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UZBEKISTAN: Large fine follows police bullying of children

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

Pastor Sergei Rychagov of Grace Presbyterian Church near Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent was heavily fined for violating the Religion Law, missionary activity, "illegal" religious teaching and violating the procedure for holding religious meetings. However, he learned of the fine only in June, Protestants told Forum 18 News Service. Police bullied children from a local orphanage who had been attending the church into writing statements against him, they added. The officer who brought the case insisted to Forum 18 that Rychagov had violated the law, while the judge who fined him refused to explain why he had done so. In Urgench, Anti-Terrorism Police accused a local Baptist of "teaching religion illegally". Police have already seized religious literature and the man's car. Asked by Forum 18 why other Baptists are being questioned to incriminate him, Anti-Terrorism Police Major Shavkat Bekjanov responded: "Who are you and why should I discuss the case with you over the phone?"

Police brought administrative charges against a Protestant pastor near Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent after forcing children from a local orphanage to write statements officers could use to bring the case, local Protestants complained to Forum 18 News Service. Although a court handed down a large fine in February, the pastor found out about it only in June.

Police in Karshi [Qarshi] hunting a local Protestant in an attempt to punish her for speaking to family members about her faith have again raided her home. Officers claim she kidnapped her grandson for three days, while a court has fined her niece (see below).

Police in Urgench [Urganch] have confiscated religious literature and a car from a local Baptist. The local police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department accuses him of "teaching religion illegally" (see below).

Police often confiscate without due legal process the property of those they target in raids (see eg. F18News 24 July 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1980). Another Baptist, Veniamin Nemirov from Samarkand, had his car illegally confiscated in April 2014 (see F18News 9 May 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1957). On 4 August 2015 Nemirov told Forum 18 that police had put his car up for sale.

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

Police bullying of children

Police bullied young people into writing statements against Pastor Sergei Rychagov of Grace Presbyterian Church, in the town of Dostabod in Tashkent Region's Kuyichirchik District. The five young people, all orphans between the ages of 15 and 18, live in Special Children's Boarding School No. 46, local Protestants who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 4 August.

Then Headteacher Shakir Khalikulov gave permission in 2012 for the young people to start going on Saturdays to a private home next to the Church building, where they took baths, were fed, and also worked in the grounds of the Church. On Sundays they participated in the Church's meetings for worship. However, in late 2014 police pressured them into writing statements describing what went on at the church premises.

On the basis of these statements Captain Mirjasur Anvarov of Kuyichirchik Police Station opened an administrative case against Pastor Rychagov.

Pastor Rychagov's Church was in 2012 raided and subjected to state-sponsored media attack, as well as he himself being fined (see F18News 18 September 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1744).

Charges

Police Captain Anvarov brought charges against Pastor Rychagov under four parts of the Code of Administrative Offences:

- Article 201, Part 2 ("Violation of the procedure for holding religious meetings, street processions, or other religious ceremonies");
- 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, and the organisation and conduct of special children's and youth meetings, as well as vocational, literature and other study groups not relating to worship");
- Article 240, Part 2 ("Attracting believers of one confession to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity");
- and Article 241, Part 1 ("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").

Rychagov "violated the Religion Law", Captain Anvarov insisted to Forum 18 on 5 August. Asked why he opened a case against the Pastor for helping orphans, Anvarov responded: "I can't tell you about the case over the phone, you need to come to our office." When Forum 18 asked why Pastor Rychagov was charged under Article 241, even though he has religious education and is a Pastor of a state-registered Church, Anvarov put the phone down.

Massive fine in February, Pastor learned of hearing and fine in June

Judge Khakim Malikov of Tashkent Region's Kuyichirchik District Criminal Court heard the case against Rychagov on 27 February – even though the Pastor (who was away in Russia) had not been told of the hearing and so was not present and could not arrange to be defended. The Judge fined him 9,472,000 Soms (about 30,360 Norwegian Kroner, 3,380 Euros, or 3,675 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

Rychagov, who remains in Russia, found out about the hearing and fine via his Church only on 22 June, local Protestants who know him, and who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18.

Local Protestants told Forum 18 that the hearing and punishment of Pastor Rychagov were illegal. For example:

- none of the young people's statements were dated;
- the case was registered on 24 December 2014 but the hearing took place on 27 February 2015 – exceeding Administrative Code Article 36's two-month limit for bringing cases to court;
- there is no evidence in the case materials that Rychagov was notified in advance of the court hearing;
- and contrary to the charges under Article 241, Rychagov has a religious education, and his Church is officially registered with Tashkent Region's Justice Department.

Asked by Forum 18 on 5 August why he fined Pastor Rychagov in his absence and with violations of legal procedure, Judge Malikov refused to answer. He claimed instead that Rychagov "ran away and is being searched for". When Forum 18 repeated the earlier question and asked why Article 241 was used when it does not apply to an authorised person of a state-registered religious organisation, he replied "no comments over the phone" before refusing to discuss the case further.

Police still hunting woman, harassing and charging family

Police in Karshi in the south-eastern Kashkadarya Region are still hunting Guljahon Kuzebayeva, a local Protestant, local Protestants who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 31 July.

Kuzebayeva has been in hiding from police since July 2014, as they allege she talked to family members about her Christian faith. She fears torture during interrogation and possible short-term jailing, fellow Protestants have told Forum 18 (see F18News 14 April 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2055).

The use of informal physical violence and torture against women and men, or threats of this, by the authorities is widespread in Uzbekistan (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Between 7 and 23 May police harassed and raided Kuzebayeva's relatives and neighbour in repeated attempts to find her. They behaved insultingly, "like hooligans", local Protestants complained (see F18News 4 June 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2070). In early July the raids and harassment continued (see F18News 24 July 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1980).

At lunchtime on 24 July, Ilhom Yakhshiyev, Fakhriiddin Jurayev and Dilmurod Boboyev of Karshi Police came to Kuzebayeva's home. They told her family that her daughter-in-law Dilnora Boboyeva (no relation of Dilmurod Boboyev) allegedly claimed in May

2015 that Kuzebayeva abducted Boboyeva's son for three days. Local Protestants told Forum 18 that Boboyeva had voluntarily left the boy at Kuzebayeva's home. Police refused to provide the family with any documentation of their claims.

Police officer Yakhshiyev refused to tell Forum 18 on 5 August why police are harassing Kuzebayeva and her family. He then put the phone down.

Shahnoza Berdiyeva, Kuzebayeva's niece, was fined in mid-July "for not obeying police orders", officer Nodyr told Forum 18 on 5 August. Asked what charges were brought and where, he claimed that "I don't remember". Asked why police are harassing Kuzebayeva's family and what exactly she is accused of, officer Nodyr asked Forum 18 to call back in 20 minutes. He refused to answer and put the phone down when Forum 18 called back.

Home raided, car confiscated

Police in Urgench in the north-western Khorezm Region on 20 July raided the home of Stanislav Kim, a member of a local Council of Churches Baptist Church, as two other local Baptists – Mirzabek Kuranbayev and Dmitry Krasnokutsky – were with him, local Protestants told Forum 18 on 5 August.

"Police checked passports, and then claimed that a woman wrote a complaint that Kim gave two Christian books to her brother as a present," the Protestants told Forum 18. Kim had given the man the books at his request, they added. Police then searched Kim's home and car, and confiscated Kim's passport, several books and a notebook from the car, as well as the car itself. Kim's passport has been returned, but not his car.

The officials then brought all three Baptists to Urgench Police Station, and put Pastor Kim's car in the Police Station's pound for confiscated cars.

Detained, interrogated, pressured

The three Baptists were kept at the Police Station for questioning until 1 am the following morning, 21 July. After being released, Pastor Kim and Kuranbayev were that morning again summoned to the Police Station, where they were held for questioning all day. The 15-year-old Krasnokutsky was brought to the Police Station that evening.

Major Shukhrat Masharipov and Major Shavkat Bekjanov of Urgench Police's Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department demanded that Kuranbayev and Krasnokutsky state that Pastor Kim is "teaching religion illegally", local Protestants complained. Kuranbayev was questioned in Uzbek, a language he does not understand, then at 10 pm sent to a detention centre for minors. He was released the next day, 22 July.

Local Protestants fear that charges will be brought against Pastor Kim under Administrative Code Article 241, Part 1 ("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").

No-one from Urgench Police was willing to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 5 August. Questioned by Forum 18 about the pressure exerted on two Baptists, including a minor, to incriminate Pastor Kim, police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department Major Bekjanov responded: "Who are you and why should I discuss the case with you over the phone?" (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 is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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