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UZBEKISTAN: Deported "for defending believers' rights"

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Russian lawyer Kirill Kulikov has been barred from entering Uzbekistan to help local Jehovah's Witnesses with the numerous prosecutions and denial of registration to their communities they face, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Held at passport control on arrival at Tashkent airport early on 26 April, Kulikov was denied access to anyone, including the Russian Embassy, and forced to board a Moscow-bound flight that evening. "Entry to the Republic of Uzbekistan is closed," is the statement on his deportation document - the same wording used when Forum 18's correspondent was deported in 2005. "I am sure the reason for my deportation was the fact that I was defending believers' rights," Kulikov told Forum 18. He was deported a few days after three Turkmen Protestants, held when police raided a Protestant pastor's home in Urgench, were deported back to Turkmenistan, with stamps in their passports barring them also from future visits.

Jehovah's Witness lawyer Kirill Kulikov, a Russian citizen, was barred from entry to Uzbekistan at Tashkent airport and deported by the Uzbek authorities on 26 April. The purpose of his visit to Uzbekistan, as on previous visits, was to give legal assistance to local Jehovah's Witnesses, many of whom face prosecution for their religious activity in the wake of police raids on their meetings across the country in April. "I am sure the reason for my deportation was the fact that I was defending believers' rights," Kulikov told Forum 18 News Service from the Russian city of St Petersburg on 8 May. "During my previous visits to Uzbekistan I have never once broken the laws of the country. I have never made derogatory statements about the authorities and have always remained politically neutral, concentrating exclusively on defending human rights."

Among recent Jehovah's Witness prosecutions is that of Nurlan Ayatov, who was given a ten-day prison term in Nukus, the capital of the Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] autonomous republic in north-western Uzbekistan, on 27 April, while an initial hearing took place the following day in Fergana [Farghona] in eastern Uzbekistan in the case against Artur Arsanov and Dila Safieva. The authorities also appear to be preparing to remove registration from the Fergana community, one of only two Jehovah's Witness communities the authorities have allowed to register in Uzbekistan (see F18News 5 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=774). Unregistered religious activity is illegal in Uzbekistan, in defiance of the country's international human rights commitments.

Because of the 9 May Second World War anniversary holiday, Forum 18 was unable to reach local officials, or the Russian Embassy, in Tashkent to find out why Kulikov was deported.

Also deported from Uzbekistan in late April were three Protestants, all Turkmen citizens, present when police raided the home of Protestant pastor Sergey Lunkin in Urgench [Urganch] in the Khorezm region of north-western Uzbekistan on 24 April. On being deported back to Turkmenistan, the three were reportedly given black stamps in their passports prohibiting them from re-entering Uzbekistan (see F18News 5 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=774).

Local lawyers defending the rights of religious believers have also faced problems in Uzbekistan (see F18News 26 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=288).

As a Russian citizen, Kulikov does not need a visa to enter Uzbekistan. He arrived at Tashkent airport on 26 April at 6am local time from St Petersburg, but was detained at passport control by immigration officials who seized his passport and took him to a separate room in the airport. He was not allowed to leave the room, use the telephone or internet, or communicate with anyone at all.

Kulikov gave the senior duty officer present a written statement declaring that he holds Russian citizenship and demanding either a meeting with an official of the Russian Embassy in Tashkent or immediate release. However, his demands were refused.

The detention lasted until 18.35 that evening, when officials forced Kulikov to board a Moscow-bound flight. On arriving in the Russian capital, his passport was returned with a deportation document (of which Forum 18 has seen a copy) stating: "Entry to the Republic of Uzbekistan is closed."

Kulikov told Forum 18 he believes the Uzbek immigration officials' actions contravened the standards set by international agreements to which Uzbekistan is a party, as well as infringing his rights and freedoms and those of his clients. In particular, he

believes their actions contravened articles 2, 7, 9, 12, 13, 14 and 17 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, article 7 of the November 2005 Agreement on Allied Relations between the Russian Federation and Uzbekistan, and articles 2 and 3 of the statute of the Commonwealth of Independent States, of which both Uzbekistan and Russia are members.

"I intend to inform governments and human rights organisations of these contraventions so that this issue can be resolved in line with international standards," Kulikov told Forum 18. He said he would appeal to a number of bodies, including the United Nations Human Rights Committee, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and Russia's Interior Ministry.

On 11 August 2005 a very similar situation befell Forum 18's Central Asia correspondent Igor Rotar. He was detained at passport control on arrival at Tashkent airport because his name came up on the computer entry ban list compiled by the National Security Service. Rotar, a Russian citizen, was not allowed to speak to the Russian embassy, any other embassy in Tashkent or the local office of the OSCE. For two days psychological pressure was put on him to force him to buy a plane ticket and leave Uzbekistan, but he insisted that if the Uzbek authorities wished to remove him from the country they should deport him officially.

On 13 August the Uzbek authorities gave Rotar an official deportation document (identical in content to that given to Kulikov) and put him on an aeroplane to Moscow (see F18News 16 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=631).

Interestingly, soon after Rotar's deportation, police officers told Bakhtier Tuichiev, a Protestant pastor from Andijan in eastern Uzbekistan: "We are not going to let foreign human rights activists into Uzbekistan any more. It's payback time – we've already dealt with Igor Rotar and now we've come for you" (see F18News 3 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=665). (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 what is known about Akramia and the Andijan uprising see F18News 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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