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UZBEKISTAN: Officials "condone" kangaroo court punishments

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

When Christian convert Khaldibek Primbetov appealed to the prosecutor's office against fellow-villagers who had beaten him, told him to "return" to Islam or leave his home village in the north-western region of Karakalpakstan, an investigator showed no interest in his complaints, a Protestant source told Forum 18 News Service. The investigator instead told Primbetov he had "betrayed" the faith of his ancestors and threatened to imprison him after he refused to withdraw his complaint. Local prosecutor Rustam Atajanov confirmed to Forum 18 his investigator had visited, but claimed that "he did not threaten local Christians".

The authorities of Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] in north-western Uzbekistan are in effect condoning the kangaroo courts staged by locals against people of Muslim background who have converted to another faith, an Uzbek Protestant who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 News Service on 9 May. The Protestant cited the case of Khaldibek Primbetov, a Christian convert who had tried to complain to the local prosecutor's office about fellow-villagers who had beaten him in retaliation for becoming a Christian. A prosecutor's office official instead began investigating and threatening local Protestants, though the district prosecutor vigorously denied this to Forum 18.

Primbetov, who is from the village of Yanboshkala in the Tatirkul district on the edge of Nukus, the capital of Karakalpakstan autonomous republic, was beaten up several times by his fellow-villagers, told to "return" to Islam or leave Yanboshkala (see F18News 20 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=546).

When Primbetov sent a complaint against the villagers who assaulted him to Karakalpakstan's prosecutor's office, an investigator from the Tatirkul district prosecutor's office visited Yanboshkala. But, Forum 18's source reported, it turned out that the investigator had no intention of following cases where force had been used against Christians, instead choosing to investigate the activity of the local Protestant community.

In particular, the investigator started accusing local Protestant Kurbongul Yermanova of incitement. He told another Protestant, Nurumbetova, that reading the New Testament was forbidden, and that she was "ruining society" by reading Christian literature. When Nurumbetova tried to argue with the investigator, he told her that he would hit her if she did not quieten down. Interestingly, the investigator refused to tell Nurumbetova his name and tried to force her to write a statement for him, saying that no-one in the village was putting any pressure on Christians.

The investigator also told Primbetov to withdraw his complaint to the prosecutor's office in writing. When he refused to do so, the investigator said he would send him to prison. The investigator also told Primbetov that he had "betrayed" the faith of his ancestors.

The Tatirkul district prosecutor, Rustam Atajanov, confirmed that an investigation had been conducted into Primbetov's complaint, but denied the Protestants' accusations. "It is true that we sent an investigator to Yanboshkala, but he did not threaten local Christians; he just investigated Primbetov's complaint," Atajanov claimed to Forum 18 on 10 May. "The circumstances cited by Primbetov have not been confirmed. Nevertheless, we have come to the conclusion the Christians' activity in Yanboshkala is lawful and we do not intend to prevent it."

Begzot Kadyrov, the chief specialist at the government's religious affairs committee in the capital Tashkent, claimed that no-one in Uzbekistan was putting any pressure on Christians who had converted from another faith. "Our laws do forbid proselytism – activities designed to turn believers of one faith to another," he told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 10 May. "But if a person has changed his faith anyway, then that is his personal decision, and no-one has the right to stop him."

He said that "unfortunately" the committee has no information about Primbetov's case as he has not complained to it. "If he sends an appeal to our committee, we would certainly investigate the matter and would not permit the persecution of Primbetov or other Christians in this village," Kadyrov told Forum 18.

Karakalpakstan has seen a long-running anti-Protestant campaign. It is almost impossible for Christian churches to gain official registration in the autonomous republic and therefore to meet legally for worship. As part of this campaign, Protestant university students have also been expelled from their university (see F18News 13 December 2004).

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=476).

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all faiths as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=546

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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