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UZBEKISTAN: Pentecostal and Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience face harsh labour camp conditions

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Friends of Pentecostal prisoner of conscience Dmitry Shestakov, sentenced to four years in a labour camp, have told Forum 18 News Service of their concern at the conditions he is being held in. He has lost between 15 and 20 kilograms (33 to 44 pounds) in weight and is being pressured to renounce his faith. Former prisoners from Camp No. 29, where he is being held, describe unsanitary and dangerous living and working conditions, which cause a high level of sickness among prisoners. Guards beat them with truncheons and members of criminal gangs have a ruthless hold over other prisoners. Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience Irfon Khamidov has lost his appeal against a sentence of two years in a labour camp. Jehovah's Witnesses note irregularities in the legal process, including testimony from two people claimed by the authorities to be "victims" of Khamidov's "illegal" teaching, who testified at his original trial that they had never met him. The authorities have refused to speak to Forum 18 about the cases.

Friends of imprisoned Pentecostal pastor Dmitry Shestakov (also known as David) have expressed concern about the conditions he is being held in at his labour camp in Navoi [Nawoiy], in central Uzbekistan, over 560 kilometres (350 miles) from his home in Andijan [Andijon] in eastern Uzbekistan. His imprisonment separates him from his wife Marina and their three children. Like all newly-arrived prisoners, Shestakov is currently being held in quarantine at Navoi's Camp No. 29. In accounts given to Forum 18 News Service, former prisoners at the camp report that prisoners are routinely beaten, forced to renounce their "crimes" and forced to clean toilets with their bare hands. Protestants have told Forum 18 that Shestakov refuses to renounce his faith, despite being pressured to do so.

Meanwhile Jehovah's Witness Irfon Khamidov, who has also been imprisoned for his religious activity, lost his appeal on 21 June against his sentence of two years in a labour camp, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. He was originally sentenced in Samarkand [Samarqand] in May for "illegally teaching religion."

No official at the government's Committee for Religious Affairs in Tashkent was prepared even to talk to Forum 18. Reached on 26 June, an official who would not give his name said the chairman Artyk Yusupov was not in the office and put the phone down. The phone then went unanswered when Forum 18 called back, as did the phones of other Committee officials.

A court in Andijan [Andijon] in the Fergana [Farghona] Valley sentenced Shestakov on 9 March to a four-year term of imprisonment for leading his Full Gospel church. The authorities claim its activity was illegal and that Shestakov was promoting "religious extremism", charges he vigorously rejected.

Shestakov was transferred to the Navoi camp after a new trial on 25 May. This trial sentenced him to be moved for the rest of his term from an open work camp to a harsher "ordinary regime" labour camp. There are suspicions that the harshening of Pastor Shestakov's sentence was "deliberately set up" (see F18News 12 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=973).

Shestakov's friends told Forum 18 that he has lost between 15 and 20 kilograms (33 to 44 pounds) in weight since his arrest in January. They fear for him in the Navoi camp. "Shestakov's Bible has been taken from him," Protestants told Forum 18. "He is being pressured to sign a 'letter of repentance' and to renounce Christ. He is refusing to do this. He cannot renounce Christ."

His friends say Shestakov continues to insist he committed no crime and that the criminal case was brought against him illegally and that "evidence" was fabricated. They fear that because he refuses to write a "letter of repentance" and "renounce Christ", he will be handed over to imprisoned Islamists, who might harm him.

Shestakov's friends say he is being held in quarantine in the 8th Detachment of the 82nd Brigade in Navoi's Camp No. 29. The camp, which holds some 2,000 prisoners mostly on shorter sentences, is led by Internal Affairs Major Sh. Sharipov. The camp address is:

210105 Navoi-5

Uzbekistan

Former prisoners freed recently from Camp No. 29 recount the unsanitary conditions there. Drinking water is contaminated with chlorine, salt and sand. Prisoners are assigned to the production of quicklime and household soap. "The manufacturing processes used are harmful to health," former prisoners attest. "Safety measures and equipment are lacking. This means that levels of sickness among prisoners are very high." The camp is located near Navoi's industrial area, with a chemical plant and other factories nearby exacerbating the unhealthy environment.

Camp No. 29 is known as a "red zone" where discipline is maintained by the prisoners themselves. Former prisoners say that on arrival, prisoners are forced through a corridor of guards, who beat them from both sides with 75 cm (30 inch) truncheons. Prisoners are then put into quarantine, where they are told the rules of the camp and the daily schedule. They are given minimal food and routinely beaten. Prisoners are forced to clean out the communal toilet with their bare hands, clean and rake the outer zone between fences around the camp and learn and sing the Uzbek national anthem. Members of criminal gangs (known in Russian as "thieves in law"), who have a ruthless hold over other prisoners, refuse to do all these.

Newly-arrived prisoners are forced to write a statement declaring that they "with a pure heart repent of the crimes they have committed against Uzbekistan" as well as renouncing their membership of "banned religious organisations." This term is used to refer to not only the banned Islamist political movement Hizb ut-Tahrir (see F18News 29 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170) and the terrorist group the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, but also to any other religious group the government does not like. After writing this statement, a prisoner is then forced to stand in front of the other prisoners on the parade ground to repeat their renunciation of membership of such groups in front of other prisoners sentenced for "religious" offences.

Former prisoners say that those sentenced on charges of "religious extremism" (such as Shestakov) are held separately. They are allocated the heaviest and most dangerous work.

Prisoners with money can bribe their way into being assigned easier work, former prisoners say. Early release can also be achieved through bribery, with a going rate of about 1,265,900 Uzbek Sums (about 5,900 Norwegian Kroner, 750 Euros or 1,000 US Dollars) for each year of a prisoner's sentence remitted. Former prisoners say the best time for the camp administration is ahead of a prisoner amnesty, when prisoners to be freed are chosen on the basis of how much they can pay.

Meanwhile, Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience Irfon Khamidov has lost his appeal against his sentence to two years in a labour camp, on a charge of "illegally teaching religion." He was convicted of this "crime" on 14 May by Samarkand City Criminal Court (see F18News 20 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=977).

The appeal was due to have been heard at the Criminal Court of Samarkand Region on 19 June. Forum 18 has learned that the court refused to allow into the courtroom an independent observer, who had travelled specially to Samarkand to observe the appeal. The appeal was then postponed without explanation to 21 June. Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that the court ruled that day to uphold Khamidov's two year labour camp sentence. They say Khamidov was present in court for the appeal.

Jehovah's Witnesses complain about what they say are irregularities in the legal process. They point out that two people the prosecution claims had been the "victims" of Khamidov's "illegal" teaching testified at his original trial that they had never met him. "Strangely, the appeal court refused to hear testimony of observers about the missing testimony of the two alleged victims of the crime. But the appeal court also ruled that trial judge Zokir Azimov violated the rights of another lawyer defending Khamidov at his trial, when Judge Azimov refused to accept the lawyer's complaint that the trial court record did not have the testimony of the alleged 'victims'," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "Even the prosecution told the appeal court, before its decision, that there was no reason not to reduce Khamidov's two-year sentence."

Khamidov's lawyers are considering a supervisory protest to Uzbekistan's Supreme Court.

Another Samarkand-based Jehovah's Witness, Dilafuz Arziyeva, was sentenced on 6 June on the same charge of "illegally teaching religion" to two years' correctional labour. During this correctional labour, she was sentenced to have 20 per cent of her income to be deducted and handed over to the state (see F18News 20 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=977).

This same appeal court in Samarkand is also due to hear Arziyeva's appeal. No date for this has yet been set.

As of today (27 June), Samarkand City Criminal Court – which refused to answer Forum 18's questions by telephone and insisted on written questions – had failed to respond to Forum 18's written enquiry of 20 June about the sentencing of Arziyeva and Khamidov.

Protestant Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses have been the minority religious communities that have faced most official pressure this year. Their congregations across Uzbekistan have been raided, while individual believers have been beaten, threatened, fined,

imprisoned, driven from their homes and deported (see eg. F18News 26 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=980).

Jail sentences have started to be imposed on members of religious minorities as well as on devout Muslims. The most severe known sentences imposed on members of religious minorities so far in 2007 have been: deportation for a Pentecostal Christian, Sayora (who preferred that her last name not be published) (see eg. F18News 26 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=980); four years in a labour camp for Pentecostal pastor Dmitry Shestakov (see F18News 12 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=973); two years in a labour camp for Jehovah's Witness Irfon Khamidov; two years corrective labour for Jehovah's Witness Dilafruz Arziyeva; and one year corrective labour, with a fine of 20 per cent of his salary, for Pentecostal Christian Salavat Serikbayev (see F18News 20 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=977 for all three of these last cases). (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.

Full reports of the religious freedom situation in Uzbekistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>.

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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