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UZBEKISTAN: Raids, religious literature seizures, passport confiscations and expulsions

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

As a Baptist family in Navoi gathered with relatives and friends for a Sunday morning meeting for worship, 11 Anti-Terrorism Police officers and other officials raided the Alpayev family home, church members complained to Forum 18 News Service. They searched the home without a warrant and went on to search the home of another church member present, Nikolai Serin, seizing all the religious literature they could find. Police and other authorities keep telling him and other Baptists – including during the 17 August raid - that he cannot keep his Christian books and even his Bible in his home, Serin complained to Forum 18. "Isn't this a gross violation?" Artur Alpayev's mother (born in Uzbekistan and visiting from Israel) and a couple from Russia (the wife also born in Uzbekistan) were subsequently expelled from Uzbekistan. Fines are expected. Sadridin, who introduced himself as Assistant Head of the Navoi Anti-Terrorism Police, claimed to Forum 18 that he is "new in the Police Department, and I do not know the details." Raids, literature seizures and fines have continued across Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan's authorities continue to raid peaceful religious or non-religious activity by religious believers, confiscate all religious literature - even including Bibles and New Testaments - from private homes, collect information on members of both registered and unregistered communities, as well as punish them, Forum 18 News Service notes. Even personal notebooks with notes of religious teachings were confiscated, worship services, sports activity and summer holidays disrupted, and even visiting foreigners in one case were expelled from Uzbekistan.

In mid-August in the central Navoi Region, 11 Police officers and other officials raided a Baptist family as they and friends were meeting for worship. They confiscated the religious literature found in their and another church member's homes. They also expelled two visiting co-believers back to Russia and the mother, who is not a Church member, visiting from Israel. Administrative punishments are being prepared for the three local Baptists.

In early August in Chirchik in Tashkent Region, 15 police officers and officials of a variety of agencies raided the home of a Protestant pastor, while he, his son and their friends were playing volleyball. The pastor's religious books and other property were confiscated. All except the Pastor and his son were taken to the Police Station, kept there for more than four hours, questioned and released. It is believed that administrative punishments are being prepared against at least the Pastor and his son.

Elsewhere in the north-western Khorezm Region, police "fabricated" a case against a local Protestant, and in early June a regional Court fined him allegedly for sharing his Christian faith with his relative and one other person, in that relative's home (see below).

Police raids on other religious communities have continued. In late July, separate raids targeted Jehovah's Witnesses in eastern Namangan Region and a summer camp run by a Baptist Church in Tashkent. In both cases administrative punishments are also expected (see F18News 5 September 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1993).

Tightening state controls

The continuing raids came as the new Law on Prevention of Violations of the Law – which formalises the powers of a range of state agencies to prevent individuals from exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief – entered into legal force on 15 August (see F18News 4 July 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1974).

State control over all religious literature was stepped up in January, with the entry into force of a new Decree, entitled "Measures to improve order in the production, import and distribution of religious materials". This formalised the existing sweeping state controls on the production, distribution and import of all such materials (see F18News 25 March 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1942).

Religious literature seized from individuals – whether Muslims, Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses or of other faiths – is frequently ordered destroyed by the courts (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Raid with no warrant, passport confiscation

Mid-morning on Sunday 17 August, Anti-Terrorism Police and other officials raided the Navoi home of Artur and Irina Alpayev as they and fellow members of the Council of Churches Baptist congregation were meeting for worship, church member Nikolai Serin complained to Forum 18 on 19 August.

Leading the raid was Bakhrom Rakhmonov, Chief of Navoi Regional Terrorism Police and his colleague M. Usmanov along with officers M. Sharipov, D. Sattarov and Achilov (first names not given) from Navoi Criminal Police, as well as local Police officers Kholmurodov and Bazarov (first names not known). Accompanying the police were two officials of the mahalla Committee (local residential administration), Kh. Khayrullayev and Nurboyev (first names not known).

The officials "broke into the home and despite the homeowners' demands, made a search in the home without showing an official warrant." The officials "gathered in one room all the guests in the house". These included Artur Alpayev's mother visiting from Israel; Gulya and Sergei Solyanov, a married couple visiting from Vladivostok in Russia; and a local family, Nikolai and Larisa Serin with their three children.

The officials "spoke rudely to the homeowners". They photographed and filmed the search of all cases, shelves, chests, and cupboards. They confiscated all the Christian literature they could find.

Police officers then summoned Uchkun Akhatov, Chief of Navoi Police's Passport Registration Division, Serin told Forum 18. As soon as he arrived he confiscated the passports from all three guests. "He told them their passports would be returned when they depart Uzbekistan after their expulsion is formalised."

Later the officials took Serin with them and conducted a search in his home, which lasted several hours. They confiscated Christian religious materials as well as his laptop computer, he told Forum 18. "Though I presented a document that the literature had earlier been approved by the [government's] Religious Affairs Committee, the Police told me I can't keep these books in my home."

"Disrespect"

The Sunday-morning raid, passport confiscations and literature seizures represent "disrespect to our guests and a gross violation of our basic freedoms and human rights," Serin complained to Forum 18. He added that the police and other authorities keep telling him and other Baptists – including during the 17 August raid - that he cannot keep his Christian books and even his Bible in his home. "Isn't this a gross violation?"

Serin said that he believes that both he and the Alpayevs are likely to be given administrative punishments. Alpayev similarly lamented to Forum 18 that he and his wife may be fined for the religious literature found in their home.

The official who answered Rakhmonov's phone on 27 August, and who introduced himself as Sadridin, Assistant Chief of Navoi Regional Terrorism Police, claimed to Forum 18 that Rakhmonov "recently retired." Asked why Rakhmonov and other Police officials raided the homes of Baptists, which resulted in the expulsion of their visiting foreign relatives, confiscation of their Christian books and possible administrative punishments, Sadridin claimed that he is "new in the Police Department, and I do not know the details."

Sadridin also claimed that "no one is available," when asked to whom Forum 18 can talk about the case. "If they are unhappy they can write a complaint to the Prosecutor's office," he answered, when Forum 18 insisted with the question.

Expulsion of guests

The Solyanovs were expelled back to Russia on 23 August, Alpayev told Forum 18 on 28 August. (Gulya Solyanova had been born in Soviet Uzbekistan.) Police accompanied them to the airport in Bukhara. Their passports, stamped with notices of expulsion, were returned to them just before they departed. As the Solyanovs were expelled rather than being formally deported, they will in theory be able to return to Uzbekistan.

Alpayev's mother (who was born in Soviet Uzbekistan) was similarly expelled back to Israel on 28 August, he told Forum 18 that day. An officer of Navoi Police accompanied them in the car on 27 August from Navoi to Tashkent when they took his mother to Tashkent for the flight. In the earlier hours of 28 August, the officer took her to the border authorities at the airport. There her passport was returned to her (eleven days after its confiscation) with a stamp "Expelled". She left at 6 am on a flight back to Israel.

Alpayev noted that his mother had been able to spend some time with them and that she will be able to return to Uzbekistan as she has been expelled, not formally deported. But he lamented that the raid "disturbed us and my mother, and disrupted our fellowship on 17 August."

Akhatov of Passport Registration Division, on 26 August introduced himself to Forum 18 and took down its details. However, when asked why the Alpayevs' two guests from Russia were expelled from the country and why the authorities were also expelling Alpayev's mother back to Israel, he claimed, "it's a wrong number," and put the phone down. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

Forum 18 also reached the Police officer accompanying the Alpayev family in their car while they were taking Alpayev's mother to Tashkent on 27 August. However, he refused to comment on the case saying that "I am only carrying out what I was told do." He also declined to give his name.

Raid during volleyball game

In Chirchik in Tashkent Region, a total of 15 officials broke into the private home of Stanislav Kim, pastor of a local unregistered Protestant Church, during the afternoon of 2 August, a local Protestant, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 22 August.

Leading the raid were officials of Chirchik Fire, Electric, Gas, Sewage and Architecture Departments accompanied by Chirchik Police Department's Investigator Muzaffar Nurmatov and local Police Officers Abbas Ismatullayev and A. Suleymanov.

The officials broke in while the Pastor, his son Valeri Kim and three other adults - Stanislav Pak, Vladimir Kovalchuk and Igor Li - along with 11 young people aged between 14 and 19 were playing volleyball in the yard.

During a search of Pastor Kim's home, officials confiscated 19 Christian books, including a Bible and New Testament, two computer hard disks, a photocopier, a printer and a hundred slides with Christian hymns. The officials then detained all those present, except Pastor Kim and his son, taking them in a bus to Chirchik Police Station. "There they were held illegally between 5 pm and 9.30 pm, questioned and then released," the Protestant complained to Forum 18.

Investigator Nurmatov categorically refused to discuss any details of the case with Forum 18 on 28 August. "Please send us a letter, and we will answer you." When Forum 18 asked why Police or other authorities needed to interfere when a group of church members were playing volleyball, he repeated his previous answer.

The Protestant told Forum 18 that he believes that administrative fines are being prepared against Pastor Kim and his son.

Fined for "illegal" religious teaching

Protestant Zokir Rajabov, a resident of Kushkupir District in Khorezm Region, has been fined for "illegally" sharing his faith on charges fellow Protestants insist were fabricated.

On 5 June, Judge Muzaffar Samandarov of Shavat District Criminal Court fined Rajabov five times the minimum monthly wage or 480,525 Soms (1,250 Norwegian Kroner, 150 Euros or 200 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate), according to the decision seen by Forum 18.

Rajabov was punished under Administrative Code Article 241 ("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"). Judge Samandarov heard the case in the building of Kushkupir District Criminal Court.

The verdict claims that Rajabov was questioned in the Court. However, Judge Samandarov heard the case in his absence, a local Protestant who knows Rajabov and the case, and who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 26 August. Rajabov learnt that he had been punished only two months after the hearing from a Court bailiff.

According to the verdict Kushkupir District Police officials "established that Rajabov on 3 June at 10 am without having special religious education and permission from a central religious organ shared his religious beliefs of Jesus Christ with his relative Z. Bobojanova and U. Allaberganov in Bobojanova's private home."

Case "fabricated"?

According to the verdict, Rajabov admitted to the Court he "shared his religious beliefs with his relative Bobojanova but that he does not know Allaberganov." Judge Samandarov claims in the decision that Rajabov's guilt is "proven" by his statement in the Court as well as the Police records of interrogations of Bobojanova and Allaberganov.

However, the Protestant told Forum 18 that Rajabov "actually does not know either of them [Bobojanova or Allaberganov]," and that "Kushkupir Police officials falsified the case against him just to punish him."

Told this and asked why he punished Rajabov without properly investigating the case, Judge Samandarov on 27 August told Forum 18 that he was busy, and asked to call back in 10 minutes. Judge Samandarov's phones went unanswered later on the same day and

on 28 August.

Asked about the case and why the Police sought to have Rajabov punished, Rustam Sotyvoldiyev, the District's Deputy Police Chief, who oversees religious communities, on 28 August told Forum 18 that "he can address the Prosecutor's office, if he thinks there is a violation."

Told that Rajabov's fellow-believers say that the case was falsified by his Police Department, and asked, even if Rajabov shared his beliefs with his relative in a private conversation, how or why this is a violation, Sotyvoldiyev repeated his previous answer. (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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