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UZBEKISTAN: International condemnation of Forum 18 reporter's detention grows

By John Kinahan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Igor Rotar, Forum 18 News Service's Central Asia correspondent, is still today (12 August) being held at Tashkent airport. Forum 18 has been told by reliable sources that the detention was "for political reasons at the highest levels," on the instructions of the National Security Service secret police. International condemnation of the detention is growing, as Igor Rotar is a respected religious freedom journalist. Rachel Denber of Human Rights Watch stated that "this is an ugly situation, and it is in line with the repressive measures that this government has taken against the media and freedom of religion." Alex Lupis of the Committee to Protect Journalists said that "we are very concerned for Rotar's safety and call on the Uzbek authorities to release him and to end their campaign of harassment and intimidation against the independent media." Amnesty International told Forum 18 that it "is concerned for his safety and see his detention as part of a wave of intimidation and harassment of journalists and human rights defenders by the authorities of Uzbekistan." The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and diplomats from a number of countries continue to closely follow the detention.

Igor Rotar, Forum 18 News Service's Central Asia correspondent, is still today (12 August) being held at Tashkent airport by the Uzbek authorities. He originally arrived at the airport on a flight from Bishkek at 10.25 am on 11 August and was detained at passport control by the Immigration Service and Border Guards.

Reliable sources have told Forum 18 that the detention was ordered "for political reasons at the highest levels," and that the detention was carried out on the instructions of the National Security Service secret police (see F18News 11 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=627).

Igor Rotar is apparently in good health, and although he has still not been permitted to communicate with anyone, he does not appear to have suffered further physical harassment. He spent the night on the floor of Tashkent airport's transit lounge, and it is believed that the Uzbek authorities originally encouraged him to buy a ticket out of the country, to avoid being seen to formally deport him.

International condemnation of the Uzbek government's detention of Igor Rotar, a respected religious freedom journalist, is growing, with a number of countries expressing their concerns about the case. Uzbek authorities continue to either deny holding Igor Rotar, or to be evasive about their actions. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, along with other international diplomats, is continuing to closely follow developments in the case.

Eurasianet reported that international media and human rights groups are calling for Igor Rotar's immediate release unharmed, quoting both Human Rights Watch and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). "We are very concerned for Rotar's safety and call on the Uzbek authorities to release him and to end their campaign of harassment and intimidation against the independent media," said Alex Lupis, CPJ's Europe Program Coordinator.

Rachel Denber, deputy director of Human Rights Watch's Europe and Central Asia division, stated that "anytime a journalist is taken into custody, there is a danger to the journalist, and to freedom of expression. This is an ugly situation, and it is in line with the repressive measures that this government has taken against the media and freedom of religion."

Amnesty International told Forum 18 that it "is concerned for his [Igor Rotar's] safety and see his detention as part of a wave of intimidation and harassment of journalists and human rights defenders by the authorities of Uzbekistan."

Larry Uzzell of International Religious Freedom Watch, a long-time friend of Igor Rotar, told Forum 18 that "this is an issue of both religious freedom and freedom of the press. I would be grateful for anything you might be able to do to help Igor. For those of you who have direct or indirect contacts in the Uzbek government, this is the time to use them. I would also encourage you to use whatever contacts you may have in Russia's establishment to try to get the Russian government to intervene in Igor's behalf." He is a Russian citizen, and the Russian Embassy in Tashkent has been following the case.

Other international human rights organisations and media outlets are following Igor Rotar's continued detention with interest.

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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

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 an outline of what is known about Akramia and the uprising see 16 June http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586

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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