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UZBEKISTAN: Andijan Pentecostal pastor threatened

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Bakhtier Tuichiev, pastor of the Full Gospel Pentecostal Church in the city of Andijan in the Uzbek part of the Fergana valley, was summoned to the regional internal affairs administration on 10 January and warned that if the church did not halt its activity in the absence of registration, then "serious trouble" was in store for him. On 11 January the deputy head of the city department of internal affairs, Major Sumanov, came to a church service and asked why the church was operating without registration. The church has been trying to register for more than a year – so far in vain. "Of course, I have submitted the registration documents, but I am sure we will be refused," Tuichiev told Forum 18 News Service back in January. As of mid-March, the church had not been registered. Tuichiev reports that he is under National Security Service surveillance.

The pastor of a Full Gospel Pentecostal Church which has been denied registration has been threatened because the church is not registered. Pastor Bakhtier Tuichiev, who is based in the city of Andijan in the Fergana valley of Uzbekistan, near the border with Kyrgyzstan, told Forum 18 News Service that he was summoned to the internal affairs administration of Andijan region on 10 January and warned that if the church did not halt its activity in the absence of registration, then "serious trouble" was in store for him. On 11 January the deputy head of the city department of internal affairs, Major Sumanov, came to a church service and asked why the church was operating without registration (Uzbek law bans unregistered religious activity). "Of course, I have submitted the registration documents, but I am sure we will be refused," Tuichiev told Forum 18 back in January. As of mid-March, the church had not been registered.

The pastor bases his pessimism on the fact that he has already been trying in vain to register his church for more than a year. Tuichiev told Forum 18 that in February 2002 he received the authorisation required for the church to operate from the mahalla committee (the mahalla is a district of a city), and submitted registration documents to the city hakimiat (administration). However, a short time later the chairman of the mahalla committee came to Tuichiev and asked him to return the authorisation, because the city hakimiat did not want to register the church. Tuichiev replied that he could not return the authorisation, however much he might want to, because it was already with the city hakimiat. Nevertheless, in March 2002 a meeting of residents in the mahalla established that it was "inexpedient for a Christian church to operate". Tuichiev is convinced that the second meeting was initiated by the department for ideology at the city hakimiat.

Today, Tuichiev told Forum 18, it is very difficult to register a church, because the city hakimiat refers to the fact that under the registration rules, the mahalla committee must give permission before a religious community can gain registration. Tuichiev believes that the authorities are conducting a targeted campaign to close the church. He maintains that the National Security Service (the former KGB) has placed him under surveillance, along with other active members of the Protestant community. Tuichiev claims that NSS officers are trying to stir up the mahalla residents against him.

Tuichiev told Forum 18 that on 20 September a group of people who claimed to be BBC and CNN journalists visited him from Tashkent, but the pastor believes that in fact these were NSS officers. "The journalists were not at all interested in church issues, they just constantly asked me what my attitude was to the president of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov," he reported. "They were simply collecting incriminating material against me." He said he had telephoned the BBC and CNN, and both organisations told him that none of their employees had been sent to visit him. "It seems to me that the campaign against the church has entered a new phase. The interest shown in me by the internal affairs administration is no coincidence, and if we do not halt our activity, then serious trouble is in store for us."

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