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UZBEKISTAN: "Entry to the Republic of Uzbekistan closed"

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Forum 18 News Service's Central Asia Correspondent, Igor Rotar, describes how he was unjustifiably detained and deported from Uzbekistan. He was barred from contacting anyone, threatened with jail for "a very long time" for offences which officials refused to explain, and not given a reason for his deportation. One official asked him if he knew why he was being deported, and when he began to guess at a reason, the official stopped him and said "just say yes or no." When he explained to officials that detaining and deporting Forum 18's correspondent would only attract negative attention to Uzbekistan, he was told that the country didn't have specialists who could think like that. Finally, Igor Rotar expresses his deep gratitude to the very many people and organisations who fought for his release.

As Forum 18 News Service earlier reported, on 13 August its Central Asia Correspondent, Igor Rotar, was officially – and unjustifiably - deported from Uzbekistan (see F18News 13 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=629). From 11 August, he had been detained for two days at Tashkent airport by representatives of the Uzbek authorities, who were trying to force him to leave the country "voluntarily" at his own expense, in an attempt to avoid officially deporting him. We publish below a detailed account of our correspondent's detention, as told by himself:

My problems began on Thursday 11 August, after the computer at the border control post showed my surname on a list of undesirable persons, compiled by the Uzbek National Security Service (NSS) secret police. My name had been put on this list at least three years ago, but, before 11 August, I had always been allowed into Uzbekistan as Forum 18 News Service's Central Asia Correspondent after a telephone call was made to the NSS. I was last in Uzbekistan at the beginning of June, after the Andijan uprising and subsequent crackdown. But this time I was taken to the hall for transit passengers. Although there was a telephone in the room, which passengers could use, I was forbidden to get in touch with anyone – even the embassy of my own country, Russia. According to Uzbek laws, a detained foreigner has the right to contact his embassy.

The Uzbek authorities tried to keep me completely isolated, so both the airport workers and ordinary airline passengers were forbidden to associate with me. In answer to my requests to be allowed immediately to contact other people at once, and also to be told the reason for my detention, the border guards replied that my case was being decided "at the highest level" and that they could not do anything, explaining that it was "a matter of politics".

When I objected against being isolated, I was told that, officially, I did not exist. The rather odd reasoning behind this statement was revealed by their words. "You have not crossed the border. Formally, you are not on the territory of Uzbekistan."

At the same time, the border guards constantly emphasised that "it would be better if you bought a ticket and left the country of your own free will". I replied that I would leave Uzbekistan only if I were officially deported.

I gained the impression that the border guards were deliberately keeping me in complete isolation in order to break me down psychologically and force me to buy a ticket out of Uzbekistan. Towards evening on the second day of my detention in the airport, I was taken into another building, where I was met by two men, who said they were Immigration Department officials. However, I was quickly convinced that these men were really officers of the NSS secret police, as they were very well acquainted with the details of my personal life in Tashkent, where I had lived for two years. They also let slip that they had been involved in crushing the uprising in Andijan.

My two new acquaintances immediately began to use classic secret police tactics towards me. One of them, who called himself Andrei Andreyevich, played the role of the polite "good cop," whilst the other, who called himself Alisher, was the "bad cop." Alisher told me that he would beat me up if I did not buy a ticket and leave Uzbekistan. I told him that he could, of course, do this, but that this behaviour would seriously damage the image of Uzbekistan. He then raised his hand threateningly against me, but then pushed my shoulder in a seemingly friendly way.

His colleague, "good cop" Andrei Andreyevich, tried to put pressure on me psychologically saying that "it's quite pointless being obstinate, nobody has any interest in you and no one is even trying to help you. So just behave yourself, buy a ticket and depart." I later discovered that Andreyevich's statement that no one was trying to help me was a deliberate lie.

Andreyevich then told me that he and his "bad cop" colleague were being humane, and that this was the reason why they had not let me enter Uzbekistan. "If you had ended up on the territory of Uzbekistan, then we would have arrested you and brought a criminal charge against you. Our humane president has abolished the death penalty, so we would not have executed you, but you would have spent a very long time in prison", he said.

When I asked what I could be put in prison for, as I had not broken any Uzbek laws, my new "immigration official" acquaintance replied that I would find that out if I crossed the border. My new acquaintances tried constantly to persuade me to buy a ticket and leave Uzbekistan, while I continued to insist on official deportation. Andrei Andreyevich stated that they could not do that, as officially I had not crossed the Uzbek border.

Then I told them that I would go on living in the transit hall until I was allowed to enter Uzbekistan. "I am a Russian citizen and our countries have an agreement that visas are not required, consequently you cannot refuse to allow me into Uzbekistan," I said.

In reply, Andrei Andreyevich stated that they would never allow me into Uzbekistan. "By your libellous articles you have done great harm to Uzbekistan. The Uzbek nation's patience is exhausted", Andrei Andreyevich told me. In the end, not having gained my agreement to buying a ticket myself, they took me back to the airport. After about half an hour, they handed me an official deportation order and put me on an aeroplane without payment. The deportation order was formulated in an interesting way:

It's a pre-printed Certificate of Deportation, filled in with my passport details and stating that I arrived from Bishkek at 9.50 on 11 August. Very interesting is the part of the form which asks the authorities to give a reason why "the holder of the document was refused entry to the Republic of Uzbekistan." Instead of a reason, there is the bald statement "Entry to the Republic of Uzbekistan closed." It was signed on 12 August by Sergeant B. F. Isakov.

No official gave me a specific reason why I was being deported. One official asked me if I knew why I was being deported, and when I began to guess at a reason, the official stopped me and said "just say yes or no."

I was willing to be deported over land to nearby Kazakhstan, but an official told me that "we're not deporting you to Norway, or to England, but to Russia." I explained to officials that detaining and deporting me would only attract negative attention to Uzbekistan, but was told that the country didn't have specialists who could think like that.

I have once before been deported from Uzbekistan, in 1991, when I was a correspondent for the Russian newspaper Nezavisimaya Gazeta. But on that occasion, I was not handed a deportation order.

In conclusion, I wish to thank all the people who, I can say without any exaggeration, heroically fought for my release. These include Forum 18 News Service, Amnesty International, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, the Committee to Protect Journalists, the Dansk Europamission, Human Rights First, Human Rights Watch, the Institute on Religion and Public Policy, the International Helsinki Federation, International Religious Freedom Watch, the International Religious Liberty Association, the Jamestown Foundation, the Norsk Misjon i Øst, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Reporters Without Borders, several foreign ministries, and a range of news organisations such as Eurasianet, Ferghana.Ru and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. There are also many others who I am grateful to who I sadly cannot publicly name, as well as a large number of other people who helped me, even if I don't know their names.

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Igor Rotar's last article on Uzbekistan before his unjustified detention was F18News 10 August
http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=626

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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