

6 August 2004

UZBEKISTAN: Being a devout Muslim a crime?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Two groups of Muslims, detained respectively just before and just after the March/April terrorist attacks, are now being tried in southern Uzbekistan, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The authorities state that leaflets of the banned Islamist Hizb ut-Tahrir party and drugs were found in the homes of the people being tried, but a local human rights activist insists to Forum 18 that this evidence was planted, and that their only "crime" was to be devout Muslims. Relatives claim that those accused were subjected to brutal treatment during questioning. Although the trials are officially open to the public, both journalists and human rights activists have been refused admittance.

Two groups of Muslims have been on trial at Kashkadarya regional criminal court since 10 July, human rights activist Tulkin Karayev told Forum 18 News Service on 4 August in Karshi [Qarshi], southern Uzbekistan. The groups are from different parts of Uzbekistan, 12 people being from the city of Karshi, and the other group being from Kamashi district, some 100 kilometres (60 miles) south-east of Karshi. During searches carried out before the arrests, the authorities maintain that leaflets of the banned Islamist Hizb ut-Tahrir party and drugs were discovered in all of the accused Muslims' homes. However, Karayev insists that these "articles of evidence" were planted, and that the detainees' only "crime" is being devout Muslims.

The Karshi Muslims were arrested at the beginning of March (before the terrorist attacks in that month), while the Kamashi Muslims were arrested on 4 April, immediately after the series of terrorist attacks at the end of March and beginning of April in Uzbekistan (see F18News 13 April http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=298 and 4 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=334).

The Muslims are accused of breaking six articles of the criminal code: Article 155 (terrorism), Article 156 (inciting national, racial or religious hatred), Article 159 (undermining the constitutional basis of the republic of Uzbekistan), Article 242 (forming criminal groups) Article 244-1 (composing and distributing documents that present a public threat) and Article 242-1 (establishing, leading or participating in religious, separatist or fundamentalist organisations).

Five court examinations have already been conducted into the cases of each group. According to close relatives of the accused, the detainees were constantly subjected to blows and brutal treatment during questioning. For example, during the court hearing on 28 July, detainee Azim Kambarov, from Kamashi district, told Judge Nurilla Ziyadullayev that he had been severely beaten during the investigation, and his false teeth had been smashed several months previously.

It is telling that although both legal hearings are officially open to the public, both journalists and human rights activists have been refused admittance. For example, on 28 July, during the court case against the Kamashi group, Judge Ziyadullayev ordered that Khamrokula Karshiyeva, a correspondent for the Uzbek service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, be refused entry to the courtroom.

Forum 18's attempts to obtain information from official sources on 4 August were in vain. When telephoning the court and prosecutor's office for Kashkadarya region, Forum 18 had scarcely finished introducing itself before officials immediately hung up.

For more background information see Forum 18's Uzbekistan 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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