

29 July 2004

UZBEKISTAN: Jail for leading home Koran study group?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Armed NSS secret police have raided the home of Normurod Zhumaev, a doctor in the Uzbek capital Tashkent, arrested him and confiscated Muslim religious literature and computer equipment, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. He is still under arrest and has been charged under an article of the criminal code which punishes "the creation or leadership of, or participation in, religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations". His wife says that he did lead studies of the Koran with a group of his friends, but insists to Forum 18 that the small group did not discuss politics. It is possible that Zhumaev may have attracted the NSS's attention because, like his family, he is a notably devout Muslim and a friend of an imam who was arrested in April.

Nearly two weeks after his home in the Uzbek capital Tashkent was raided by the National Security Service (NSS) secret police, and religious literature confiscated, Normurod Zhumaev is still under arrest and is likely to face trial for leading a group of Muslims who studied the Koran at his home. Forum 18 News Service has been unable to find out what evidence the NSS had to raid Zhumaev's home, why he is being held and whether and when he will be put on trial. An NSS officer who refused to give his name told Forum 18 on 27 July that Ulugbek Saliev, an investigator at the national NSS who led the raid, was on holiday. Asked who is in charge of Zhumaev's case, the officer told Forum 18 that he had no right to give any information until the investigation is concluded and put the phone down.

Zhumaev works as a doctor at the Tashkent Scientific Research Institute for Dermatology and Venereal Diseases of the Ministry of Health. His mother Ergash Satarova, who is from the southern town of Karshi [Qarshi], told Forum 18 on 27 July that her son's home was raided at 5.30 a.m. on 17 July by six NSS officers, one of whom was in a mask and camouflage uniform and armed with an automatic weapon. As senior NSS officer, Saliev showed Zhumaev a search warrant. After their search of the flat the officers confiscated religious literature in Arabic and computer equipment and took Zhumaev to Tashkent's NSS investigation prison, where he is still being held.

"At first the NSS officers behaved quite aggressively," Zhumaev's wife Nargiza Abdurasulova told Forum 18 on 27 July. "It seemed they really thought there were armed terrorists in the flat. But when they did not find any weapons they began to treat us very politely. They even covered the handcuffs on my husband's wrists with a towel so as not to shame him in front of our neighbours."

Abdurasulova reported that Zhumaev has been charged with offences under article 244 part 2 of the criminal code, which punishes "the creation or leadership of, or participation in, religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations". She said investigators told her that her husband is a "Wahhabi". This is a label widely used in Central Asia and applied indiscriminately to all Islamic radicals, "independent" Muslims who refuse to attend official mosques, and, by some Uzbek officials, to Jehovah's Witnesses.

"They are also accusing him of attending private groups for the study of Islam," Abdurasulova added. "My husband really did study the Koran with his friends, but they did not discuss politics but only the suras of the Holy Book. Maybe the investigators were also alarmed that my husband knows Arabic well. But he is simply a well-educated person who in addition to Arabic speaks English quite well. I consider that my husband's only 'guilt' is that he is a deeply believing Muslim."

It was notable that during her meeting with Forum 18 Abdurasulova had her head and face completely covered apart from her eyes. This is extremely rare in Uzbekistan today, as usually even devout Muslim women wear a scarf with their face uncovered. It is possible that the Uzbek security service regarded the overt religiosity of the Zhumaev family as suspicious.

It is also interesting that, according to Abdurasulova, her husband, who comes from Karshi, is a close friend of the Karshi imam Rustam Kilichev who was arrested by the NSS after the recent terrorist attacks (see F18News 13 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=298 and 4 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=334). "My husband went on the haj with Kilichev," Abdurasulova told Forum 18, "and it is possible that after Kilichev's arrest the NSS decided to deal with his friends."

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>

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY