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KYRGYZSTAN: "His screams of terror and pain could be heard throughout the building"

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

Ten police officers – only two of them in uniform – raided a Jehovah's Witness meeting for worship in a rented cafe in Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan on 9 August, claiming it was "illegal". Police brought an Imam to "convert them to Islam", who threatened those present. Officers beat one man for filming the raid on his phone and "his screams of terror and pain could be heard throughout the building", Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18 News Service. At the police station, officers strangled three Jehovah's Witnesses "to the point that they passed out". Asked why he and his colleagues raided the meeting for worship and beat several participants, Officer Kozhobek Kozubayev insulted and swore at Forum 18. Kozubayev had been involved in similar beatings of Jehovah's Witnesses in Osh in 2013, for which he was ordered punished. Also in early August, Osh City authorities and a local Imam did not allow a Protestant to bury her deceased 25-year-old son in the cemetery in the District where they live. She could only bury him in a distant cemetery when, under pressure from an Imam, she renounced her faith.

For the third time in three years, Osh City Police in Kyrgyzstan's southern Osh Region have used torture against Jehovah's Witnesses to punish them for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief. Officers on 9 August raided a worship service which they claimed was "illegal" and "brutally attacked the peaceful worshippers by beating them", Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18 News Service on 17 August. Officers beat one man for filming the raid on his phone and "his screams of terror and pain could be heard throughout the building". At the police station, officers beat six participants, three of whom were strangled "to the point that they passed out".

Police also brought Imam Keneshbay Ryskeldi uulu with them, who represents Osh City Kaziyat, the state-sponsored Muslim Board's Osh City branch. He threatened that Jehovah's Witnesses would "not be allowed to bury your dead, because you are Baptists." And in order to prevent their burials he would "take copies of the photographs and names" of all the worshippers present in the meeting and "distribute them".

The Muslim Board is controlled by the state and the state routinely allows local imams to prevent non-Muslims from being buried (see Forum 18's Kyrgyzstan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2013 and below).

Jehovah's Witnesses described the latest brutal attack against their fellow-believers in Osh as a "gross violation of the Constitution of the Kyrgyzstan and of the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic. These crimes were motivated by their religious hatred and intolerance for Jehovah's Witnesses."

Forced to renounce faith to be allowed to bury son

Also in early August, Osh City authorities and a local Imam did not allow a Protestant Christian woman to bury her deceased 25-year-old son in the cemetery in the District where they live and where their relatives are buried, local Protestants complained to Forum 18. The son had recently died in a car accident. Protestants asked not to publish their names or the names of the woman or her relatives for fear of state reprisals.

"After negotiations with the Osh City authorities, they were allowed to bury him in a different cemetery, in a District of Osh far from their home, where adherents of various religions are buried," Protestants added. However, even to be able to do that "under pressure from the local Imam who recited Muslim prayers, the mother was made to renounce her Christian faith".

Local people and Muslim leaders, with the connivance of local authorities, have long obstructed or denied burials according to their own rites to deceased Protestants, Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees – especially those of ethnic Kyrgyz or ethnic Uzbek background – in village graveyards which they insist are only for Muslims. The authorities appear content to allow local imams to control who is buried in state-owned cemeteries not owned by religious communities. Police often back obstructions of burials, in some cases actively participating in burial denials. The authorities' failure to ensure people may bury their dead in the way they would wish causes deep distress to the family and friends of the dead and their communities (see Forum 18's Kyrgyzstan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2013).

"A sensitive issue we cannot interfere in"

Asked on 19 August why the Osh authorities did not allow a young Christian man to be buried in the cemetery near his home where his relatives are buried, Kanatbek Abdurahimov, representative of the State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA) in Osh, claimed to Forum 18 that it is a "Muslim cemetery". But, he added, "he was finally buried in another cemetery". He maintained that "this is a sensitive issue we cannot interfere in", but did not explain why the authorities cannot intervene to allow individuals of any faith or none to be buried in local cemeteries.

Asked why the mother was compelled to renounce her faith, Abdurahimov claimed that "She herself came to the Regional Kazi's office and asked to accept her into Islam." Told that sources from Osh told Forum 18 that she was compelled to do so, he claimed: "If it was against her will, she wouldn't have come of her own accord."

"I do not want to interfere in the affairs of the police"

Asked about the police raid on the Jehovah's Witness worship meeting, Abdurahimov told Forum 18 that he cannot comment on the actions of the police. However, he said police had told him that Jehovah's Witnesses "conducted a religious meeting and spread their faith in an unauthorised place".

Told that the Community has a central organ in the capital Bishkek which is authorised to conduct religious activity all over the country, according to the 4 September 2014 interpretation of the Religion Law by Kyrgyzstan's Constitutional Chamber, he responded: "I do not have these facts and I do not want to interfere in the affairs of the police."

Asked why police brought Imam Ryskeldi uulu with them to forcibly convert Jehovah's Witnesses, by threatened them with being not allowed to bury their dead and distributing their photographs among Imams, Abdurahimov repeated: "I cannot interfere with what the police do because they are a closed agency."

Raid

Ten police officers – only two of them in police uniforms and the rest in plain clothes - "burst" into a cafe on Masaliyeva Street of Osh's Suleyman-Too District at approximately 10.30 am on 9 August. Jehovah's Witnesses had rented the cafe for a meeting for worship and more than 50 people were present. Police were led by Kozhobek Kozubayev and Lieutenant Colonel Nurbek Sherikbayev of the 10th Division of Osh Police, which oversees religious cases. Officers "ordered the service to be stopped", Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18.

The intruders identified themselves as officers of Osh Police's 10th Division, but did not show their identity documents, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. However, Jehovah's Witnesses have video and audio recordings of the raid where the officers addressed their two leaders as Lieutenant Colonel Nurbek Sherikbayev and Officer Kozhobek Kozubayev.

Sherikbayev also signed the 9 August police record (seen by Forum 18) of an administrative "offence" against Nurlan Usupbayev, one of the worshippers.

"We will shoot you in the head if you move"

Officer Kozubayev began by demanding that all those in attendance show their identity documents. He and other officers "repeatedly threatened" the worshippers that "we will shoot you in the head if you move".

As the police began the raid, a black car pulled up and more police officers arrived, Jehovah's Witnesses added. Then officers seized Usupbayev, who had arranged the worship meeting, "forced him roughly" into the car, and took him to Osh City Police Station.

Meanwhile, other officers took Tynchtyk Olzhobayev, one of the worshippers, to another floor in the cafe, and "viciously beat him so that his screams of terror and pain could be heard throughout the building". When Jehovah's Witnesses asked Officer Sherikbayev why his colleagues were beating Olzhobayev so badly, he "admitted that they are beating him because he had filmed the actions of the police with his telephone" and that "he refused to give his telephone to the police so they could delete the recordings".

Imam threatens Jehovah's Witnesses

During the raid, Kozubayev and the other officers insulted the religious beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses, saying: "You deceive people, you brainwash them." Officers told them that they had brought an Imam with them to "convert them to Islam".

Imam Ryskeldi uulu (who would not give his name during the raid) insulted the Jehovah's Witnesses, threatening that "You ceased to be Muslims, you became infidels, and when you are attacked we are not going to protect you." His threats continued: "Your marriages are invalid. We won't let you bury your dead here because you are Baptists." And he warned: "I have memorised all of

you. I will distribute copies of your names and photographs to everyone."

Asked what consequences such threats might have for them in Osh or elsewhere in Kyrgyzstan, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18: "We in any case experience difficulties with burials of our deceased ones, and pressure on us – especially outside cities - is constant, and we do not know what extra difficulties this might bring" (see Forum 18's Kyrgyzstan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2013).

Torture at Osh Police Station

Officers then took 10 members of the congregation to Osh City Police Station, "where six were brutally beaten, three of whom were strangled to the point that they passed out". The six identified by fellow Jehovah's Witnesses as having been tortured were: Usupbayev, Chorobek Kadyrov, Bakytbek Kubanychbek uulu, Manas Bilal uulu, Razan Korgolov and Islamedin Kombarov.

Usupbayev, Kadyrov and Bilal uulu were also strangled by the police. Two of the three, Kadyrov and Bilal uulu, "passed out" while being strangled. Kadyrov "thought he was going to die".

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that they have audio and video recordings of the raid and torture of Olzhobayev, as well as photographs of the strangulation marks on the three victims tortured at Osh Police Station.

"Marks from the strangulation were still visible hours later, as proven by the photographs taken of the victims later that same day, and their certificates of medical examination," Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18.

The other four Jehovah's Witnesses taken to Osh Police Station were: Eldiyar Ormonov, Arstan Botokhanov, Iskander Kambarov and Zhakonchir Asanbayev.

Officer Kozubayev, who also participated in the beatings and strangulation, had been responsible for beating Usupbayev in 2013. During the 9 August 2015 beatings, he "mocked Usupbayev", referring back to "his vicious abuse of him in 2013": "You reported me. You invited a lawyer from Moscow. What did you achieve? Nothing."

Kozubayev then strangled Usupbayev with the tie he was wearing, "screaming," "Why did you give me away to the Prosecutor's Office? Will you again give me away to the Prosecutor? Because of you I was punished."

Police swear when questioned about torture

Asked who Forum 18 could talk about the raid on the Jehovah's Witness meeting and the torture, Osh Police referred Forum 18 on 17 August to Officer Kozubayev.

Asked on 18 August why he and his colleagues raided the worship meeting of the Jehovah's Witnesses and physically tortured them, Officer Kozubayev insulted and swore at Forum 18, shouting "who are you?" Asked why he was swearing at Forum 18 and why he would not explain why he beat and abused the Jehovah's Witnesses, he put the phone down. Subsequent calls to him the same day went unanswered.

Answering his phone on 18 August, Officer Sherikbayev introduced himself but, when Forum 18 asked about the raid and torture of people, claimed that "it's a wrong number". When Forum 18 repeated the question, he replied "You don't speak Kyrgyz," and put the phone down.

Police force victims to sign statement against themselves

Police "forced all our fellow-believers to write and sign statements claiming they were not mistreated by the police," and that "their religious gathering was illegal", Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18. Officers "literally dictated" what the 10 Jehovah's Witnesses had to write, and "beat them to force them to do so". At approximately 3.30 pm police released the 10.

Police refuse to register victims' complaint

Immediately after being released on 9 August, the six Jehovah's Witnesses who were tortured abused at Osh Police Station visited the Police Station in Osh City's Suleyman-Too District, where the cafe is located and the raid took place. There they tried to report the "illegal actions of the officers" from Osh Police's 10th Division. They requested that the police send them for an official medical examination. However, Investigator Munar Manosov refused to grant the request, claiming that the incident did "not happen in his territory".

That same afternoon, the six torture victims visited a hospital in Osh, where they were examined by a doctor and their injuries confirmed. (Forum 18 has seen photographs of the victims with signs of abuse on their necks, as well as the signed medical reports, and has heard parts of the audio recordings.)

Not the first time

"This is the third violent attack against Jehovah's Witnesses by officials from Osh Police 10th Division," Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18. Officer Kozubayev was involved in all three attacks, they added.

On 16 April 2013, Kozubayev summoned Usupbayev to the 10th Police Division, and "viciously beat him, claiming that the religious activity of Jehovah's Witnesses in Osh is illegal."

On 19 May 2013, Kozubayev and nine other police officers raided a Jehovah's Witness religious meeting held in a home in Osh. They took all nine people present, including several young women, to Osh City Police Station for interrogation. During that interrogation, officers "threatened that they would torture Jehovah's Witnesses if they continued to hold their religious services". Officers interrogated the young women separately, "threatening them with rape", Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Jehovah's Witnesses filed an official complaint concerning these illegal actions. On 25 July 2013 the General Prosecutor's Office informed the Religious Centre of Jehovah's Witnesses of the Kyrgyz Republic that Kozubayev "received a warning". Kyrgyzstan's Interior Ministry (Police) and National Security Committee (NSC) secret police ordered Osh Regional and City Police to "severely punish" Kozubayev and other officials involved "to prevent such violations in the future", Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. However, they lamented, "the warning had no effect".

Police warn Usupbayev of hearing

On the day of the raid, police opened an administrative case against Usupbayev for arranging the worship meeting "illegally". Police drew up a record of an "offence" against him (seen by Forum 18) under Administrative Code Article 395, Part 2 ("Violation of procedures for holding religious meetings and processions, and other religious rites"). The punishment for this is a fine of up to five Financial Indicators (FIs).

In 2006 Kyrgyzstan's Parliament set one Financial Indicator at 100 Soms. This means that the maximum fine for this "offence" is 500 Soms (about 68 Norwegian Kroner, 7 Euros or 8 US Dollars).

"It is quite strange that the indictment prepared by Osh Police asks the Court to fine Usupbayev 2,000 Soms," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "But we think the Court will ignore this, since the maximum penalty is 500 Soms."

On 11 August, two days after the raid, eight of the raiding police officers again stopped Usupbayev, Kadyrov, Bilal uulu, Korgolov, Ormonov and Kombarov who happened to be together on the street in Osh, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. The officers took Usupbayev again to Osh Police Station. "They warned him that he needs to appear before the Court on 19 August for the hearing of his case." After about 40 minutes they released him.

The case against Usupbayev was handed to Osh City Court, where Judge Bolotbek Satybaldiyev was due to hear it on 19 August. However, the Judge adjourned the case that day. "He told us that the court has been informed that the involved police officers were not available today," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. The case was adjourned until 20 August.

Judge Satybaldiyev refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 19 August. "It is not over yet, I can't give any comments." He then put the phone down.

Will prosecutors investigate and punish police officers?

On 17 August Jehovah's Witnesses filed a complaint against the actions of the police officers to Osh City Prosecutor Atay Shakir uulu. They also sent copies to Kyrgyzstan's President Almazbek Atambayev, Prosecutor General Indira Joldubayeva and Interior Minister Melis Turganbayev, as well as Osh City Administration.

Asked on 18 August, when or whether they will investigate the torture by police and punish the responsible officers, Osh City Prosecutor Shakir uulu at first claimed: "We have not received a complaint from Jehovah's Witnesses." When Forum 18 stated that it has seen a copy of the complaint received and signed for on 17 August by the duty Prosecutor A. Mamataliyev of Osh City Prosecutor's Office, Shakir uulu replied: "Look, if we received it then our Investigators will investigate it." He then refused to discuss the case further with Forum 18.

Asked on 18 August whether the Prosecutor General's Office in Bishkek will investigate the police raid and brutality in Osh, the Assistant (who did not give her name) to Prosecutor General Joldubayeva referred Forum 18 to Aynura Eshmambetova, Chief of the General Section. "She will give all the necessary information on this case." However, Eshmambetova said on 19 August that she cannot comment on the case or answer questions over the phone. She asked Forum 18 to send questions in writing.

The same day Forum 18 asked the Prosecutor General in writing when or whether the Prosecutor's Office will investigate the raid

and torture and what possible punishments might be handed down to those responsible. (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Kyrgyzstan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2013.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Kyrgyzstan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=30>.

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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