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The right to believe, to worship and witness
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The right to join together and express one's belief

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UZBEKISTAN: Another Protestant faces criminal charges

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

In Muynak in Karakalpakstan region – where all Protestant activity is banned – local Protestant Lepes Omarov faces up to three years' imprisonment on criminal charges for "breaking the law on religious organisations". The duty officer at the police station told Forum 18 News Service that Omarov was released by the police after several hours' detention in late June after signing "an undertaking not to leave the country". Forum 18 has also learnt that Pentecostal pastor Dmitry Shestakov from Andijan has fled Uzbekistan to escape criminal charges also lodged in June in retaliation for his church work. In Kuvasai in Fergana region, the NSS secret police have questioned the 11-year-old son of the Vitkovsky couple in whose home a Baptist church meets. The Church's services have repeatedly been raided in recent months and a judge threatened Viktor Vitkovsky with imprisonment on 27 June. He and his wife were due in court on 3 July.

Criminal charges were launched against a second Protestant in Uzbekistan in late June in punishment for religious activity, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Lepes Omarov - who is from the town of Muynak [Muynoq] in the north-western region of Karakalpakstan – faces charges under Article 216-2 of the criminal code, which punishes "breaking the law on religious organisations" with up to three years' imprisonment. A Protestant source told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 29 June that Omarov's only "crime" is that he failed to conceal his religious convictions and spoke to his fellow-believers about religious matters. Meanwhile, Protestant sources told Forum 18 on 30 June that Dmitry Shestakov, a Protestant pastor from Andijan [Andijon] in eastern Uzbekistan against whom criminal charges were lodged earlier in June in retaliation for his church work, has had to flee the country to evade prosecution.

Omarov was detained in his home in Muynak and taken for questioning to the local police station, Protestant sources told Forum 18. During a search of his home, Christian literature that had been legally imported into Uzbekistan was seized.

Murad, the duty officer at Muynak's police department who refused to give his full name, confirmed to Forum 18 on 30 June that a criminal case had been brought against Omarov under article 216-2. However, Murad maintained that Omarov had been released by the police after several hours after signing "an undertaking not to leave the country".

Omarov and other Protestants in Muynak have long faced pressure from the authorities. A former school sports teacher, Omarov was dismissed in July 2003 because of his religious affiliation after rejecting pressure by a local ideology official for him to renounce his beliefs as a Protestant (see F18News 30 September 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=147).

Of all the regions in Uzbekistan, Karakalpakstan is where Protestants face the most problems. Not one Protestant church is registered in the region (which means – under Uzbekistan's harsh restrictions on religion – that all their activity is therefore illegal) and Protestants in the region are subjected to systematic persecution from the authorities.

Moreover, Muynak, with its population of 5,000, presents more difficulties for its inhabitants, including Christians, than anywhere else in Karakalpakstan. A former seaport, the town is now 100 kilometres (60 miles) from the Aral Sea following an ecological disaster. Unemployment has reached 80 per cent, and the standard of living here is lower than almost anywhere in Central Asia. Some believe this may account for the relatively strong Protestant community in the town, which has several dozen members.

Persecution of local Christians by the authorities is particularly acute, even by Uzbek standards. For example, in January 2003 police burst into a private home, where two local Christians were reading the Bible. The Protestants were taken to the police station and subjected to torture – for example the police put gas masks on them and cut off their air supply – in a bid to force them to admit that they had been preaching to each other. Local Protestant students in the regional capital Nukus have long been singled out for pressure (see F18News 26 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=719).

However, it seems likely that the persecution of Omarov is not simply an initiative on the part of the local authorities, but represents deliberate state policy. Recently the Uzbek authorities have hardened their policy towards unregistered religious minority communities across the country, despite an absolute denial of this to Forum 18 from the head of the government's Religious Affairs Committee, Shoazim Minovarov (see F18News 23 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=804).

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Pastor Shestakov, who led the officially-register Full Gospel Pentecostal Church in Andijan, faces between ten and twenty years in prison if found guilty of treason charges apparently lodged against him by the Andijan regional Prosecutor's Office, though the final charges prosecutors lodged remain unclear. After the charges were lodged, Shestakov went into hiding to evade arrest (see F18News 20 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=803).

Baptists from an unregistered Council of Churches congregation in the town of Kuvasai in Fergana [Farghona] region close to the border with Kyrgyzstan reported on 1 July that during June the authorities "again repeatedly came to services" without presenting any documentation. "They conducted videofilming of services, wrote down the names of all those present and threatened to close down the church," local Baptists complained to Forum 18. Lyubov Vitkovskaya, in whose home the church meets, was several times summoned to a judge and to an investigator.

On 13 June her 11-year-old son was taken with her husband Viktor Vitkovsky to an interrogation by officers of the National Security Service (NSS) secret police. Also present were police officers and the director of the son's school. The son was forced to write a statement about the internal life of the church, including who led church meetings and where any guests came from. On 27 June Vitkovsky – who attends church meetings but is not a church member - was stopped on the way home from work and told he could come to the town court to collect back Christian literature confiscated earlier. However, at the court he was subjected to a 90-minute interrogation by the judge, who threatened that he could face criminal charges and be imprisoned.

The Vitkovskys were summoned to appear at court on 28 June but, as local Baptists told Forum 18, a group of church members accompanied them at the appointed time to the court, only to be told that the hearing had been postponed until 3 July.

The church has been facing mounting pressure in recent months. It was raided during church services in April and May, and Vitkovskaya was fined in May (see F18News 19 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=784).

About a dozen Protestant congregations are reported to have been stripped of registration across Uzbekistan this year, while pressure is also mounting on Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims.

Penalties under the Criminal and Administrative Codes were introduced in June for publishing, distributing or importing "illegal" religious literature of any sort, adding to already tight censorship of religious literature (see F18News 29 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=805).

All the evidence is that the authorities have launched a multi-faceted war against religious minorities and are trying to prevent potential missionary activity from foreigners. The rector of the National University of Uzbekistan, Ravshan Ashurov, issued an order prohibiting teachers of the University from attending any events organised by foreign organisations, embassies or their representatives without the written permission of the rector or foreign department of the University.

Foreign non-governmental organisations with a religious affiliation or which the authorities suspect of having a religious affiliation have been closed down or subjected to close scrutiny. Jehovah's Witness and Protestant foreigners have also been expelled from Uzbekistan as part of the crackdown (see F18News 23 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=804). (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

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