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UZBEKISTAN: Baptist "mob" banned from worshipping

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Anti-terrorist police officer Alisher Kurbanov, who banned an unregistered Baptist church in Navoi from meeting for worship, has dismissed Baptist complaints about the move. "This is not a church at all, just a religious mob," he told Forum 18 News Service. "Under Uzbek laws a church is not allowed to operate without registration, but the Baptists refuse to register." The ban came after Kurbanov confiscated books from a mobile Baptist street library on 27 September and threatened library organiser Nikolai Nikulin with criminal prosecution. Nikulin has already served a ten-day prison sentence for his work with the church. The ban on the Navoi Baptist church is the latest move to forbid the activity of unregistered Protestant churches in Uzbekistan.

In the latest incident in a spate of moves against unregistered Protestant churches across Uzbekistan, police lieutenant Alisher Kurbanov banned members of an unregistered Baptist church in the town of Navoi in north-western Uzbekistan from meeting for worship, reported a 28 September statement from local Baptists received by Forum 18 News Service. The ban came after Kurbanov confiscated religious books being distributed by church member Nikolai Nikulin at a mobile street library in the town on 27 September. Kurbanov – an officer of the anti-terrorism department of the Internal Affairs administration – failed to draw up any record of the confiscation of the books, the Baptists complained. He also threatened to bring a criminal prosecution against Nikulin.

Kurbanov said the Baptists' account was "only partly" true. "This is not a church at all, just a religious mob," he told Forum 18 from Navoi on 3 October. "Under Uzbek laws a church is not allowed to operate without registration, but the Baptists refuse to register." The Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians/Baptists, to which the Navoi congregation belongs, believes that registration is unacceptable because it leads to unwarranted state interference in the life of the church.

Nikulin had been sentenced before to 10 days' imprisonment under the Code of Administrative Offences for "unlawful religious activity", Kurbanov added. "So because Nikulin has already received an administrative sentence, we can bring a criminal case against him under Article 216, part 2 of the Criminal Code (breaking the law on religious organisations)," Kurbanov told Forum 18.

When Forum 18 pointed out that Uzbekistan is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantees the right to meet freely for religious worship, and that according to Article 2 of the country's law on religion "if different rules are set out in an international agreement signed by the Republic of Uzbekistan from those contained in the Republic of Uzbekistan's law on freedom of conscience and religious organisations, then the rules of the international agreement will take precedence," Kurbanov responded that "this was a problem for the Internal Affairs Ministry, not for rank-and-file officers".

He said there were "appropriate articles" both in the Administrative Code and in the Criminal Code and it was on these that they based their actions. "You will agree that it would be simply ridiculous for police officials to start checking whether articles of the criminal and administrative codes contradicted international agreements to which Uzbekistan is a signatory," Kurbanov told Forum 18.

He also denied that he had confiscated the books from Nikulin. "He says he was giving them away for free, so I simply took them away to read them," Kurbanov claimed. "I'm very interested in these books."

Congregations of the Council of Churches (or unregistered Baptists) split from the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians/Baptists in 1961, when further state-sponsored controls were introduced by the then Baptist leadership. It has refused state registration ever since. According to one of its pastors in Moscow, it has 3,705 congregations throughout the former Soviet Union.

Uzbekistan has recently seen a spate of attempts to close down unregistered Protestant churches, including one in the village of Ahmad Yassavy on the outskirts of Tashkent (see F18News 2 October 2003) and another in Nukus in Karakalpakstan (see F18News 3 October 2003). In his latest report the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Abdelfattah Amor, condemned the growing use of laws in Central Asia making registration compulsory to restrict the right of believers to meet freely for worship.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news@editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY