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UZBEKISTAN: Feeding homeless people is "not according to charter"

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

Protestants in Uzbekistan continue to be targeted, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Police raided a Protestant youth conference, claiming to check identity documents. Many of the about 70 young people were playing football and basketball, and 43 were taken to a police station where they were fingerprinted and photographed. Two leaders are under investigation for "violation of the procedure for holding mass events" and "violation of the law on religious organisations". Two days after that raid, police, tax inspectors and local officials raided Eternal Life Protestant Church in the capital Tashkent. At the time of the raid, church members were feeding homeless people. Officials complained this was "not according to their [registered] charter" and police detained several church members. Police admitted to Forum 18 that the NSS secret police had led the raid. Following an alleged "Anti-terror" raid on a birthday party, ten Pentecostals – eight of them pensioners - were fined 100 times the minimum monthly salary.

Two Protestant Christian churches in and near Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent were subjected to raids within two days of each other in mid-April, Protestants have told Forum 18 News Service. The first raid targeted a youth conference and the second – where the police were accompanied by television journalists – targeted a feeding programme for the homeless. In addition, an "anti-terror" raid in Tashkent targeted ten Protestant women gathering for a birthday party in a private home, eight of them pensioners. They were all given massive fines. No officials in Tashkent have been prepared to explain why peaceful religious believers should face such punishments.

Meanwhile, Protestants in Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] in north-western Uzbekistan have complained to Forum 18 of mounting raids, threats, fines, literature confiscations and court-ordered destruction of religious literature. State-imposed restrictions on all faiths are particularly tight in Karakalpakstan, and all non-Russian Orthodox and non-state-controlled Muslim activity is banned (see F18News 23 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1435).

The latest raids, fines, threats and literature confiscations come as Muslims and Christians have faced or face trials and jail terms, to punish them for peaceful religious activity (see F18News 26 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1436).

Akhmat Ismailov, Deputy Director of the government-sponsored National Human Rights Centre of Uzbekistan in Tashkent, put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 asked on 21 April why religious believers are being imprisoned, have their meetings raided and face fines. The phone was also put down on subsequent calls.

At the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent the same day, Forum 18 reached several people, but as soon as it introduced itself each time officials put the phone down.

Youth conference raided

In the afternoon of 10 April, eight police officers raided a Protestant church's youth conference, held in the village of Baraj in Bostanlyk District of Tashkent Region. Officers claimed to be checking individuals' identity documents, Protestants who asked not to be identified told Forum 18. The District's deputy police chief, Major Bahtiyor Azimov, led the raid.

When the police arrived, many of the approximately 70 young people were outside playing football and basketball. Police confiscated the conference programme, as well as computer files of seven hymns. A total of 43 attendees were taken by bus to Bostanlyk District police station, including the conference leader, Denis Shirkov, and his wife. All were fingerprinted and photographed before being freed at 11 pm.

Several of those detained, including Aleksandr Lokshev, had earlier been punished under the Code of Administrative Offences for their faith.

Police began investigating Shirkov and Lokshev under Administrative Code Article 200-1 ("violation of the procedure for holding

mass events") and Article 240 ("violation of the law on religious organisations").

Attendees at the conference filmed the police in what they complain was their "illegal" raid and interrogation. They have also lodged official complaints about the police action.

Forum 18 has been unable to find out why police raided the youth conference, and whether court cases will be pursued against Shirkov and Lokshev. Major Azimov's telephone at the police station went unanswered on 20 and 21 April.

Second Protestant raid in two days

In the afternoon of 12 April, two days after the raid on the youth conference, police, tax inspectors and local officials raided Eternal Life Protestant Church in Tashkent's Yakkasarai District, Protestants who asked not to be identified told Forum 18 from Tashkent. Also present were journalists from the First Channel of Uzbekistan Television. "There were many officials and they didn't identify themselves," one church member present told Forum 18.

Uzbek television frequently shows programmes attacking religious minorities. On 11 February for example, Baptists in Tashkent were accused of turning people into zombies and encouraging people to sell their homes and give the money to the Church. One church member described the programme to Forum 18 as containing "outrageous lies". State-disfavoured Muslims, Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Methodists and Baha'is have been attacked in earlier broadcasts (see F18News 22 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1411).

At the time of the raid on Eternal Life, church members were feeding homeless people. The authorities complained that church members were conducting activity "not according to their [registered] charter".

Officials started to check the documents of the church. After questioning those present, the police detained the pastor's assistant and several other church members. However, all were later freed after questioning.

"An investigation against the church is still underway, and we don't know if the case will end up in court," one Protestant told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 20 April.

Reached on 21 April, officers at Yakkasarai District Police – who declined to give their names - initially denied that any church had been raided, then insisted that the visit had been a check of identity documents. Asked why this had been done, and why church members had been interrogated about their activity, one officer insisted that the Yakkasarai District National Security Service (NSS) secret police had led the raid.

"Anti-Terror" raid and massive fines

In Tashkent's Sergeli District, ten members of a registered Pentecostal church were given heavy fines on 12 March, according to the verdict seen by Forum 18. Judge Sh. Tojiev of Sergeli District Court found the ten women guilty of violating Administrative Code Article 201 Part 1 ("violating the procedure for arranging and holding gatherings, meetings, street marches and demonstrations") and Article 202 ("creating the conditions for conducting unapproved meetings"). They were each fined 100 times the minimum monthly salary, or 3,768,000 Soms (14,384 Norwegian Kroner, 1,810 Euros or 2,436 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rates).

The verdict records that the trial followed a "Tozalash-Anti-Terror" raid on the home of Dilbar Akhmedieva on 10 March, where the ten women "by violating the procedure for organising the holding of a meeting created the conditions for and conducted an unapproved meeting". The women told the court that they are members of the same church and had gathered to celebrate the 10 March birthday of one of their number when the "Anti-Terror" raid began.

Protestants expressed outrage to Forum 18 over the raid, and that eight of those sentenced are pensioners, the oldest of whom – Valentina Yemelyanova - is aged 76. They point out the enormity of the fines for those trying to survive on small state pensions. The ten women appealed against the massive fines, but on 2 April, Judge A. Alimova at Tashkent City Criminal Court rejected their appeal, leaving the fines unchanged.

Appeals against heavy fines mostly fail

Meanwhile, 13 members of the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Almalyk [Olmalyq] in Tashkent Region, who appealed against heavy fines imposed on them in February for religious literature "offences", have mostly failed.

According to the verdict seen by Forum 18, Judge M. Bazarov of Almalyk Criminal Court rejected their appeal on 12 April. The only change he made to the punishments was to reduce by half the fines imposed on three of the Baptists - Tatyana Shopova, Olga Brislavskaya and Rita Struchaeva – because of their "family and social position and age". They are each now due to pay fines of 50 times the minimum monthly wage, 1,884,000 Soms (7,192 Norwegian Kroner, 905 Euros or 1,218 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rates).

Baptists insist all 13 have done nothing wrong, and say the prosecutions should be annulled.

The 13 were all originally each fined 100 times the minimum monthly wage, 3,768,000 Soms on 23 February after being found guilty of violating Article 240 part 2 ("attracting believers of one confession to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity") of the Administrative Code (see F18News 15 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1421).

Local Baptists complained to Forum 18 in early April of what they saw as "ever new persecutions of true Christians who want to submit themselves to Christ and live as the holy Gospel teaches". They noted that Sergei Brislavsky, the church's leader, has repeatedly been fined, including with the 12 other church members in February. Colonel A. Sirojiddinov, head of Almalyk Police, wrote to Brislavsky on 13 March warning: "If you repeat the above violations in future, I warn you that you will be brought to criminal responsibility under Article 244 part 3 of Uzbekistan's Criminal Code."

As Article 244 part 3 does not exist, it appears that Police Colonel Sirojiddinov means Article 244-3 ("illegal production, storage, import or distribution of religious literature"). (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all 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=1170.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Uzbekistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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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