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UZBEKISTAN: "Threatened we will be put in prison if we don't stop visiting each other for prayers"

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

A wide group of Muslims in Tashkent Region near Uzbekistan's capital have faced repeated harassment since the summer, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Two Muslim families were initially targeted, with four of them imprisoned by police for between one and two months and about 18 of them fined for "violation of the procedure for holding religious meetings". Another group were then targeted, with ten women detained and fined for the same "offence", while one woman was threatened with being imprisoned with men who might rape her. On 10 August, Anti-Terrorism Police raided the homes of eight male relatives of the women who met occasionally to pray together, discuss their faith and share meals. Anti-Terrorism Officer Mirvolid Mirboboyev "warned and threatened us that we will be put in prison if we don't stop visiting each other for prayers", one of the victims Tashkentboy Ergashev told Forum 18. Officer Mirboboyev refused to discuss his or his colleagues' actions with Forum 18. Another Tashkent Muslim, Olmosbek Erkaboyev, was held by police for two months as they sought information about his father-in-law. Officers beat him to try to get him to sign a document incriminating himself on charges of religious extremism.

Anti-Terrorism Police raided the homes of eight Muslim men in Tashkent Region near Uzbekistan's capital on 10 August, Forum 18 News Service has learned. The men met occasionally to pray together, discuss their faith and share meals. Officers held and questioned them for between 15 and 40 hours, warning that they would be imprisoned or tried by a court and fined.

Earlier in the summer, about ten of their female relatives were detained and fined, and one woman was threatened with being imprisoned with men who might rape her. Two other Muslim families were targeted, with four of them imprisoned by police for between one and two months and about 18 of them fined.

In a separate case, the National Security Service (NSS) secret police and Tashkent Regional Police "illegally" imprisoned a Tashkent Muslim for two months as they sought information about his father-in-law, who left Uzbekistan for Russia several years ago. Officers beat him to try to get him to sign a document incriminating himself on charges of religious extremism. He was freed, but remains under travel restrictions (see below).

Under Uzbekistan's harsh system of state control over the exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief, all religious activity - except by state registered religious communities in approved premises and with pre-censored religious literature - is banned. Those who violate these strict restrictions face imprisonment or often heavy fines. Those detained by police often face beatings and other torture, or threats of torture (see Forum 18's religious freedom survey of Uzbekistan http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Violence and torture, or threats of this, by police and other officials are "routine" in Uzbekistan, 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).

"Anti-Terrorism" raids and questioning

In the early morning of 10 August, eight officers of Tashkent Region's Yukori-Chirchik Police, led by Mirvolid Mirboboyev of the Anti-Terrorism Police Division, raided the homes of eight Muslim men, one of the eight Tashkentboy Ergashev told Forum 18 on 9 September. He and the other seven Muslims - Khumaydullo Abduganiyev, Abdumannon Kholdorov, Imam Khaitboyev, Valikhan Ismaylov, Murat Maymakbayev, Iskandar Kurbanov and Ishdaulet Karabayev - "occasionally visited each other and prayed together".

Police searched their homes, and "found nothing illegal during these raids, but only the Koran for instance in my home", Ergashev added. Officers then took all eight to the Police Station for questioning.

During questioning, Officer Mirboboyev and other officers asked him and his fellow-believers why they visited each other, shared meals, prayed together, and discussed religious topics, Ergashev told Forum 18. He complained that the officers were "rude and

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swore at us". Officer Mirboboyev "warned and threatened us that we will be put in prison if we don't stop visiting each other for prayers." The Police "compelled all of us to sign the Police reports".

Police released six of the men late in the evening on 10 August after some 15 hours' detention. However, they released Ergashev and Abduganiyev only on the evening of 11 August, after some 40 hours. Police warned the eight men that "soon there will be a court hearing" and that they would be fined.

Officer Mirboboyev refused to answer why he and the other Police officers raided, questioned and threatened the eight Muslims, warning them not to visit each other and pray together. He also refused to explain to Forum 18 on 9 September whether or when the case will be referred to the Court. "I already referred the case to Tashkent Regional Police," was all he would say. He then put the phone down, and did not answer subsequent calls.

Asked about the case, Tashkent Regional Police on 10 September referred Forum 18 to Deputy Police Chief Nasridddin Abdosov. However, his phone went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 10 and 11 September. Tashkent Regional police officers (who would not give their names) refused to comment on the case or say which Court will hear the cases of the eight men and when.

Officer Mirboboyev was also involved in a raid on the home of another Tashkent Muslim, Gulchohra Norbayeva, in February. Officers were hunting religious literature and also accused her of teaching the Koran "illegally" (see F18News 14 April 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2055).

Earlier raid and questioning of Ergashev's wife

Seven officers of Yukori-Chirchik Police had raided and searched Ergashev's home in the early morning of 29 June, exactly six weeks before the 10 August raid. Finding no religious literature, officers seized Ergashev's computer, which they have not returned. They took his wife Sabohat Ergasheva to the Police Station.

"In the computer memory there was nothing illegal, only some Muslim cartoons for children and instructions on how to read prayers and conduct other Muslim rituals," Ergashev said.

At the Police Station Ergasheva was "cursed with unutterable words, compelling her to sign police reports against her husband". When she refused to do so, officers "threatened her that she could be given fifteen-day administrative arrest, and put in a prison cell with men, who could rape her," Ergashev complained to Forum 18. "My wife is pregnant, and they did this to her."

Ergasheva was released the same day after seven hours' detention.

