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TAJIKISTAN: Who murdered Baptist missionary Sergei Besarab?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

It is not yet certain who killed Baptist pastor Sergei Besarab in Isfara, but reliable sources insist to Forum 18 News Service that a previously unknown Islamist group called Bayat was behind it, a group said to be associated with the banned Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Afghanistan's Taliban. The authorities state they have arrested a group of Bayat members for the murder and other crimes, but some local Muslim politicians have denied to Forum 18 that Bayat exists. Echoing a local newspaper attack on Besarab just before his murder, Isfara's mayor, interviewed by Forum 18, attacked Besarab's missionary work, referring to his past criminal convictions and alleging that the killing was solely drug-related. The mayor produced no evidence for his allegations and Tajikistan's Baptist Church has firmly refuted them, pointing to the spiritual rebirth Besarab underwent when he became a Christian in prison, and his subsequent active growth in faith. The man thought to have carried out the murder, Saidullo Madyerov, is the son of the former imam of Isfara's central mosque. Isfara is one of the most devoutly Muslim regions of Tajikistan.

Despite intense media speculation, mystery still surrounds a group of men arrested in April in Isfara district of northern Tajikistan accused of the murder of local Baptist pastor and missionary Sergei Besarab last January and other crimes. Several local politicians told Forum 18 News Service that most of those held are devout Muslims. Media reports – among them from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and the Russian RIA Novosti news agency – claimed the men are members of a previously-unknown Islamic movement Bayat (an Arabic word meaning oath). But others doubt this, claiming they are simple criminals. One Baptist told Forum 18 in Isfara that the killing of the missionary was a deliberate attack on the local Christian minority. Interior Ministry investigators in Isfara have refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 before their investigation is completed.

Besarab was shot dead in the evening of 12 January after unknown intruders burst into the yard of the Baptist church in Isfara armed with automatic weapons. His active missionary work – which included distributing Tajik-language Christian leaflets to residents - had aroused the anger of some local people. Only a week before Besarab was killed, the local newspaper Nasimi Isfara published an anonymous article sharply criticising his missionary work and pointing out that he had four criminal convictions (see F18News 14 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=229).

On 12 April the secret police arrested 20 people on suspicion of having committed serious criminal offences that incited racial and religious tension, including Besarab's murder and arson attacks on several mosques whose imams were believed by the attackers to demonstrate excessive loyalty to the regime. According to a statement from Tajikistan's general procuracy, the detainees put up armed resistance, and weapons were seized when their homes were searched. Tajikistan's secret police admitted they had no prior knowledge of a Bayat movement.

Some sources claim that Bayat members have nothing to do with the banned Hizb-ut-Tahrir party or the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), both groups which are better known in the region, and that Bayat is also not affiliated to the only legally active Islamic organisation in Tajikistan - the Islamic Revival Party (IRP). Others claim Bayat members were among the local people who fought for the Taliban in Afghanistan, some of whom are now held at the US base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. These sources maintain there may be a link between Bayat and the IMU, whose members have been very active in the neighbouring Fergana valley and also fought for the Taliban.

"The Tajiks got on with Sergei Besarab very well and we didn't have any problems with Muslims," a member of the local Baptist community, Svetlana Drygina, told Forum 18 on 24 May in Isfara, stressing that all the neighbours had come to his funeral. At the same time, she is convinced that Besarab's murder was directed against the local Christian community. "Sergei often drove out of town, travelling to unpopulated areas where it would have been much easier to kill him. But someone wanted Sergei to be killed right in the church."

Naim Sameyev, a people's deputy for Sugd region of northern Tajikistan and a member of the IRP's ruling body, noted that of the six people under arrest suspected of murdering Besarab "unfortunately all of them are respected and very devout people". He told Forum 18 on 22 May in the village of Chorku, 15 kilometres (10 miles) south of Isfara, that one of those being held, Hodi Hatayev, is the village's imam-hatyb. Sameyev also admitted that another of those arrested is a member of his party. "I don't know anything about the other detainees, but I can say with assurance that the member of our party is innocent."

Abdusator Boboyev, the head of the Isfara district branch of the IRP, confirmed that most of those arrested on suspicion of Besarab's murder were devout Muslims. He added that the arrested man who is suspected of being the actual murderer, Saidullo Madyerov, is the son of the former imam of the town's central mosque and one of the most knowledgeable theologians in Isfara. "Thus far it is hard for me to draw any conclusions," he told Forum 18 on 23 May in Isfara. "I can only say that genuine Muslims condemn terrorism."

Both Boboyev and Sameyev were adamant that they had never heard of the Bayat movement and suspected that it had "simply been dreamt up by journalists".

Isfara's mayor Muzasharif Islamuddinov said he did not understand where journalists got their information about the existence in the town of an underground terrorist Bayat organisation. "As far as I know, those suspected of killing Besarab have committed crimes before, and all of them are just criminals," he told Forum 18 in the town on 24 May.

Islamuddinov questioned the genuineness of Besarab's faith, pointing to his four prison terms. "One may well ask why he had decided to engage in missionary work here in Isfara, where there are virtually no Russians." He alleged that he might have been attracted by Isfara's location, equidistant from Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. "This is a very convenient staging post for drug trafficking," he told Forum 18. "Besarab used to deal in drugs before he became a pastor. Isn't it logical to assume he had simply become a rival to some criminal drug barons!?"

The leadership of Tajikistan's Baptist Union denies this allegation, pointing out that although Besarab was a criminal he underwent a spiritual rebirth after his conversion to Christianity in jail. "We conduct services in prisons and indeed it was there that we met Besarab," Rashid Shamsizade, a Baptist pastor from the capital Dushanbe, told Forum 18 in January. "After he got to know the Bible, he became a completely different person - he was indeed born again." After release from prison, Shamsizade recalled, Besarab had become an active church member and was soon sent to Isfara as a missionary.

Radio Liberty's Tajik-language service, which was among the first to mention the Bayat organisation, sticks to its story. "We received information that the Baptist pastor had been murdered by members of the extremist Bayat organisation from a reliable source at the Sugd regional procuracy," Salim Ayubzod, senior broadcaster at the Tajik service, told Forum 18 on 25 May from Prague. "But clearly, the authorities felt it necessary not to announce this information, at least until the investigation was complete."

Isfara district is one of the most devoutly Muslim regions of Tajikistan and the sale of alcohol is banned in several places, local Muslims having occasionally burnt shops selling alcohol. In Chorku, the village where most of the men being held for involvement in Besarab's murder come from, 93 per cent of voters supported the IRP in the 2000 parliamentary elections.

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

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=190

A printer-friendly map of Tajikistan is available at

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

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