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UZBEKISTAN: One imprisoned, one fined, six more to follow

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Nail Kalinkin of the embattled Bethany Protestant Church in the capital Tashkent was sentenced to 15 days in prison on 10 June for "illegally" teaching his faith, while his daughter Marina was fined 68 US dollars, Protestant sources have told Forum 18 News Service. After the church's Sunday service was raided by police on 12 June six more – including the pastor Nikolai Shevchenko – face administrative charges of breaking the country's religion law by leading an unregistered religious community. The church – located in a city district where mosques are also banned - has repeatedly tried but failed to register. Its latest challenge through the courts was again postponed on 17 June. Leaders of another Protestant church in Tashkent have been interrogated and threatened since mid-May, with 18 armed riot police raiding the home of one church leader. In Angren near Tashkent, the leader of a registered Pentecostal church was fined 39 US dollars.

Two members of the embattled Bethany Protestant Church in the Mirzo-Ulugbek district of the capital Tashkent have already been punished for "illegally" teaching their faith, while six others – including the pastor Nikolai Shevchenko - are due to face trial at an unknown date for leading an unregistered religious organisation, Protestants in Tashkent have told Forum 18 News Service. Shevchenko and fellow-church leader Sergei Khripunov could face a prison term because they have already been sentenced under the administrative code for "unlawful" religious activity. The church has repeatedly been denied registration in a district of the city where mosques are banned also. At a court session today (17 June), the court once more delayed hearing the church's appeal against the authorities who have blocked registration. Other Protestant churches are also being targeted by the authorities.

In a separate case, on 10 June, the Mirzo-Ulugbek district criminal court sentenced Nail Kalinkin to 15 days in prison and fined his daughter Marina the equivalent of 438 Norwegian kroner, 56 Euros or 68 US dollars. They were found guilty of expounding the meaning of Biblical texts to people and punished under Article 241 of Uzbekistan's code of administrative offences (which punishes "contravening the standard for teaching religious beliefs").

Protestants told Forum 18 that on 12 June uniformed and plain clothes police officers burst into the Bethany church during the Sunday service. The raiders rudely cut short the service, saying that the church could not meet there any more. During questioning they ordered the pastors to write statements explaining the reason for the meeting, but they refused to do this until their lawyer had been called in. Then the officers started to threaten the pastors, warning them "there won't be a church here any more, and the pastors will end up in prison". Meanwhile, other police officers present took a list of those at the church. The police officers were also rude to the believers and told them to stop attending the church.

Pastor Shevchenko, Khripunov and four other church members - Ruslan Aminov, Nikolai Nam, Edika Seitjelilova and Sergei Tsoi - were taken to the police station. There, the church members again demanded a lawyer, but the police started threatening them that they would beat them until they were "nearly dead", and still would not release the Christians until they signed all the papers. The six were not released from the police station until the evening. All six now expect to face trial under Article 240 of the administrative code, which punishes "violation of the law on religion".

Shevchenko has been repeatedly fined since 2000 for leading an unregistered religious community (under Article 8 of Uzbekistan's religion law unregistered religious activity is illegal). In 2001, he was accused of unlawful religious activity and faced a criminal case under Article 216 (2) (breaking the law on religious organisations) of the criminal code. But the case was closed after pressure from the international community.

Shevchenko has tried to register his church three times, but the authorities have refused him each time on various pretexts. He stressed to Forum 18 in Tashkent in October 2004 that the authorities were simply making it impossible for him to keep within the law, because they were deliberately refusing registration (see F18News 17 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=455).

Most recently, Shevchenko challenged the local authorities' long-running refusal to approve registration through the courts. On 12 January a local court ruled that the administration chief for Mirzo-Ulugbek district was obliged to allow the necessary documents needed to registration to be compiled. The ruling entered into force on 2 February, but officials took no action. On 16 March, Shevchenko wrote to the administration chief attaching a copy of the court ruling. "According to Uzbek law the administration chief

must execute the decision of the court within in month," one Protestant told Forum 18 from Tashkent. "The administration chief himself violated the law by not responding at all." On 23 May – after the suppression of the uprising in Andijan - the first assistant to the administration chief, R. Khadjiev, "illegally" annulled the court decision. In the wake of the 17 June decision to delay the hearing, it remains unclear when this case will finally be heard.

Persecution of Protestants is still under way in other regions of Uzbekistan. In mid-May, just after the crushing of the uprising in Andijan, the SNB started summoning leaders of another Protestant church in Tashkent for questioning. One church leader had 18 armed riot police storm his home. Some of those questioned were threatened, Protestant sources told Forum 18, asking that the congregation not be identified for its own protection. Officials banned the church from meeting in private homes. "They are trying to frighten the church leaders," one Protestant told Forum 18.

On 8 June, the criminal court in the town of Angren 100 kilometres (60 miles) east of Tashkent illegally fined the pastor of a Pentecostal church, Askhad Mustafin, the equivalent of 251 Norwegian kroner, 32 Euros or 39 US dollars for conducting a service in an officially registered church, under Article 240 of the administrative code. The case against him was prepared by the SNB secret police and the town's public prosecutor's office. Local Protestants told Forum 18 that they believe that the latest wave of persecution of Protestants is a consequence of a harsher government religious policy in the wake of the May uprising in Andijan.

However, the chief specialist at the department for non-Muslim faiths at the Uzbek government's religious affairs committee, Begzot Kadyrov, categorically denied the Protestant's claim. "That's simply rubbish! What link could there be between the events in Andijan and the Protestants?" he told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 15 June. "I can tell you with authority that state policy towards the non-Muslim faiths has not changed. As far as Muslims are concerned, that is not my department. I can only give an opinion on my own area. Members of unregistered Protestant communities have been fined and held in administrative detention before, so it's blatant speculation to link this with events in Andijan!"

Kadyrov said he knew nothing about the problems experienced by the Angren church. "If members of a registered church have been fined under Article 240 of the administrative code, or for unlawful religious activity, then that is certainly ridiculous! Let them make a complaint to us and we will put everything right."

Kadyrov also said that he was well aware of the latest developments at the Bethany church. "This story goes back a long way. Shevchenko's main problem is that he hasn't been able to come to an understanding with the mahalla committee," he told Forum 18. "That committee refuses to give him its permission for the church to be registered. Shevchenko hasn't had much luck – lots of Protestant churches have been operating without registration for several years without attracting any attention. Shevchenko's church was discovered during a police raid in the year 2000. If he doesn't manage to get registered, the church will be closed, as he refuses to move it to another location."

An Uzbek official, who preferred not to be named, gave another reason for Shevchenko's misfortunes. The pastor had deliberately opened a Protestant church in a traditionally purely Uzbek mahalla (residential district) with strong social traditions. The presence of a Protestant church in a mahalla that is almost purely Uzbek, and where the authorities have refused to open a mosque, has infuriated local Muslims. Therefore the registration of a Protestant church in an Uzbek mahalla could have been interpreted by local residents as clear proof of the government's anti-Islamic policy.

For an outline of the repression immediately following the Andijan uprising, see F18News 23 May http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567 and for recent developments see F18News 15 June http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=585

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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