18 that he was not authorised to comment on his own decision. Asked why he fined someone for possessing legally purchased books, which he ordered to be destroyed, he replied that "she has already filed an appeal, and it will be heard in a higher court".

Zakirov of Bektemir police Anti-Terrorism Department claimed that "we will not confiscate literature authorised by the Religious Affairs Committee. We will only confiscate books that are not authorised".

An official at the NSS secret police headquarters on 6 February refused to comment on the raid and confiscation. He asked Forum 18 to send questions in writing through the Foreign Ministry.

Doniyor Sultanov, head of Tashkent's police Anti-Terrorism Department on 6 February told Forum 18 that he will "look into the case to see why the police made a search". Called back later the same day, Sultanov's Deputy Alisher (who would not give his last name) claimed that "the confiscation from Gaiyer's home was lawful". (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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