Ergashev is preparing an official complaint over the way Police treated his wife and himself.

Female relatives fined earlier

Also during the summer, some ten women – "mothers and wives of some of us" - were also fined, Ergashev complained to Forum 18. They were brought to court under Administrative Code Article 201, Part 2. This punishes "Violation of the procedure for holding religious meetings, street processions, or other religious ceremonies". Each was fined up to five times the minimum monthly wage, 592,000 Soms (1,800 Norwegian Kroner, 200 Euros or 225 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

Although punishments under this Article are a fine of between 80 to 100 times the minimum monthly wage or being jailed for up to 15 days, the authorities "used another Article of the Administrative Code to give milder punishments", Ergashev explained.

"The women were also warned not to visit each other and not to pray together." Ergashev said that relatives do not want the names of the women published for fear of the authorities.

Lengthy detentions and fines

Police officers told Ergashev during his detention that the authorities found out about his and his friends' meetings from two Muslim men they had detained, Fazil and Rakhmatullo (whose last names he did not remember). Police held Rakhmatullo and his son in prison for two months and Fazil and his son for one month, Ergashev told Forum 18.

Rakhmatullo, his son and about eight other family members, as well as Fazil, his son and about six other family members, were brought to court under Administrative Code Article 201, Part 2. Each was fined five times the minimum monthly wage, 592,000 Soms.

As with the group of women who were fined, the authorities reduced the fines to well below the minimum fine under Article 201, Part 2, Ergashev noted. All have paid the fines. The two families do "not want to talk publicly about the cases for fear of further persecution from the authorities."

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Arrest, 61 days' imprisonment, torture

In a separate case, on 5 June officers of the NSS secret police and Tashkent Regional Police arrested Olmosbek Erkaboyev, a Muslim from Tashkent's Mirzo-Ulugbek District. They "illegally" imprisoned him for 61 days, Tashkent-based human rights defender Surat Ikramov complained to Forum 18 on 8 September. Erkaboyev was eventually freed on 4 August.

The 36-year old Erkaboyev was arrested in the building of the Police Passport Division, where he was supposed to collect his new Uzbek bio-metric passport. He was then taken to Tashkent Regional Police Station. "There he was subjected to illegal questioning without participation of a lawyer, was beaten, tortured and hit on the head with a truncheon," Ikramov told Forum 18. "Officers demanded that he sign an indictment accusing him of religious extremism."

Erkaboyev's mother Mutabarkhon Sodikova – who sought help in the case from Ikramov – believes her son was targeted because police are hunting for his father-in-law, Muhiddin (last name unknown). She told Radio Free Europe's Uzbek Service for an 18 August report that some years ago Muhiddin and his wife had moved to Russia, where they received Russian citizenship.

Several years ago during a return visit to Uzbekistan, Muhiddin was sharing a meal with his Muslim friends when police raided. Police opened a case, but Muhiddin was able to flee from Uzbekistan. Sodikova said her son had been questioned about his father-in-law's religious activity during his detention.

Erkaboyev himself is known to attend mosque regularly.

Released under recognisance not to leave

Sodikova visited Tashkent Regional Police "every day during her son's imprisonment to find out what exactly her son is being accused of", human rights defender Ikramov told Forum 18. Saidislom Yusupov, Anti-terrorism Police officer "calmed her, telling her that her son would soon be released, but did not tell her why he had been arrested."

Ikramov told Forum 18 that in early August he called Officer Yusupov, who similarly told him that Erkaboyev would soon be released without giving any details of the case. Erkaboyev was then released on 4 August after 61 days' imprisonment. However, he signed "papers that he will be a witness in a criminal case, and that he must not leave Tashkent until the court hearing."

The Police reports Erkaboyev signed claimed that officers were "polite", and that he has "no complaints against the authorities." Officers warned him that "if materials are published on the internet about his arrest, he will be put in prison."

Called on 10 September, Officer Yusupov introduced himself but put the phone down when Forum 18 asked what Erkaboyev is charged with, and why he was tortured while in detention. Called back, one of Yusupov's colleagues answered the phone and as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself, he began mumbling in a language which sounded like a mixture of Russian and English and laughing loudly. He then put the phone down.

Asked about the case, Tashkent Regional Police on 10 September referred Forum 18 to Sherzod Nurmatov, Chief of the Anti-Terrorism Police. Asked the same day about the case and why officers had tortured Erkaboyev, Nurmatov asked Forum 18 to call back in an hour. Called back on 10 September, Nurmatov's cell phone was switched off. When Forum 18 reached him on 11 September, he first asked, "Who gave you my number?" Without waiting for an answer, he suddenly said, "You can write anything and anywhere," and put the phone down.

No soap or toilet paper and only poor food in detention

While in detention in Tashkent Regional Investigation Detention Centre, Erkaboyev was "not given soap or toilet paper," and was given "poor food". He came out of detention "skinny, sickly, and with complaints about his abdomen and heart", human rights defender Ikramov told Forum 18.

Seeing her son in this state, Sodikova "felt very bad". She asked the Chief of Police Passport Division Farrukh Muminov why her son had been arrested and why, three months after his application, he still had not got his passport. Muminov declined to discuss the issue with her, saying only that it was an "instruction from above".

Sodikova also approached Tashkent Regional NSS secret police, where she was received by Officer Ulugbek (who refused to give his last name or position). On Ulugbek's instruction, she left a written complaint about the case. Sodikova also wrote a complaint to Tashkent Regional Prosecutor's Office. (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.

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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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