

16 September 2005

UZBEKISTAN: Massive fines, ban upheld and TV vilification for unregistered communities

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

On 8 September, the Emmanuel Full Gospel Church in Nukus – the last legal Protestant church in the north-western Karakalpakstan region – failed to overturn the justice ministry's ban on its activity, a church lawyer told Forum 18 News Service. In early September a local TV station in nearby Khorezm region broadcast a programme "virtually depicting Protestants as criminals", local Full Gospel pastor Ruzmet Voisov told Forum 18, and the following day unidentified women burst into his home and beat his wife, calling her a traitor to her faith. In Karshi, two Jehovah's Witnesses were sentenced to fines totalling more than 1,100 US dollars, while local wages are about 20 US dollars per month. "These are the largest fines we have ever faced," Andrei Shirobokov of the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Uzbekistan bans all unregistered religious activity in defiance of its international human rights commitments.

Problems are mounting for unregistered religious communities as members of the last legal Protestant church in the autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpog'iston] in north-western Uzbekistan failed to overturn the local justice ministry's ban on its activity and a judge in the capital Tashkent overturned her earlier ruling that the local authorities must accept registration documents from a Protestant church which has been seeking registration in vain for years. Elsewhere, a Protestant pastor's wife was physically attacked in her home, a day after a local television station branded Protestants virtually as criminals, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. In the southern city of Karshi [Qarshi], a judge imposed massive fines on two Jehovah's Witnesses who belong to a local congregation too small to gain legal status.

On 8 September Karakalpakstan's economic court in the regional capital Nukus rejected the appeal by members of the city's Emmanuel Full Gospel Church against the regional justice ministry, leaving the ban unchanged, Iskander Najafov, a lawyer for the Full Gospel church in Tashkent, told Forum 18 on 9 September. The court advised church members, if they were dissatisfied with the decision, to appeal to Uzbekistan's Supreme Economic Court.

The Emmanuel church was the last legal Protestant church in Karakalpakstan out of an estimated more than 20 in the region. As Uzbekistan's harsh religion law bans all unregistered religious activity – in defiance of the country's international human rights commitments – any Protestant activity in Karakalpakstan remains illegal.

The court admitted that there was no evidence to uphold the Karakalpakstan's justice ministry's charge that the Emmanuel church was promoting Christianity among children without their parents' agreement, the church's administrator Mila Pak told Forum 18 on 12 September from Nukus. However, she said the court upheld the justice ministry's accusation that the church's members were promoting their beliefs outside the confines of the religious community.

The judge at Karakalpakstan's Economic Court, Azamat Khaipnazarov, refused absolutely to discuss his judgment about the Emmanuel church. "The judgement has not yet been typed up and so officially it has not yet been handed down to the Protestants," he told Forum 18 from Nukus on 12 September. "You can read the document when it's issued."

In closing down the Emmanuel church in May 2005, a decision upheld in court in July, the local Justice Ministry argued that its members were promoting Christianity among children without parental agreement and were engaged in unlawful missionary activity. Nurula Jamolov, an official of Karakalpakstan's regional Religious Affairs Committee, insisted to Forum 18 in July that the decision to close down the church was perfectly legal. Church members reject the reason the ministry gave for the Emmanuel Church's closure - that a general meeting of church members held in a private house in Kungrad, 200 kilometres (125 miles) north of Nukus, represented an illegal religious meeting (see F18News 11 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=602).

When Uzbekistan adopted a new law on religion in 1998, Karakalpakstan's justice ministry closed down several other Protestant churches. Now local Protestants have nowhere in the region where they can worship legally.

Najafov believes the ban on the Emmanuel church is part of a wider official campaign against Protestants. "The Emmanuel church has not committed any genuine infringements of the law," he told Forum 18. "The authorities simply don't want Christianity to

become widespread in Uzbekistan. Recently, officials at the Uzbek government's religious affairs committee have been trying to put pressure on me to stop what I am doing and leave Uzbekistan."

The persecution of Protestants continues in other parts of Uzbekistan as well. In early September the wife of Ruzmet Voisov, pastor of an unregistered Full Gospel church in Khorezm region, which borders Karakalpakstan, was beaten up in their home. "Some unidentified women burst into my home when I wasn't there and started to beat my wife, calling her a traitor to the faith of her ancestors," Voisov told Forum 18 from Urgench [Urganch], the administrative centre of Khorezm region, on 12 September. "The night before, the local television station had shown a report about us, virtually depicting Protestants as criminals."

No legal Protestant church exists in Khorezm region either. Prior to February 2004 there was a registered Baptist church, but that month the regional justice ministry stripped it of its registration after claiming that ministers at the church were promoting Christianity among children without the agreement of their parents, allegations church members reject. At the time a Korean Protestant church also had registration (see F18News 4 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=267).

Meanwhile, Pastor Nikolai Shevchenko of the embattled Bethany church in Tashkent faces continuing moves to stop him registering his congregation. On 22 August, the judge for the city's Mirzo-ulugbek district cancelled her own decision of 12 January which required the district mayor to accept the documents required for the church's registration. "On 12 January we finally managed to get the court to admit that our demands for the district mayor to accept the documents required for registration were lawful," Shevchenko told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 12 September. "But six months later the same judge withdrew her own decision after a phone call from higher up."

Pastor Shevchenko has been trying in vain to register his church for the past five years, but the authorities have used various pretexts to refuse registration. In 2001 a criminal case was brought against him for leading an unregistered religious community. Shevchenko is also currently facing administrative charges for leading unregistered worship services (see F18News 14 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=606).

The persecution of other religious minorities also continues in Uzbekistan. On 31 August, the city court in Karshi found two Jehovah's Witnesses guilty of violating Article 216 (2) of the criminal code – breaking the law on religious organisations. Bakhrom Pulatov was fined 705,150 soms (3,961 Norwegian kroner, 509 Euros or 624 US dollars), while Feruza Mamatova was fined 548,450 soms (3,081 Norwegian kroner, 396 Euros or 485 US dollars).

"These are the largest fines we have ever faced," Andrei Shirobokov, spokesperson for Uzbekistan's Jehovah's Witnesses, complained to Forum 18 from Tashkent on 13 September. "The average monthly wage in Karshi is less than 20 US dollars, so this is a huge amount for local people." Both Pulatov and Mamatova have previously been fined under administrative law for taking part in the activity of an unregistered religious organisation (see F18News 14 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=606).

Shirobokov added that the local community would like to get official registration, but this remains impossible as it does not have the 100 adult citizen members required in law to register. "We have fewer than 100 Jehovah's Witnesses in Karshi, so there is no way for us to register our community there," he told Forum 18. "I'd also point out that under various pretexts the authorities won't even register our communities in towns where our adherents number much higher than 100, such as in Tashkent. So what can I say about the towns where Uzbek law bars the organisation from registering?"

Begzot Kadyrov, chief specialist at the government's religious affairs committee, dismissed any complaints about the fine on the two Jehovah's Witnesses in Karshi. "Article 216 (2) prescribes a fine of up to 100 times the minimum monthly wage or up to three years' imprisonment, so the Jehovah's Witnesses in Karshi did not receive the harshest punishment possible," he told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 13 September. He rejected Najafov's claims that the authorities were trying to pressure him to leave his homeland. "No-one is forcing Iskander Najafov to leave Uzbekistan. He himself told us not long ago that he was fed up with everything and that he wanted to leave the country."

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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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