

8 July 2004

UZBEKISTAN: Jehovah's Witnesses arrested for being Islamic fundamentalists

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Six Jehovah's Witnesses have been arrested, having been denounced as "Wahhabis". They were interrogated by several policemen, the most senior of whom was apparently drunk. Of the six Jehovah's Witnesses, who included a 16 year old girl who should not have been held, the men were beaten up and the women and young girl had heavy psychological pressure applied against them, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Begzot Kadyrov, of the government's committee for religious affairs, has told Forum 18 that "The Jehovah's Witnesses are not registered in Bukhara region, and they remain active there despite all our warnings. As long as the Jehovah's Witnesses are not registered at the justice administration for Bukhara region, their conflicts with the police will continue." Jehovah's Witnesses have been denied registration in Uzbekistan. The state, in defiance of the human rights commitments it has freely entered into, routinely punishes unregistered religious activity.

Six Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested and taken to the Kagan police station, on the outskirts of Bukhara [Bukhoro], western Uzbekistan, on 1 July, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The owner of the apartment, Lyudmila Simina, with five fellow Jehovah's Witnesses - Aziz Pulatov, Sabina Kurbanova, Nikolai Kryukov, Olim Jabbarov and Kamila Arabova (who at 16 years old is under the legal age of responsibility) - were arrested on the strength of a denunciation by neighbours, who reported that "Wahhabis" (a term widely and loosely used in Central Asia to denote Islamic fundamentalists) were meeting in the apartment. All six are Jehovah's Witnesses and were simply visiting the apartment.

This is not the first time that Jehovah's Witnesses have been described as so-called "Wahhabis" (see F18News 14 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=299).

Erkin Khabibov, a Jehovah's Witness from Bukhara, told Forum 18 on 3 July that there was no proof that any religious meeting or sermon was underway at the time. The participants were simply drinking tea, a fact borne out by the cups of untouched tea, he maintained. The Jehovah's Witnesses were held at the police station for 10 and a half hours, where the police gave them no food and did not even let them go to the toilet. Khabibov claims that the men were beaten at the police station, while moral and psychological pressure was exerted on the women and young girl.

The unauthorised interrogation was conducted by police chief Lieutenant-Colonel I. Shernazarov (who appeared drunk at the time), deputy chief of police Lieutenant-Colonel Tuimurod Tursunov, Senior Lieutenant Murtazo Ochilov (who works at the Criminal Investigations Department) and Senior Divisional Police Lieutenant Rafik Rajabov.

During the interrogation Shernazarov beat 19-year-old Aziz Pulatov on the head with a heavy book and strongly pressured him to write a statement under dictation. Tursunov raised a stool over 16 year old Kamila Arabova in a threatening manner, precipitating psychological trauma (a medical report established a diagnosis of "situational neurosis").

Heavy pressure was also brought to bear on all the other detainees, as a result of which the state of mind of four of them was badly affected in detention: Kurbanova, Simina, Kryukov and Pulatov. Arabova, the underage girl, was held at the police until 6pm (around 8 hours altogether), without being allowed to see her mother. She was questioned without her mother's permission and was forced under pressure to write a statement.

The chief specialist at the government's committee for religious affairs, Begzot Kadyrov, told Forum 18 on 6 July that the Jehovah's Witnesses had already lodged a complaint with him about the Kagan incident outside Bukhara, and that he had referred their complaint to the committee's leadership.

At the same time, he emphasised that the committee could not help the Kagan Jehovah's Witnesses. "This is far from being the first time that the Kagan Jehovah's Witnesses have come up against the police. The Jehovah's Witnesses are not registered in Bukhara region, and they remain active there despite all our warnings. As long as the Jehovah's Witnesses are not registered at the justice administration for Bukhara region, their conflicts with the police will continue."

When Forum 18 remarked that even if the Jehovah's Witnesses had broken the law, that did not give the police the right to beat and insult them, Kadyrov responded: "They declare that they are beaten every time, but they can't offer any convincing evidence."

In defiance of its international human rights commitments, Uzbekistan's religion law makes unregistered religious activity illegal. The Jehovah's Witnesses have been denied registration in Bukhara and many other places (see eg. F18News 11 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=339), rendering any activity in these communities liable to punishment. (END)

For more background, 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>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY