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UZBEKISTAN: Persecution continues throughout country

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Persecution of Protestants continues throughout Uzbekistan, Forum 18 News Service has found. Amongst recent incidents indicated to Forum 18 are the interrogation of a group of 40 Protestants for 18 days, the unlawful imposition of a fine for "security" on one woman, Protestants in a café being ordered by police to state that they were in an unauthorised religious meeting, and nine Pentecostals at a social gathering having permitted religious literature - including copies of the New Testament – confiscated. Fines were also imposed. Iskander Najafov, a Christian lawyer, commented that "I believe it is quite absurd to use the phrase 'unlawful religious activity' of the Syr-Darya Protestants," he told Forum 18. "No-one can prevent people from visiting each other and talking about religious issues!" The head of the Criminal and Administrative Court for Syr-Darya, Akbar Nazimov, was unable to explain to Forum 18 why permitted religious literature was confiscated.

The persecution of Protestants continues throughout Uzbekistan, Forum 18 News Service has found. Iskander Najafov, a lawyer for the Full Gospel Church in Tashkent, has told Forum 18 that, on 11 February, police burst into a private home where 40 Protestants had gathered for a meeting in the village of Kum Kurgan. This is in the Surkhandarya region of southern Uzbekistan, 200 kilometres (124 miles) north of the regional centre Termez. The police recorded the names of all those present in the house.

Those present were then summoned by the police every day for 18 days for questioning between Sunday 12 February and Wednesday 1 March. The interrogations were conducted without a break from 6 am in the morning until the late evening. Those interrogated were allowed a one or two hour meal break at the whim of the police. Najafov claims that the people were mocked "in an affront to their human dignity", and their Bibles and personal notes were taken from them.

The police paid particular attention to Rosa Tsoi, a Protestant visiting from the capital Tashkent. They threatened to bring a criminal case against her for missionary activity, which is forbidden under Uzbek law. The police took Tsoi's passport from her, in order to stop her leaving the village before the investigation was completed. The police also took her Bible without any explanation. Finally, the police did return Tsoi's passport to her, but without legal authority took 200,000 Uzbek Soms (1,095 Norwegian Kroner, 138 Euros, or 165 US Dollars) from her as "security". The average monthly salary was estimated in 2005 to be \$60.

In a separate incident, nine Protestants were in the Smak café in Tashkent on Sunday 5 March, when suddenly ten law enforcement officers came into the café. The police then abruptly ordered the Protestants to give written statements that they had gathered for an unauthorised religious meeting.

In yet another incident, on Sunday 26 February around 20 police officers in the town of Syr-Darya [Sidare], 150 kilometres (95 miles) south west of Tashkent, burst into a private home where nine Pentecostals were holding a social gathering, Iskander Najafov told Forum 18 on 13 March. The officials confiscated the Pentecostals' musical equipment and religious literature (including copies of the New Testament) and forced them to write statements.

The following day, Batyr Sarybekov, a judge at Syr-Darya's municipal Criminal and Administrative Court, sentenced Pentecostal pastor Viktor Melko along with another Pentecostal, Kurbona Abdieva, to fines of 25,000 Soms (137 Norwegian Kroner, 17 Euros, or 21 US Dollars) each under Article 240 of the Code of Administrative Offences (breaking the law on religious organisations).

Sarybekov based his decision on the fact that Uzbek law does not permit unregistered religious communities to operate. Judge Sarybekov also ruled that the musical equipment and religious literature would not be returned to the Pentecostals. He claimed that these items represent material evidence and are therefore subject to confiscation.

Najafov pointed out that the church does not have the 100 adult members required under Uzbekistan's religion law to gain registration, so therefore registration is impossible. "I believe it is quite absurd to use the phrase 'unlawful religious activity' of the Syr-Darya Protestants," he told Forum 18. "No-one can prevent people from visiting each other and talking about religious issues!"

The head of the Criminal and Administrative Court for Syr-Darya, Akbar Nazimov, found it hard to explain to Forum 18 why the court had confiscated religious literature that is permitted in Uzbekistan from the Pentecostals. "My colleague Batyr Sakirov was in charge of the case against the Protestants. I will give you his telephone number," he told Forum 18 on 13 March. Sakirov's secretary

wrote down the name of Forum 18's correspondent and asked him to phone again later. Forum 18's correspondent telephoned Zakirov over ten times during the course of the day, but each time the judge's secretary said that her boss had gone out.

Pentecostals have told Forum 18 that church members have lived in Syr-Darya since 1930 and later built a church, which the authorities banned them from using in 2005 as the community does not have registration. Church members say the authorities' attitude to them used to be favourable, but say the change in the atmosphere followed the arrival of a new Hokim (head of administration) last year.

Begzot Kadyrov, the chief specialist at the government's religious affairs committee in Tashkent, has stressed that it is a "gross infringement of the law" to confiscate Bibles from religious believers. "We have a list of religious literature that is permitted in Uzbekistan," he told Forum 18 late last year. "Naturally, that includes the New and Old Testaments. Therefore Uzbek believers have the right to keep these books in their homes and no-one has the right to confiscate that literature from them."

"I do not know the details of the Protestant cases you mention. However, as you know perfectly well, missionary work and the activity of unregistered religious communities are illegal in Uzbekistan," Shoazim Minovarov, head of the Uzbek government's Religious Affairs Committee, told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 14 March. "Separately, no-one has the right to confiscate Bibles that are for the personal use of believers or to affront their human dignity."

Despite the claims of Kadyrov and Minovarov, amongst the violations of religious freedom and human dignity routinely practised by the Uzbek government is the confiscation and destruction of religious literature (see F18News 6 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=643). Strict postal censorship of religious literature is also applied (see F18News 14 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=687). (END)

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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