

11 April 2023

UZBEKISTAN: Easter church raid, Baptists tortured, prison Ramadan fast ban

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Police raided the Baptist Church in Karshi during worship on Easter Sunday, 9 April. They "damaged the door of the prayer house, behaved crudely, and arrested three church members", Baptists said. Police "brutally beat David Ibragimov and a few more church members in front of our fellow believers" and "used electric shock prods and other implements to incapacitate" church members. Police refused to explain why they raided the church and tortured church members. Open Prison No. 49 in Olmalyk banned prisoners from fasting during Ramadan, threatening those that do.

On Easter Sunday, 9 April, police raided the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Karshi in the southern Kashkadarya Region during their morning worship meeting. "Police officers and officials damaged the door of the prayer house, behaved crudely, and arrested three church members," Baptists told Forum 18 the same day.

Baptists state that police tortured church members. "Today police brutally beat David Ibragimov and a few more church members in front of our fellow believers," they said. "They also used electric shock prods and other implements to incapacitate the brothers and sisters. Church members cried and prayed during those difficult minutes." Video posted online shows Ibragimov collapsing to the ground against a wall in the yard, and then a police officer standing next to him (see below).

The United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment requires the regime to arrest and put on criminal trial for torture officials suspected of involvement in torture. The regime routinely ignores this human rights obligation (see below).

Local Baptists said 10 church members, including young people, were taken to the police station. Video images show police officers holding one church member Yokub round the neck as he was on the ground, and as they put him in a police van. The officer warns another officer that a church member is filming the arrest and a man runs towards the camera. Another church member, Yusuf, was already in the police van in handcuffs (see below).

No official from the police, the Kashkadarya Regional Interior Ministry (which oversees the police), or the district administration would answer Forum 18's questions about the raid or the torture of Baptists (see below).

Church members say the raid followed the Church's attempts to rent 15 local halls for presentations of the Christian faith to mark Easter. Visiting German musicians were to be involved in these meetings. All the rental attempts were blocked (see below).

On 10 April, police raided the special Easter worship meeting of the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Denov in Surkhandarya Region. They said the meeting was illegal and forcibly dispersed those present. The German Baptist musicians had travelled there from Karshi for the meeting. As in Karshi, the Church had tried to rent a venue. "Invitations had been handed out, but everywhere there was a ban on renting premises," church members noted (see below).

Council of Churches Baptists fear that the authorities may disrupt further events in the tour of Uzbek cities by the visiting German Baptists (see below).

Prisoners in at least one prison have been warned not to fast during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, which began in late March and is due to end on or about 21 April. The administration of Open Prison No. 49 in Olmalyk in Tashkent Region banned Muslim prisoners from fasting during Ramadan (see below).

"They threatened prisoners that, if they fast, they will be accused of violating prison regulations and will be sent back to the prison camp," one Muslim who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. "They also began to close the canteen for suhur, the morning meal before the start of the fast" (see below).

Neither Major Shukur Jurayev, the acting head of Open Prison No. 49, nor the Interior Ministry has been willing to answer Forum

18's questions about why prisoners are banned from fasting during Ramadan, and why the prison has closed the canteen for prisoners wanting to eat the pre-dawn meal (see below).

On 20 February, Uzbek customs officials detained a Baptist from Kazakhstan, Nikolai Smirnov, at the Gisht-Kuprik border crossing point, Baptists told Forum 18. Border guards had found in his car 237 Christian books, including calendars and Bibles. They seized all the Christian literature and handed it over to the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent for an "expert analysis". This found that there was nothing illegal in the literature, but officials refuse to return it and Smirnov faces a possible fine for "illegal" import of religious literature (see below).

Religious Affairs Committee officials did not answer their phones each time Forum 18 called to question them about the incident (see below).

Karshi: Police raid on Baptist Church

Police raided the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Karshi in the southern Kashkadarya Region during their morning worship meeting on Easter Sunday, 9 April. Council of Churches Baptists do not seek state permission to exercise their freedom of religion or belief, as is their right under international human rights law (<https://www.osce.org/odihr/139046>). Fellow Baptist musicians from Germany were among those taking part in the worship meeting.

Officials arrived during the service, refusing to say who they were except that they were from the mahalla (local district) committee. They said they were acting in accordance with a circular from the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent (signed by Deputy Chair Dilshod Mamadkulov) and the Culture Ministry in Tashkent (signed by Deputy Minister Bahodir Ahmedov) saying events involving the musicians from Germany were not allowed. The officials then called in the police.

"Police officers and officials damaged the door of the prayer house, behaved crudely, and arrested three church members," Baptists told Forum 18 the same day.

Video of the raid posted online show church members trying to prevent the police coming in from the yard through a church door the police broke down, while musicians carry on singing a Christian song at the front of the packed place of worship.

Further images show six or seven uniformed police walking through the congregation with the large letters "PPX" (which indicates police who patrol local areas) on the backs of their jackets. The video also shows a church leader asking a man in plain clothes, who appears to be leading the raid, if he is from the Hokimiyat (district administration).

Karshi: Police torture Baptists

Baptists state that police tortured church members. "Today police brutally beat David Ibragimov and a few more church members in front of our fellow believers," they said. "They also used electric shock prods and other implements to incapacitate the brothers and sisters. Church members cried and prayed during those difficult minutes."

Video posted online shows Ibragimov collapsing to the ground against a wall in the yard, and then a police officer standing next to him.

Local Baptists said 10 church members, including young people, were taken to the police station. Video images show police officers holding one church member Yokub round the neck as he was on the ground, and as they put him in a police van. The officer warns another officer that a church member is filming the arrest and a man runs towards the camera. Another church member, Yusuf, was already in the police van in handcuffs.

Police held all those they had detained until 3 pm. They drew up records of an offence before releasing them. They threatened one of them, Yokub Boboyev with a criminal charge of injuring a police officer, accusations church members insist are false.

The head and deputy heads of Kashkadarya Regional Interior Ministry (which oversees the police) did not answer their phones each time Forum 18 called on 10 April. The man who answered the phone of press secretary Major Javlon Bakhtiyev put the phone down as Forum 18 began to ask about the raid on the Baptist Church's Easter service and torture of church members.

The United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-against-torture-and-other-cruel-inhuman-or-degrading>) requires the regime to arrest and put on criminal trial for torture officials suspected of involvement in torture.

The regime routinely ignores (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) this human rights obligation, for example in relation to the torture of Muslim prisoner of conscience Fazilkhoja Arifkhoyayev (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2716).

The duty officer at Karshi City Police on 10 April referred all enquiries to the city's 2nd Police Station, in whose area the Baptist church is located. The 2nd Police Station duty officer put Forum 18 through to another officer, who put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 began to ask about the raid on the Baptist Church's Easter service and torture of church members. All the officers refused to give their names.

Anvar Kobilov, the Deputy Head of Kashkadarya Regional Hokimiyat (administration) responsible for youth policy, social development and spiritual and educational affairs, put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 began to ask about the raid on the Baptist Church's Easter service and torture of church members.

The official who answered the phone at the City Hokimiyat (administration) refused to put Forum 18 through on 10 April to any official there.

Church members say the raid followed the Church's attempts to rent 15 local halls for presentations of the Christian faith to mark Easter. The visiting German musicians were to be involved in these meetings. All the rental attempts were blocked.

Karshi: Earlier raids on Baptist Church

On 19 February, officials from the town Hokimiyat (administration) and the police raided Karshi's Council of Churches Baptist congregation during its Sunday morning meeting for worship, Baptists told Forum 18.

The Karshi congregation has existed for 30 years. It completed its new building and held a special service to dedicate it on the afternoon of 21 November 2021. Police and local officials came into the yard as the special service was underway. They tried to halt the service and force their way into the building to disperse those present, but church members prevented them from entering.

Police brought a bus to the church building and threatened to take away church members who were blocking their entrance. However, they did not do so. Church members said the police mostly behaved correctly, though some jostled church members as officers tried to gain entry. One officer tried to seize the mobile phone from a church member who was filming what they were doing.

Police also threatened to record personal details of any foreign citizens who were at the service, to ban them from further entry to the country. However, they did not do so. Police left mid-afternoon and the special dedication service continued undisturbed until the evening.

Police and other officials have raided the Church on numerous earlier occasions and fined church members, including in 2013 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1878), 2015 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2122), 2017 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2304), and 2018 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2388).

Denov: Worship meeting raided, banned

On Monday 10 April 2023, police raided a special Easter worship meeting of the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Denov in Surkhandarya Region. They said the meeting was illegal and forcibly dispersed those present.

The German Baptist musicians had travelled there from Karshi for the meeting. As in Karshi, the Church had tried to rent a venue. "Invitations had been handed out, but everywhere there was a ban on renting premises," church members noted. They decided to hold the worship meeting in their own church.

More tour events to be banned?

Council of Churches Baptists fear that the authorities may disrupt further events in the tour of Uzbek cities by the visiting German Baptists.

"We would like them to take part in several meetings for worship in various cities of Uzbekistan over the next three days," Baptists told Forum 18 on 10 April. "The authorities have promised to follow this group in all its meetings with local Baptists."

Prisoners banned, threatened over Ramadan fasting

Prisoners in at least one prison have been warned not to fast during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, which began in late March and is due to end on or about 21 April. Muslim prisoners have in the past been tortured for praying the namaz or fasting during Ramadan (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2635).

The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (known as the Mandela Rules, A/C.3/70/L.3 (https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/GA-RESOLUTION/E_ebook.pdf)) requires the regime to respect prisoners' exercise of freedom of religion or belief. Rule 2 includes the provision: "The religious beliefs and moral precepts of

prisoners shall be respected."

Yusup Bahodiy, Deputy Head of the Medical Division of the Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments, claimed to Forum 18 in December 2021 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2704) that "I have never heard of the Rules. Please e-mail them to us."

The administration of Open Prison No. 49 in Olmalyk in Tashkent Region banned Muslim prisoners from fasting during Ramadan. "They threatened prisoners that, if they fast, they will be accused of violating prison regulations and will be sent back to the prison camp," one Muslim who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 4 April 2023. "They also began to close the canteen for suhur, the morning meal before the start of the fast."

Prisoners in an open prison can be sent to a prison with harsher conditions for violating the prison regime. Human rights defenders told Forum 18 that prison administrations can easily fabricate alleged violations of prison regulations when they want to increase a prisoner's punishment. One told Forum 18 that the administration of Open Prison No. 49 has already sent two prisoners to a prison camp in late March, and is preparing to send two more.

A human rights defender, who wishes to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that prisoners state that such transfers to harsher regime camps are made on the orders of the State Security Service (SSS) secret police (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699).

Forum 18 called Major Shukur Jurayev, the acting head of Open Prison No. 49, on 10 April to find out why prisoners are banned from fasting during Ramadan, and why the prison has closed the canteen for prisoners wanting to eat the pre-dawn meal. After Forum 18 introduced itself and began asking the questions, he put the phone down. Subsequent calls were not answered. Major Jurayev has not replied to written questions.

An official who refused to give his name of the Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) in Tashkent (which is responsible for prisons) put the phone down on 10 April as soon as Forum 18 began asking about the ban on fasting during Ramadan in Open Prison No. 49.

Administrative prosecution, confiscation follow literature seizure on border

On the evening of 20 February, Uzbek customs officials detained a Baptist from Kazakhstan, Nikolai Smirnov, at the Gisht-Kuprik border crossing point, Baptists told Forum 18. Border guards had found in his car 237 copies of a book of children's stories "God's Miracle", about 60 copies of another children's book, 199 calendars and 31 Bibles, as well as postcards. They seized all the Christian literature and handed it over to the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent for an "expert analysis" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699).

Customs officials questioned Smirnov and then released him that evening. The following day they summoned him again to the border post for further questioning. On 24 February, they allowed him to leave Uzbekistan. Smirnov has relatives who live in Uzbekistan and fears the Uzbek authorities might ban him from entering the country.

The 2-page Religious Affairs Committee "expert analysis" found nothing illegal in the books. Smirnov was allowed to read the "expert analysis" but not given a copy. "Officials said earlier that if the expert analysis finds nothing illegal in the books they would hand them back," Smirnov told Forum 18 from Kazakhstan on 11 April. "But they deceived me. They then said they wouldn't return them as they were brought into Uzbekistan illegally. I would like them back."

On 7 March, officials drew up a case against Smirnov under Administrative Code Article 184-2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699). This punishes "Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials" with a fine for individuals of 20 to 100 base units (currently 6,000,000 to 30,000,000 Soms, two to 10 months' average wage) plus confiscation of the materials.

Officials then handed the case against Smirnov to Tashkent District Criminal Court in the town of Keles. However, no date has yet been set for a hearing, Smirnov told Forum 18.

Religious Affairs Committee (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) officials, including Begzod Kadyrov, head of the Department for Non-Islamic Faiths, did not answer their phones each time Forum 18 called on 10 April. (END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Uzbekistan (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=33>)

For background information, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments

(https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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