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UZBEKISTAN: All Protestants "face persecution, whether registered or not"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

"Harsh measures have been targeted at Christians," Forum 18 News Service has been told by a Protestant in Uzbekistan, with the authorities especially targeting ethnic Uzbek church members. "Unfortunately in Uzbekistan today there is no Protestant church that doesn't face persecution, whether registered or not," Forum 18's source added. The latest cases known to Forum 18 are the Uzbek Supreme Court's confirmation of the banning of the Emmanuel Full Gospel Church in Nukus in the north-west, and the separate banning from meeting of the Fores Full Gospel Congregation in the capital Tashkent. All Protestant activity is illegal in north-west Uzbekistan, against international human rights standards. But the Emmanuel Church in the region intends to fight on for its right to meet legally. In Tashkent, a member of the Fores Church told Forum 18 that "Church members are tired and angry. They can't reconcile themselves to the illegal ban on practising their religious rights."

The embattled Emmanuel Full Gospel Protestant Church in Nukus, capital of the north-western autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston], has failed to overturn the court-imposed ban on its activity, Protestant sources have told Forum 18 News Service from Tashkent. On 9 November, Uzbekistan's Supreme Court ruled to leave unchanged the ban imposed by the Karakalpakstan Justice Ministry and previous court decisions. Against international human rights standards, Uzbekistan bans all unregistered religious activity.

"The court took no account of the church's views and the verdict means only one thing: it thinks the Church doesn't exist." one Protestant involved in the case told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 9 November. "This means the judicial system has again – on the usual basis – committed the crudest violation, disregarding the arguments of the church's lawyer."

The Emmanuel Church was the last legal Protestant Church in north-west Uzbekistan, and has faced an intense campaign by the authorities to close it down (see eg. F18News 11 July http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=602 and 16 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=653). The authorities have long been conducting an anti-Christian campaign (see F18News 2 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=575).

However, the church is continuing its battle to be allowed to function legally, and intends to present its case to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Uzbek government's human rights centre, the general prosecutor's office and even the National Security Service secret police.

Begzot Kadyrov, chief specialist at the government's Religious Affairs Committee, told Forum 18 he had not seen the court documents so was unable to comment on the case. "I don't know why the church is unable to exist," he told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 10 November. "It was decided in Karakalpakstan – it's not our decision." He said that if the church gives him the documents he will study them. "Only then might I be able to do something."

While admitting that difficulties exist for believers of all faiths in Uzbekistan, he claimed such problems are being resolved, though he gave no evidence for this. "There are no problems that can't be resolved," he told Forum 18, "it's just a question of time." Asked why official obstructions to free religious practice have gone on for many years he responded: "They can't be solved in a day."

Emmanuel Church members complain that the court reached its decision despite the fact that the church presented once again evidence refuting all the allegations that led to its enforced liquidation.

Meanwhile, the Fores Full Gospel Congregation in the Bakhor mahalla (local district) of Tashkent's Mirobad district – which used to meet in premises provided by a church member – has been banned from meeting since the end of October. The ban reportedly came from the Mirobad district head of administration, Aves Turaev. "Every day at some time or other the local policeman visits the church building," one church member told Forum 18 on 9 November. "Church members are tired and angry. They can't reconcile themselves to the illegal ban on practising their religious rights."

On 23 October the deputy head of the local police department for fighting terrorism and two local police officers arrived during the

Sunday service and warned that the church should no longer meet. They warned of "unpleasantness to come" if the church failed to stop holding services. Church members say that during the raid, the two local policemen looked at the ground in embarrassment while the other warned the church of serious consequences if it continued to meet, informing the church that the administration chief had issued the orders. "While all this was going on, the congregation was extremely calm, people were praying and even the children were quiet."

The following day church leaders met the local police officer, who was supportive of the church, and they showed him the legal documents allowing the church to meet. They then went to the district police, where they met the deputy head of the anti-terrorism branch, who was also supportive. At police request the church leaders returned the following day and discussions began tensely, but again ended warmly, church members report. The police verbally said the church could continue holding services. However, district administration chief Turaev overturned this and the housing department under his control also began to deploy pressure.

When church leaders visited the first deputy head of the Mirobad administration, Alisher Nabiev, on 27 October to try to resolve the problems, Nabiev insisted the congregation stop functioning immediately. He insisted the church could only function once it had gained official registration independently. "We don't want an official stamp and the other paraphernalia – we're already registered as part of the Tashkent church," one church member told Forum 18. "More important to us, our church is already registered in the heavens with the Lord God." At the end of October, the head of the mahalla, Olga Bedrina, was sacked for having allowed the church to function.

Since the church has been banned from meeting, those wishing to worship in church on Sunday have to travel to the main church in central Tashkent, but this is too expensive for most of them, church members complain, especially for families with many children, invalids and the poor. "Church members are angry," one source told Forum 18. Church members have been preparing a joint complaint to Turaev at the Mirobad administration. "It's being proposed that the letter be couched in 'mild' tones," the source added. "Christians as always will try to reach a compromise with the authorities."

Church leaders point out that even the local police recognise that the church has had a benign influence on the mahalla, a poor district with many alcoholics and drug addicts.

The church insists it has the legal right to exist. Not only have church members in the mahalla written a joint declaration, they cite Article 12 of the Law on Institutions of Self-Government of Citizens (known as the "Mahalla law") which provides rights for local believers to meet at their request, as well as their rights to practice their faith freely enshrined in the constitution. They say that when the church originally applied for permission to meet, Bedrina consulted the Mirobad district chief who approved it.

Neither Turaev nor Nabiev were available on 11 November. Officials told Forum 18 that Turaev was in a meeting and Nabiev was out of the office. Nabiev's aide Bakhtiyor Tovirov said he was not informed of the church closure.

Other members of the Full Gospel Church have been questioned. Forum 18 has learnt that a member of the Tashkent church was detained for questioning by secret police officers Rustam and Akmal (last names unknown) on 1 November about the work of the Church's leader, Bishop Sergei Nechitailo, and his assistants. The secret police were also interested in the Church's links with fellow-believers abroad. They warned the church member not to meet in his home with fellow-Christians and forced him to write a police statement.

"The situation for Christians remains tense," one Protestant told Forum 18 in early November. "Harsh measures have been targeted at Christians, especially at Protestant denominations." The Protestant says the authorities especially target church members who are ethnic Uzbeks, although these make up a "tiny" part of the population. "Unfortunately in Uzbekistan today there is no Protestant church that doesn't face persecution, whether registered or not."

Religious communities of all faiths throughout Uzbekistan are currently facing attempts by the authorities to isolate them from support (see F18News 3 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=665) and some inside the country believe there is a national anti-Christian campaign going on (see F18News 27 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=678).

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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 2005 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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