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UZBEKISTAN: Where is Kazakh visiting Pastor being held?

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Concern is mounting about where Uzbekistan is holding a visiting Kazakh pastor, Rishat Garifulin, who has not been seen since his arrest by police in Samarkand on 8 February, after Christian literature was found on him. "Now it's almost a week later and we haven't heard anything about him or his whereabouts," Greater Grace sources told Forum 18 News Service. Samarkand police, who arrested Pastor Garifulin, have refused to confirm the arrest to Forum 18. His arrest comes as Pentecostal Pastor Dmitry Shestakov, who is awaiting trial in solitary confinement, is facing increasing attacks in the state-run media. Uzbek authorities are taking greater steps to isolate local religious communities from foreign contacts and have refused visas to and deported foreigners suspected of contacts with local religious communities. Uzbekistan is also continuing to crackdown on foreign religious charities. Christian charity World Vision, which works on HIV/AIDS projects, is the latest target for potential closure.

Concern is mounting among members of Uzbekistan's Greater Grace Protestant Church over a visiting pastor from Kazakhstan who has not been seen since his arrest on the streets of Samarkand [Samarqand] on 8 February, after police found Christian literature on him. Pastor Rishat Garifulin was visiting the Greater Grace congregation near the city when he was arrested. His arrest comes as Pentecostal Pastor Dmitry Shestakov, who is awaiting trial in Andijan [Andijon] for his religious activities, is facing increasing attacks in the state-run media.

Garifulin, who is one of the pastors of the Greater Grace congregation in the Kazakh commercial capital Almaty, was stopped on the street in Samarkand on 8 February and checked by the police. They found a couple of Christian booklets in his bag and arrested him immediately. "We were expecting Rishat to be released after three days as they are accustomed to do," Greater Grace sources told Forum 18 on 14 February. "Now it's almost a week later and we haven't heard anything about him or his whereabouts."

Reached on 14 February, the Samarkand city police duty officer who answered the phone refused to confirm or deny to Forum 18 that Garifulin had been arrested.

The Samarkand Greater Grace church has permission from local officials to meet for worship in a registered Korean Protestant church in the city, but has repeatedly sought state registration in vain. "Officials have said it will never get registration," Greater Grace sources told Forum 18. "But we definitely want registration – we have done everything we can, the paperwork is all correct, we have made all the many changes demanded by officials." Several years ago a church delegation even travelled to the capital Tashkent to visit the Presidential Administration, but that failed to break the registration logjam.

Without such registration the church cannot use its own place of worship, which lies empty. Sources have told Forum 18 that the church does continue to function as, like many Protestant churches, it has "adapted to the situation".

Meanwhile, as Pentecostal pastor Dmitry Shestakov (also known as David) remains in prison in Andijan awaiting criminal trial for his religious activities (see F18News 8 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=909). Begzot Kadyrov, the chief specialist on non-Islamic faiths at the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent, admitted to Forum 18 on 13 February that Shestakov is being held in solitary confinement, but refused to comment on his case. "The only person who can comment is Aziz Obidov, the Press Secretary of the Religious Affairs Committee," Kadyrov insisted. However, reached on 14 February, Obidov also declined to comment to Forum 18.

In the run up to Shestakov's trial, the Uzbek authorities have stepped up their attacks on him through the state-run media. On 12 February, the government agency Press-uz.info quoted unnamed officials at the Religious Affairs Committee's press service describing international coverage of his case as "not objective and inaccurate". They questioned Shestakov's position as a pastor. "Earlier he abused alcohol and was dependent on drugs and now he presents himself as pastor David," the officials claimed.

"The Full Gospel church, to which D. Shestakov belongs, is a registered religious organisation with its centre in Tashkent and branches in various regions of the republic, including Andijan," the officials also stated. "However, Shestakov is not the leader of any group belonging to the Pentecostal religious organisations which are officially registered in Uzbekistan."

The state-run media's encouragement of intolerance against religious minorities has recently been stepped up (see F18News 19

December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=890), as has a propaganda offensive to deny that Uzbekistan violates religious freedom (see F18News 19 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=891).

The Religious Affairs Committee insists that law enforcement agencies have discovered an illegal religious organisation of "charismatic Pentecostals" in Andijan, which for several years has been carrying out missionary and proselytising activity among the population and which has turned out to be run by Shestakov. An unnamed official of the Religious Affairs Committee claimed (wrongly) to the website that there are no obstacles to the registration of religious organisations in Uzbekistan (see F18News 16 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=913).

The officials admit that Shestakov was warned in 1997 and 2004 for his "illegal" religious activity. They characterise reports that pressure on Protestants is rising as "unfounded".

Sergei Nechitailo, president of the Full Gospel church in Uzbekistan, offered his support to Shestakov. "It is true that Shestakov has not been a member of our community," Nechitailo told Forum 18 on 13 February, "because he belongs to the charismatic tendency in Pentecostalism. But this doesn't mean we don't consider him to be a genuine believer. We are praying that Dmitry will be freed!"

Pavel Abramov, the pastor of the church in Andijan where Shestakov has been serving, also said his church is praying for Shestakov. "Dmitry's only crime is believing in God," he told Forum 18 on 13 February. "We are praying that our brother will be set free." Abramov complained that Shestakov is being held in complete isolation. "The only person he's been allowed to see is his lawyer. We're glad that the authorities agreed that Shestakov's case will be handled by a lawyer he chose himself." He complained that the church still does not know the date of the trial.

Public prosecutors have repeatedly refused to give Forum 18 information about the case against Shestakov since his arrest on 21 January. On 8 February Forum 18 reached the chief public prosecutor of Andijan, Bekmukhadam Akhmedaliev, who initiated the case, but he said he would not provide any information by telephone. "Send your questions to us in writing on your organisation's official letterhead," he said, "and then we'll reply to you."

On 13 February the German-based independent website Uznews.net quoted unnamed Andijan imams as expressing concern at what they believe are rising numbers of converts to Christianity and welcoming moves against Pentecostal Christians. "These religious missionaries set out their traps and our young people fall into them," one imam told the website. "We must punish in the harshest way those who poison the minds of our youth."

The Uzbek authorities are taking greater steps to isolate local religious communities from foreign contacts. Forum 18 has learnt of several foreigners who have visited Uzbekistan in recent years who were refused visas in December 2006 and January 2007, probably because the government suspects them of contacts with local religious communities. This is an ongoing trend (see eg. F18News 21 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=833).

In addition, Forum 18 has learnt that in December 2006 and January 2007, several citizens of other former Soviet republics - who do not need visas to enter Uzbekistan - who have visited the country in recent years, have been detained at Tashkent airport and eventually sent back to the country they came from. It is believed the Uzbek authorities likewise suspect them of links with local religious communities.

One of those deported asked the Uzbek authorities why he was being sent back. They responded: "You tell us the reason." Some observers have speculated to Forum 18 that the authorities have added many more names to their entry ban list, based on suspicion of contacts with local religious communities.

Uzbekistan is also continuing its campaign against foreign religious charities engaged in humanitarian relief (see F18News 10 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=852). In the wake of a "planned check-up", Christian charity World Vision, which works on HIV/AIDS projects in Uzbekistan, has been accused by the Justice Ministry of allegedly holding events without coordinating with the Ministry and of not providing information about charitable spending. Press-uz.info reported on 14 February that the Ministry had given World Vision International 30 days "to settle the issue." (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.

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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