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UZBEKISTAN: Bookburning, fines and jail used against Jehovah's Witnesses

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Forum 18 News Service has learnt that two Jehovah's Witnesses have been fined a month's wages for "failing to observe the prescribed manner of communicating religious doctrine" and their literature, including a copy of the New Testament, has been sentenced to be burnt. Judge Jamila Khojanova told Forum 18 that "if we hadn't made the decision to have the literature destroyed, then Khojbayev and Ajigilev would have started distributing it again and we cannot allow that.". Forum 18 pointed out that this literature is not illegal, and so the bookburning is illegal. Another Jehovah's Witness has been sentenced to three days in jail. These sentences are part of a continuing pattern of persecution throughout Uzbekistan, in which the NSS (National Security Service) secret police have threatened "to work on the Jehovah's Witnesses in earnest".

On 12 January, Jehovah's Witnesses Nurali Azhigilev and Turganbai Khozhbayev were arrested in the town of Takhiatash (in Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston], north-western Uzbekistan) for distributing religious literature, Forum 18 News Service has found. On 23 January the Takhiatash town court, presided over by Judge Jamila Khojanova, found Ajigilev and Khojbayev guilty under article 241 (failing to observe the prescribed manner of communicating religious doctrine) of the Code of Administrative Offences, and imposed a fine equivalent to one month's minimum wage, 5,440 sum (39 Norwegian Kroner, 4.50 Euros or 6 US Dollars). The court also decided that literature confiscated from the Jehovah's Witnesses should be destroyed, this consisting of one copy of the New Testament, one copy of the magazine "Awake!" and nine copies of the "Watchtower" magazine.

Judge Khojanova strongly defended the court ruling. "The Jehovah's Witness organisation is not registered in the republic of Karakalpakstan and therefore may not preach on the territory of the republic," she told Forum 18 from Takhiatash on 11 February. When Forum 18 commented that "Awake!", "Watchtower" and especially "The New Testament" were not forbidden in Uzbekistan and that therefore the decision to have them destroyed was unlawful, Khojanova responded "if we hadn't made the decision to have the literature destroyed, then Khojbayev and Ajigilev would have started distributing it again and we cannot allow that." "The confiscated literature will most likely be burnt, but the Jehovah's Witnesses can try and appeal against the decision within 10 days," Khojanova told Forum 18.

These repressive sentences against Jehovah's Witnesses are part of a continuing pattern of persecution throughout Uzbekistan, in which the NSS (National Security Service) secret police have threatened "to work on the Jehovah's Witnesses in earnest" (see F18News 28 January 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=237).

Forum 18 has also learnt that at Pastdargomsiy district criminal court in Juma, Samarkand (Samarqand) region (western Uzbekistan) a Jehovah's Witness from Samarkand, Aliakbar Davranov, was sentenced to three days of administrative arrest, this, like the sentences in Takhiatash, also being under article 241. "I went to the town of Juma on business on 4 December 2003, and at about 6 o'clock in the evening I went to see my friend Damil Mukharamov, who lives on Nadirabegim street," Davranov wrote in his protest to the chairman of the Samarkand regional court. "There were six people at his house, whom I know because they are fellow-believers who, like me, preach the faith of Jehovah's Witnesses, which is an international religious organisation. I was delighted to meet them and we started to talk about things to do with the Bible, as all Jehovah's Witnesses do throughout the world, not just in Samarkand region. I didn't entice anyone, or teach, or in particular force anyone to come to Mukharamov's house."

For more background information see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>

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