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UZBEKISTAN: Another JW deportation, more pressure on Protestants and Muslims

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Uzbekistan has deported a second Jehovah's Witness, a month after deporting a Russian lawyer intending to defend his fellow-believers, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Yevgeny Li's home is in the Uzbek capital Tashkent, but he was deported to Kazakhstan although he is Ukrainian. Also, Jamshed Fazylov, an Uzbek lawyer intending to defend Jehovah's Witnesses in southern Uzbekistan was himself detained in a cell for 24 hours for "vagrancy". "What happened to Li sets a very dangerous precedent," a Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18. "The authorities could launch a mass deportation of our fellow-believers." The use of deportation to rid the country of religious believers the state does not like seems to be growing. Other faiths are facing growing repression, Protestant sources telling Forum 18 that twelve churches have been stripped of registration, thus banning them from conducting any religious activity. Also, the authorities are attempting to stop Muslim schoolchildren from attending mosques.

One month after the deportation of a Russian lawyer, who had arrived in the country to defend his fellow Jehovah's Witnesses in numerous prosecutions that followed coordinated police raids, the Uzbek authorities have deported a second Jehovah's Witness, a Ukrainian citizen. On 29 May, Yevgeny Li, who holds a temporary residence permit in the capital Tashkent and owns an apartment there, was deported from Uzbekistan over the border to Kazakhstan, Jehovah's Witness spokesperson Sergei Artyushkov complained to Forum 18 News Service from Tashkent on 22 June.

He also told Forum 18 that Jamshed Fazylov, an Uzbek lawyer the Jehovah's Witnesses then sent to the southern town of Karshi [Qarshi] to defend those facing prosecution, was himself detained in a cell for 24 hours. "Clearly the authorities are doing everything they can to prevent believers under persecution in Karshi from having defence lawyers," Artyushkov told Forum 18.

Li's home was in Tashkent and his elderly parents and wife – who are Uzbek citizens – remain in the capital. Artyushkov said there are several other Jehovah's Witnesses with foreign passports for whom Uzbekistan is their permanent place of residence. "What happened to Li sets a very dangerous precedent," he told Forum 18. "The authorities could launch a mass deportation of our fellow-believers."

The use of deportation to rid the country of religious believers the government does not like appears to be growing. 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).

The renewed pressure on Jehovah's Witnesses comes at a time when other faiths too are facing growing repression. Protestant sources told Forum 18 that twelve Protestant churches have been stripped of their registration this year. This means that under Uzbekistan's harsh religion law – which breaks the country's international human rights commitments - they are no longer allowed to conduct any religious activity at all.

The pastor of the officially registered Full Gospel Church in Andijan, Dmitry Shestakov (known as David), faces between ten and twenty years in prison if found guilty of treason charges apparently lodged against him by investigator Kamolitdin Zulfiev of the Andijan [Andijon] regional Prosecutor's Office under Article 157 of the Criminal Code. If convicted, this would represent a sharp escalation of punishment for religious believers simply for practising their faith (see F18News 20 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=803).

Sources in Tashkent have told Forum 18 that authorities have also stepped up pressure on Muslims. Regional leaders have appeared on local television channels announcing that schoolchildren may not attend mosques. Instances have been recorded in Bukhara [Bukhoro], in western Uzbekistan, where police have not allowed schoolchildren into the mosque.

However, the head of the government's Religious Affairs Committee, Shoazim Minovarov, denies absolutely that the authorities' religious policy has become harsher, despite such increased pressure on Jehovah's Witnesses, Protestants and Muslims. "Our policy

remains the same," he insisted to Forum 18 from Tashkent on 20 June. "The fact that Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses have stepped up their propaganda about their beliefs among the Uzbek population is a separate issue. Uzbek law forbids proselytism and we have to take measures against it."

At the beginning of 2006, a massive rise in fines for unregistered religious activity has also recently been brought in, with increases in fines from 5 to 10 times the minimum wage to 50 to 100 times the minimum wage (see F18News 27 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=720). Against international human rights standards, unregistered religious activity is illegal.

Yevgeny Li was among many Jehovah's Witnesses prosecuted under the Code of Administrative Offences in the wake of coordinated police raids on 12 April, when police detained more than 500 local Jehovah's Witnesses who were commemorating the death of Jesus in meetings across Uzbekistan. Some were badly beaten by the police, including Bahrom Pulatov from Karshi, who was hospitalised with severe concussion and suffering from a brain haemorrhage. The Jehovah's Witnesses were held under arrest for several days for taking part in "an illegal religious gathering" (see F18News 19 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=763).

In the wake of the prosecutions, Russian citizen Kirill Kulikov came to Uzbekistan to represent Jehovah's Witnesses in Karshi who were facing trial. However, on 26 April he was detained at Tashkent airport, denied entry and deported (see F18News 9 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=775).

The Jehovah's Witnesses then sent Jamshed Fazylov, a lawyer with Uzbek citizenship, to Karshi. However, on 22 May he was sent straight from court, where he was defending his fellow believers, to a cell where he spent more than 24 hours for "vagrancy". Fazylov had with him a photocopy of his passport as the original was with the authorities in Tashkent for updating.

Artyushkov reports that the prosecutor's office in Karshi is bringing a criminal case against a group of Jehovah's Witnesses who had gathered for the commemoration. Bahrom Pulatov and Feruz Mamatotov, who faced a criminal prosecution last year, are among the accused. However, the investigation into Pulatov's beating is at a standstill despite an appeal to Uzbekistan's General Prosecutor.

A total of 28 Jehovah's Witnesses have already been prosecuted in 14 separate cases over the 12 April commemorations in various parts of Uzbekistan. Fines imposed so far total more than 3,000 US Dollars [3,687,400 Uzbek Soms, 19,000 Norwegian Kroner, or 2,400 Euros]. In the north-western town of Nukus, Nurlan Ayatov was sentenced on 27 April to 10 days in prison for holding an "unlawful religious meeting" (see F18News 5 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=774).

Nor has there been any progress on the Tashkent Jehovah's Witness community's long-blocked application for legal status. "Documentation for the registration of Tashkent's Jehovah's Witness community has been sent back by the justice ministry eight times this month," Artyushkov complained to Forum 18. "It's obvious that our situation is getting worse."

But as in the past, Minovarov of the government's Religious Affairs Committee puts the blame on the Jehovah's Witnesses. "Once again, they have not been able to fill in the necessary documents correctly," he told Forum 18.

The Jehovah's Witnesses have been allowed to register only two religious communities in Uzbekistan, and the registration of one of those – the community in Fergana [Farghona] – is under threat.

Amongst the many other violations of religious freedom in recent months have been: the closure of an Adventist and a Korean-led church in Samarkand [Samarqand] region, a raid on a Baptist church in the Fergana Valley during Sunday worship and a subsequent fine imposed on the host (see F18News 19 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=784); trials of Muslims, apparently for being serious in the practice of Islam (see F18News 15 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=780); the jailing of a Jehovah's Witness, a banned Protestant church being raided and children intimidated and threatened in a bid to force them to renounce their Christian faith (see F18News 5 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=774); and Muslim prisoners being banned from saying Muslim prayers (see F18News 2 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=772). (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=777.

For an analysis of whether the May 2005 Andijan events changed state religious policy in the year following, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=778. For an outline of what is known about Akramia itself, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586, and for a May 2005 analysis of what happened in Andijan http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567.

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY