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UZBEKISTAN: Concern over health of prisoners of conscience

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

Relatives and friends of three Muslim prisoners of conscience in Uzbekistan, jailed for exercising their freedom of religion or belief, have expressed concern to Forum 18 News Service about their state of health. Khayrullo Tursunov and his relatives Mehrinisso and Zulhumor Hamdamova (who are sisters) are all apparently in need of medical treatment. Relatives of the Hamdamova sisters told Forum 18 that "they both feel ill but Mehrinisso's health is worse". Relatives do not know when or even whether the prison authorities will arrange an operation for Mehrinisso. A related case is that of Khayrullo Tursunov, who has been exposed to the potentially fatal disease of tuberculosis (TB). The authorities have claimed to Forum 18 that he is cured – but if so Forum 18 notes this has taken an unusually short length of time. A relative wondered what the authorities' reasons were. "If he did not have TB why was he moved to the TB prison – and if he did why was he moved back to his original prison in such a short time?", the relative asked.

Relatives and friends of three Muslim prisoners of conscience in Uzbekistan, jailed for exercising their freedom of religion or belief, have expressed concern to Forum 18 News Service about their state of health. Khayrullo Tursunov and his relatives Mehrinisso and Zulhumor Hamdamova (who are sisters) are all apparently in need of medical treatment they appear not to be receiving.

Relatives of the Hamdamova sisters, who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 17 February that they are particularly concerned about Mehrinisso. Aged 46, she urgently needs medical treatment and even an operation on an apparent myoma. It is unclear how reliable the diagnosis is. A myoma is a tumour associated with uterine cancer which can be painful and is normally treated by being removed. Relatives fear that if she is left untreated in prison conditions this could endanger her life.

Relatives told Forum 18 that on visits to the sisters in January, Zulhumor – who is 53 – reported suffering from goitre. This is an abnormal swelling that causes a lump to form in the throat, in some cases affecting breathing and swallowing. "They both feel ill but Mehrinisso's health is worse," relatives stated.

Will authorities allow treatment for the Hamdamovas?

Relatives do not know when or even whether the prison authorities will arrange an operation for Mehrinisso. They stated that prison authorities do not permit the family to hand over medicines for the sisters, as is normal in Uzbek prisons. "We do not know whether they are given any medicines in the prison," they told Forum 18. "Mehrinisso needs an operation, but her family does not have money for the operation."

Both sisters are being held in a camp for female prisoners in Zangiota District, just north of the capital Tashkent.

The Hamdamova sisters' prison address is:

Uzbekistan

Tashkent region

Zangiota tumani

Uchr. 64/1

Hamdamova Mehrinisso Imomovna

or

Hamdamova Zulhumor Imomovna

Surat Ikramov, an independent human rights defender from Tashkent, told Forum 18 on 18 February that he spoke about the case to the Department of Execution of Punishments Deputy Head Erkin Bobokulov on 1 February. He told Ikramov that Hamdamova's treatment will be in their prison, and that "convicts from the women's prison are not moved out of the prison for treatment since it has its own medical clinic".

Torture, labour camps

Conditions in labour camps such as the one the Hamdamovas are held in can be harsh, with unsanitary and dangerous living and working conditions, beatings by guards, and criminal gangs having a ruthless hold over other prisoners (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=982). Prisoners in labour camps and jails are denied their right to freedom of religion or belief – for example to pray visibly, to have religious literature, or to receive visits from religious clergy (see eg. F18News 7 May 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1832).

Violence and torture, or threats of this, by police and other officials are "routine" the United Nations Committee Against Torture found in 2007. Women seem to be particularly targeted for torture and threats by male officials (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

The UN Committee Against Torture renewed its criticism in its concluding observations (CAT/C/UZB/CO/4), adopted on 14 November 2013, on Uzbekistan's record under the Convention Against Torture. "The Committee is concerned about numerous, ongoing and consistent allegations that torture and ill-treatment are routinely used by law enforcement, investigative and prison officials, or at their instigation or with their consent, often to extract confessions or information to be used in criminal proceedings," it noted (see http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CAT%2fC%2fUZB%2fCO%2f4&Lang=en).

The UN Committee also expressed concern about officers' threats of sexual violence against "Mehrinisso and Zulhumor Hamdamova, who allege that they were forced to strip and threatened with rape by police while in custody in November 2009".

Family prisoners

Many Muslims have been given long prison terms for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. The Hamdamova sisters and Shahlo Rakhmonova (a relative of the sisters) were sentenced to up to seven years in jail in April 2010, after being arrested for holding unauthorised religious meetings. The trial was conducted with many violations of published law, as often happens in Uzbekistan (see F18News 26 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1436).

Mehrinisso Hamdamova – a state official - and many of her family members were arrested for holding unauthorised religious meetings, by 12 officials from the National Security Service (NSS) secret police and the ordinary police. The arrests happened following a 06.00 am raid on her home on 5 November 2009 (see F18News 18 November 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1376).

Nurbek Kulturayev – Hamdamova's 25 year-old son-in-law - was arrested later, after women forced to give testimony against Hamdamova by the threat of rape disappeared (see F18News 27 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1399). Kulturayev was kept in detention for fifteen days and was then released. He is understood to have left the country, for fear of the authorities.

Does prisoner of conscience have tuberculosis or not?

A related case to the Hamdamova sisters is that of 38-year-old Muslim prisoner of conscience Khayrullo Tursunov, illegally extradited by Kazakhstan to Uzbekistan on 13 March 2013 (see F18News 1 May 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1829). He was given 16 years in jail in June 2013 for exercising his freedom of religion or belief. Tursunov was subsequently exposed by the authorities to the potentially fatal disease of tuberculosis (TB) (see F18News 5 November 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1893).

In mid-December 2013 he was moved from the prison for TB patients to Karavulbazar Prison 64/25. This is a special regime prison in central-southern Uzbekistan.

Tursunov's prison address is:

Uzbekistan

Bukhara Region

Korovulbazar sh.

Tursunov Khayrullo Turdiyevich

A relative, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, wondered what the reasons for the move were. "If he did not have TB why was he moved to the TB prison – and if he did why was he moved back to his original prison in such a short time?", they asked Forum 18 on 17 February.

Tuygun Kurbonov, Governor of Korovulbazar Prison 64/25, claimed to Forum 18 on 18 February that Tursunov "is fine and cured from TB". Treatment for TB normally takes a minimum of six months in good conditions and modern medical care.

Asked how it was possible to cure Tursunov in a relatively short period, and in what conditions he is being held, Governor Kurbonov refused to say. He then referred Forum 18 to the Department of Execution of Punishments in Tashkent.

Rustam Sharapov, the TB prison's Head Accountant, on 18 February claimed to Forum 18 that Tursunov "was treated and recovered from the illness, and therefore he was moved back to his original prison for especially dangerous repeat offenders". Asked how it was possible to cure Tursunov in under six months in poor conditions, Sharapov gave the phone to another official who stated he was Akhtam Khatamov, Deputy Prison Governor. Khatamov refused to discuss the case, and referred Forum 18 to the Department of Execution of Punishments in Tashkent.

No comment

Nurali Tagayev, a duty officer at the Interior Ministry's Department of Execution of Punishments in Tashkent, which oversees prisons, told Forum 18 on 18 February he would put Forum 18 through to Bobokulov, Deputy Head of the Department, when he was asked about the conditions of the Hamdamova sisters and Tursunov. Bobokulov's phone went unanswered.

When Forum 18 called Tagayev back and asked if he could put it through to Burkhan Akramov, Head of the Department, or another official, he told Forum 18 "please send your questions in writing." Other officials of the Department on 18 February refused to talk to Forum 18.

Christian prisoner of conscience

The only currently known non-Muslim prisoner of conscience jailed for exercising freedom of religion or belief is Tohar Haydarov, jailed in 2011 for 10 years. His fellow-Baptists told Forum 18 in October 2013 that "every two months we visit him, and the last time we found out that because of back pain he was confined to the prison". Haydarov "cannot go into town for work with other prisoners which can be depressing for him. He did not speak of having any problems with the prison authorities or inmates" (see F18News 5 November 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1893).

Haydarov's prison address is:

180020 Uzbekistan

Kashkadarya Region

g. Karshi

pos. Shaikh-Ali

otryad 13

UYa 64/49

Tohar Haydarov

State vengeance?

One reason suggested for the state's extradition and jailing of Tursunov was revenge for his wife Nodira Buriyeva's escape from Uzbekistan after she along with at least seven other women were interrogated and threatened with rape by police at the time the Hamdamova sisters were arrested. The sisters were relatives of Buriyeva. Several of the arrested women as well as Buriyeva also escaped. The authorities arrested and tortured Mehrinisso Hamdamova's son-in-law Kulturayev, who they suspected of being involved in the escape (see F18News 27 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1399).

"Justice" system

As well as the Hamdamovas and Tursunov, very many other Muslims have been given long prison terms, but it is normally very difficult to impossible to identify whether freedom of religion or belief is a factor, as the Uzbek "justice" system strongly encourages arbitrary behaviour by officials including violence and torture. The planting of evidence and torture by the authorities is often credibly claimed, which makes it unlikely that the authorities – or anyone else - knows how many of these prisoners are guilty of involvement in violence or other criminality (as the authorities often claim), or are "guilty" of being devout Muslims who take their faith seriously, or were victims of official hostility for some other reason.

Legal charges brought against people do not necessarily reflect what they actually did. This can lead to people being charged using laws punishing the exercise of freedom of religion or belief, when the exercise of this freedom is not involved in the actions they actually carried out (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862). (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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