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UZBEKISTAN: Latest student expulsion in anti-Christian campaign

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

In a continuing campaign in north-western Uzbekistan against Christians, a Protestant medical student, Ilkas Aldungarov, has been expelled from the Nukus branch of the Tashkent Paediatric Medical Institute, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The expulsion was allegedly because of poor academic performance, but in reality seems to have been because of Aldungarov's Christian faith. The dean of the Medical Institute, Bekbasyn Absametov, categorically denied to Forum 18 that religious persecution happened, but was unable to explain the persecution of Christian students by his colleagues. Expulsions of Protestant students have also taken place at another local higher education institute, the Berdah Karakalpak State University. "Each time, students are expelled for their supposed failing performance. My daughter used to be a good student, but since the campaign against Protestant students began, she has suddenly become a failing student," a local Christian told Forum 18. It is thought that the student expulsions from both institutions may have been organised by the NSS secret police.

In a continuing anti-Christian campaign in the Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] autonomous republic in north-western Uzbekistan, a Protestant final year medical student, Ilkas Aldungarov, has been expelled from the Nukus branch of the Tashkent Paediatric Medical Institute, because he belongs to a Protestant church, the Church of Christ, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The expulsion took place at the end of November and a Tashkent Protestant who preferred not to be named stressed to Forum 18 that, although formally Aldungarov was expelled on grounds of academic failure, in reality he was expelled for his religious beliefs.

Ilkas Aldungarov and other Protestants have been targeted before by the authorities. In April 2004, Nukus city prosecutor M. Arzymbetov tried to have him expelled as he belonged to what Arzymbetov called "an illegal religious sect." The Prosecutors Office also summoned 11 members of the same church for questioning, where they were pressured to renounce their faith and convert to Islam, and threatened with being shot (see F18News 21 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=303).

Speaking to Forum 18 on 9 December in Nukus, the dean of the Paediatric Medical Institute, Bekbasyn Absametov, categorically denied that students were persecuted for their religious beliefs. Absametov showed Forum 18 a record of Ilkas Aldungarov's academic achievements between 2000 and 2004, which purported to show very low academic achievement. "We consider only students' knowledge, and not their religious beliefs. For example, as soon as Sherimbetova and Artykbayeva had passed the subjects in which they had unsatisfactory marks, we immediately reinstated them," Absametov told Forum 18. During the same interview with Forum 18, Absametov admitted that the lecturers did take an interest in the students' religious views, but found it hard to explain their curiosity. He also did not explain the other expulsions, or the literature search conducted by his colleague Alima Urazova.

Alima Urazova, a lecturer at the Paediatric Medical Institute, in April 2004 searched an apartment rented by Protestant students, seized religious literature, forced them to leave the flat and tried to stop them reading Protestant literature, saying that "it would be better for you to work as prostitutes than to read those dreadful books" (see F18News 27 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=329).

Two of the students - Aliya Sherimbetova and Shirin Artykbayeva - were expelled in September for being Christians and were told that they were also expelled because their case had been published "on the internet", possibly a reference to Forum 18's coverage (see F18News 16 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=412). However, in November 2004 these two students were reinstated at the institute.

Protestant students have also been persecuted in other Nukus-based higher education institutions. In June, the dean of the Philology Faculty (Roman-German philology) at Berdah Karakalpak State University, Dina Mamyrbayeva, summoned three Protestant students and threatened them with expulsion if they do not stop visiting "sect members" (see F18News 9 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=359). One of the students, Elena Kim, a student of Roman-German philology, told Forum 18 on 8 December in Nukus that Dina Mamyrbayeva had accused her of "belonging to a banned sect, whose activity was of interest to the NSS." The National Security Service (NSS) is the Uzbek secret police.

Just as with the cases in the Paediatric Medical Institute, allegedly poor performance is also given as a reason for the Berdah Karakalpak State University expulsions. "It's impossible to prove anything; each time, students are expelled for their supposed

failing performance. My daughter used to be a good student, but since the campaign against Protestant students began, she has suddenly become a failing student," said a member of the unregistered Protestant "Mir" (Peace) Church, Vladimir Kim, speaking to Forum 18 on 9 December in Nukus. It is thought that the expulsions of students from both institutions may have been organised by the NSS secret police.

Persecution specifically directed against Protestant students in Uzbekistan has so far only happened in Karakalpakstan, where it is almost impossible for Christian churches to gain official registration and therefore to meet legally for worship. Only one Christian church in the region has been legally registered - the Pentecostal Emmanuel Church – and unregistered religious activity is, against international law, banned in Uzbekistan. (END)

For 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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