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UZBEKISTAN: Then there was one

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

The regional Justice Department's stripping of registration in late August from the Fergana Jehovah's Witness community has left only one registered Jehovah's Witness community in the whole of Uzbekistan. "Under Uzbek law unregistered religious communities are not allowed to function and now our brothers in Fergana will not be free to preach their religious beliefs in peace," one Jehovah's Witness complained to Forum 18 News Service. The source added that were it not for official discrimination, the Jehovah's Witnesses could have registered "dozens" of congregations. Any activity by Jehovah's Witnesses outside the remaining congregation in Chirchik will be subject to harsh penalties under the country's repressive Religion Law. Forum 18 was unable to find out the reason for the clampdown on the Jehovah's Witnesses from the government's Religious Affairs Committee, but its spokesperson Aziz Abidov has criticised Forum 18's coverage of the current severe crackdown on religious activity affecting many faiths.

As part of the current severe crackdown on religious activity affecting many faiths, one of only two Jehovah's Witness communities allowed to register with the Uzbek authorities – and under the country's repressive Religion Law therefore allowed to function legally - has had its registration stripped from it. The decision to close down the Jehovah's Witness organisation in Fergana [Farghona] region of eastern Uzbekistan was taken by the regional Justice Department, the Russian Interfax agency reported on 25 August. Jehovah's Witnesses have complained to Forum 18 News Service that this makes all their activity outside the remaining congregation in Chirchik near Tashkent illegal.

"Under Uzbek law unregistered religious communities are not allowed to function and now our brothers in Fergana will not be free to preach their religious beliefs in peace," a Jehovah's Witness, who preferred not to be named for fear of reprisals, told Forum 18 on 28 August. "The closure of our sister congregation in Fergana demonstrates how the authorities' relations with Jehovah's Witnesses have deteriorated." Among "fresh examples" of this, the Jehovah's Witness cited the recent denial by the government's Religious Affairs Committee of permission to extend the Kingdom Hall in Chirchik, the only remaining legal Jehovah's Witness place of worship in the country.

The crackdown on the Jehovah's Witnesses is part of a major government crackdown on all religious activity, which has also seen Protestant communities facing arrests and deportations, most recently in the capital Tashkent and Termez (see F18News 6 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=838).

In a striking parallel with anti-religious moves in neighbouring Turkmenistan in the late 1990s, the Uzbek government has adopted a series of measures that have increasingly restricted the possibilities for legal religious activity and have stepped up measures to crush unregistered religious activity.

New restrictions have been proposed to punish religious leaders if any members of their communities share their faith with others (see F18News 21 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=833) and censorship of religious literature has been intensified (see F18News 29 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=805), while massively increased fines for unregistered religious activity were introduced at the end of 2005 (see F18News 27 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=720). Foreign non-governmental organisations with any kind of religious affiliation or suspected of having a religious affiliation have been closed down and foreign citizens involved in religious activity have been deported (see F18News 21 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=833).

In its account of the closure of the Fergana Jehovah's Witness community, Interfax's source reports that the Regional Administration and its Justice Department have recently received numerous complaints from citizens about the "improper conduct of members of the Jehovah's Witness organisation".

The source added that the Justice Department discovered a whole range of irregularities when monitoring the activity of the community. In particular, services and other activities were held not at the juridical address but in private homes. According to Article 14 of Uzbekistan's highly restrictive Religion Law, worship services, religious rituals and ceremonies have to be held at the place where religious organisations are registered. Moreover, "there were irregularities in the wording of employment contracts with the religious organisation's employees, and when the accounts were examined expenditure and income did not add up," the agency

source claimed.

The Jehovah's Witnesses have long tried in vain to register their religious communities across Uzbekistan. "We had just two registered Jehovah's Witness communities in the whole of Uzbekistan – in Chirchik and in Fergana," the Jehovah's Witness source told Forum 18. "Yet our organisation has so many members that if the authorities had not prevented us, we could have established dozens of registered communities." The Jehovah's Witness noted that they have tried to register their community in Tashkent eight times.

Jehovah's Witness communities have repeatedly been raided by police – especially during their annual memorial of Christ's death (see F18News 19 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=763) – with adherents detained, beaten and threatened with rape. Other religious communities – especially Protestant Christians – have suffered similar raids.

Forum 18's attempts to find out from the Religious Affairs Committee why the Jehovah's Witnesses cannot register their communities, why registration has been stripped from the Fergana community and why the Chirchik community cannot extend its place of worship proved fruitless. Speaking to Forum 18 on 29 August, Committee official Begzot Kadyrov explained that under new rules only the press officer Aziz Abidov may comment on behalf of the Committee. Forum 18 tried on 28 and 29 August to reach Abidov (who for some reason works at Uzbekistan's Supreme Court), but was told he was not at work.

Interestingly, on 29 August Abidov gave an interview to the Uzbek news agency Press-uz.info complaining about Forum 18's coverage of religious freedom issues in Uzbekistan. "Unfortunately, it has become an unpleasant tradition for the Forum 18 news agency (which we know for its prejudiced stance towards Uzbekistan) to take any opportunity to try to make unfounded accusations against our country of putting pressure on believers and undermining freedom of conscience," he asserted. "This time too this agency's representative, Mr Igor Rotar, is engaged in making something out of nothing."

Abidov cited an interview Rotar gave to Radio Liberty about the 27 July meeting at the Religious Affairs Committee where proposals for new restrictions on religious activity were explained to leaders of registered religious communities (which Forum 18 had wrongly believed to have taken place on 4 August - see F18News 21 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=833). "Mr Rotar said that during this meeting there was apparently a discussion of issues relating to a certain draft law introducing fines or imprisonment for people who professed their faith outside the walls of the religious organisation itself."

Abidov said the 27 July meeting was a "routine meeting held by the Religious Affairs Committee's Council for Confessional Affairs" and insisted that discussion focused not on new proposals but on the June 2006 amendments to the Criminal and Criminal Procedure Codes and the Code of Administrative Offences. "The amendments inserted into the above regulatory documents aim primarily to increase the punishments imposed on citizens for unlawfully preparing, possessing, importing and distributing documents of a religious nature and documents that promote national, racial, ethnic or religious hatred," Abidov claimed.

It remains unclear from Abidov's interview how a journalist can verify information if the Religious Affairs Committee refuses to make any comment and if it is not possible to reach Abidov at his place of work.

As it clamps down on religious activity at home, the Uzbek government is showing increased sensitivity over the way the clampdown is being reported abroad. In addition to successive attacks on Forum 18's coverage, Uzbek diplomats have taken unprecedented steps to promote their government's claim to promote religious freedom, in sharp contrast to earlier refusals even to discuss its record on human rights and religious freedom.

In a 17-page letter to the United Nations secretary-general Kofi Annan, dated 26 June, Uzbekistan's ambassador to the UN Alisher Vohidov claims that the country's citizens enjoy full religious rights. "The Government of Uzbekistan guarantees total freedom of religion and places no restrictions on religious organisations as to size or location," he asserted. "Assertions to the effect that there is a continuing pattern of discrimination, harassment and prosecution in Uzbekistan with regard to the exercise of freedom of thought and religion are unfounded." As evidence he cited the 2,202 religious communities of 15 faiths he maintains are officially registered and laws banning discrimination on the grounds of religion.

Vohidov failed to explain why unregistered religious activity is illegal and punishable by imprisonment, why religious literature cannot be freely published, why religious communities have been closed down, why religious communities are raided by police and religious believers detained and beaten, why foreign citizens involved in religious activity have been deported and why official registration is arbitrarily denied to many religious communities. (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 see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

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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