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UZBEKISTAN: Baptist denied permission to live in own home

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

In what he describes as "a vicious circle", Baptist Vsevolod Kalinin has again been refused a residence permit to live in his own home in the capital Tashkent, Forum 18 News Service has been told. In an open court hearing, a representative of the commission of the Tashkent city administration responsible for residence permits said that Kalinin's religious convictions were the main reason for refusing him a residence permit. It is unusual for Uzbek authorities to take a close interest in residential addresses, but Kalinin has since 2002 been the target of close scrutiny by authorities in Tashkent. As well as visits from the police, a military recruitment office has told Kalinin that he could be detained while his place of residence was checked. All Kalinin's appeals, including to Uzbek president Karimov, are met with the reply that he should appeal again to the commission which denied him a residence permit.

Baptist Vsevolod Kalinin was on 27 July refused a resident permit for his home, an apartment he owns in the Uzbek capital Tashkent, by a commission of the city hakimiat (administration), Forum 18 News Service has learnt. He has twice previously been refused a residence permit in a long-running struggle which, in Tashkent, goes back to 2002. However, even before then, Kalinin has twice been forced to leave cities in Uzbekistan, apparently because local authorities disliked his faith. The authorities deny that this is a factor in their most recent decision, even though, in January 2004, the commission stated in court that Kalinin's religious convictions were the main reason for refusing him a residence permit.

Vsevolod Kalinin's problems with the authorities began in Chirchik [Chirchiq] (about 30 km [19 miles] north east of Tashkent), where he was born, and where in 1998 Kalinin became leader of the local Evangelical Christian Baptist church. After this, Kalinin and his wife were beaten up several times and the police refused to take any action, even refusing to take statements from the couple. On 26 July 2001 Kalinin was taken to the Chirchik NSS secret police headquarters, where he claims that officers began to torture him (for example by pouring boiling water onto his groin), and demanding that he leave Chirchik within a week. Kalinin and his wife then moved to Almalyk [Olmalik] (a city about 100 km [62 miles] east of Tashkent) where he continued to preach Christianity. In April 2002 Kalinin was taken to the Almalyk NSS and warned to stop his "illegal meetings". That night the windows of his house were broken by unknown attackers. Kalinin and his wife spent the next night at friends and when they returned home they found that their house had been ransacked.

It was after this that the Kalinins quickly sold their house and moved to Tashkent, and their resident permit problems began. A Protestant family who were moving to Russia heard about their plight and quite legally sold them their apartment in Tashkent. The apartment was first registered in the name of Kalinin's grandfather, who has a residence permit for Tashkent, and he subsequently gave the apartment to his grandson.

The system of residence permits in Uzbekistan is a relic of Soviet times, under which every inhabitant of Uzbekistan has to have their address recorded on their internal passport. Under Uzbek law, an Uzbek citizen is required to live at this address, but in practice the police hardly ever check up on whether a particular citizen is living where they are registered. Kalinin appears to be an exception to this.

In January 2003 a group of policemen came to Kalinins' flat, demanding that he vacate it as he had been refused a residence permit for that address. In April 2003 a policeman came again and demanded that he vacate the flat and not return as he was living there illegally and everybody "was fed up with his faith". On 20 October 2003 Kalinin took his case to the Mirobad district court of Tashkent seeking to get the commission to "restore his violated rights". On 8 January 2004, the commission's representative stated in open court that Kalinin's religious convictions were the main reason for refusing him a residence permit. The Mirobad district judge, Saera Shakhobidinova, then turned down Kalinin's plea that he should be issued with a residence permit.

On 13 January 2004, Kalinin appealed to Uzbek president Karimov "to solve the issue of giving me a residence permit to live in my own apartment." Kalinin was told to apply to the special commission. In Kalinin's words "This is a vicious circle – whoever I appeal to sends me back to the same commission, which, of course, will refuse me again."

Threats to Kalinin have continued throughout 2004. In April 2004, Kalinin was called to the military recruitment office and told that, as someone subject to conscription, he was breaking the law by "living who knows where in such unstable times" and that he could be detained while his place of residence was checked.

Talking to Forum 18 in Tashkent on 28 July, Mirobad district court judge Saera Shakhobidinova claimed that she could not help Kalinin. "The matter of residence permits is not within our jurisdiction," Shakhobidinova told Forum 18. "We were obliged to examine Kalinin's request, but we do not have the right to require the commission to review its decision. Since the terrorist acts in 1999, decisions on residence permits in Tashkent lie with a specially created commission of the city hakimiat. All that Kalinin can do is apply again to the commission requesting a residence permit." Shakhobidinova categorically denied that Kalinin's religious views had been mentioned in court. "I have heard from you for the first time that Kalinin is a Baptist," Saera Shakhobidinova told Forum 18. "The representatives of the commission based their refusal on the fact that his wife is a Russian citizen and they already have property in that state."

The secretary of the city administration's commission on residence permits, Abdulvakhid Agzamov, who is the head of the Tashkent city administration for visas and registration, told Forum 18 on 28 July that he did not remember Kalinin's case. "Hundreds of such cases pass through my hands and I naturally cannot remember all the names," Agzamov told Forum 18. "I can say only one thing: faith has no significance in granting residence permits. I would advise Kalinin, instead of complaining to journalists, to submit a statement to us and we will examine his case carefully."

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>

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