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UZBEKISTAN: Baptist pastor narrowly escapes charges

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Charges against a pastor of a registered Baptist church for holding a small-scale service last December in a private home owned by a church member have now been withdrawn, yet Dmitri Pitirimov, spokesman for the Uzbek Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists, said the church remains pessimistic. "Although the administrative charges against Pastor Nikolai Obyedkov have happily now been dropped," he told Forum 18 News Service on 9 March, "persecution of Baptists is continuing in a whole series of districts of Uzbekistan." Pitirimov pointed to several other raids on Baptist meetings in recent months, one in the run-up to Christmas which for the families present, he complained, "spoiled the occasion in advance".

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Pastor Obyedkov of the Yangiyul church was leading a service on 22 December in a private home in the village in the Soldatsky suburb of Yangiyul, 30 kilometres (20 miles) south of Tashkent, where some of the church's members live, when the meeting was raided. Apart from the guests from Yangiyul, eight elderly women were present. Obyedkov was detained despite having with him his certificate showing he was a minister for the Union of Evangelical Christian Baptist Churches of Uzbekistan; the Union's area of activity is the whole of the country. However this certificate did not make any impression on the police. At the Kuichirchik district department of internal affairs (the district centre of Yangiyul village, Tashkent region), a case was brought against Obyedkov under article 240 of the administrative code.

Article 240, which punishes "breaking the law on religious organisations", declares: "The existence of unlawful religious activity, a refusal on the part of the leaders of religious organisations to register a statute, the organisation and conduct by cult officials and members of religious organisations of special meetings for children and young people, as well as work-related, literary and other groups and circles which bear no relation to the operation of the cult, will result in the imposition of a fine of between five and ten times the minimum [monthly] wage or administrative arrest for up to 15 days. Turning believers from one confession to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity will result in a fine of between five and ten times the minimum [monthly] wage or administrative arrest for up to 15 days".

Pitirimov rejected suggestions that Obyedkov had acted illegally. "Nikolai Obyedkov is the pastor of a registered church and therefore it is in no way possible that his activity could fall under article 240 of the administrative code," he told Forum 18. When Forum 18 commented that under Article 14 of Uzbekistan's law on religion, religious rituals and ceremonies can only be conducted at the premises of the registered religious organisation, not in private homes, Pitirimov responded: "According to our organisation's statute, which has been registered at the justice ministry, we have the right to carry out our activity throughout the territory of Uzbekistan. We fought for this for a long time and we do not intend to give up what we have achieved."

Forum 18 tried without success to find out from the Kuichirchik district department of internal affairs why Obyedkov had been detained and charged. An official at the department, who refused to identify himself, said that the person in charge of Obyedkov's case, the investigator Izatulla Kurbanov, was ill with flu and was in hospital. The official advised Forum 18 to contact the head of the Kuichirchik district department of internal affairs, Colonel Saidullayev. However, Forum 18's repeated attempts to reach Saidullayev by telephone were in vain; each time the receptionist replied that he was not there.

Pitirimov believes that – despite the dropping of the case against Obyedkov - what may be described as a battle between the Uzbek authorities and the Protestant churches has been launched. Pitirimov told Forum 18 that Obyedkov's case was far from the only recent incident of its kind. On 3 November, officials of the local authority and the regional justice ministry entered a Baptist church in the city of Gulistan, 110 kilometres (70 miles) south of Tashkent. The church's pastor, Boris Akrachkov, was accused of carrying out religious activity without registration and an administrative case was brought against him.

On 16 December, representatives of the law enforcement agencies and the local authorities raided a private apartment belonging to a

member of a Baptist church in the Khamzin district of Tashkent. At the time of the raid church members Natalya Naumenko and Yelena Kaments were preparing to celebrate Christmas with local children. The ten or so police and local authority officials brought a video recorder with them in order to film everything in the apartment. Then, after barring the exit, they drew up a list of all those present, both children and adults. Afterwards they let the children go, but escorted the adults to the mahalla committee (the local agency of authority), where they forced them to write statements. An unauthorised search of the apartment took place, during which various publications were confiscated.

After some time it emerged that the parents of children who had been present in the flat at the time of the raid were being called into school and were being threatened by teachers for allowing their children to be drawn into the Jehovah's Witness "sect" (although in fact the apartment belonged to a Baptist). "What went on in Khamzin district was simply absurd," Pitirimov told Forum 18. "The police stopped children and their parents from preparing for Christmas and effectively spoiled the occasion in advance."

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