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UZBEKISTAN: "It's our secret"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

In Uzbekistan, police in the central Syrdarya Region have raided and are preparing to prosecute members of an unregistered Baptist Church, Forum 18 News Service has learned. They also confiscated religious literature for "expert analysis", even though it had been bought from the registered Bible Society. Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church has spoken of the difficulties his church faces in Uzbekistan, noting in particular a ban on missionary activity and opening Orthodox schools, and inability to get state permission for new parishes. The state Religious Affairs Committee refused to discuss this with Forum 18. Elsewhere, two short-term Baptist prisoners of conscience have been released. Judge Bobojonov as he initially introduced himself, of the court which convicted the Baptists, changed his mind about what his name was after Forum 18 asked him why the Baptists were jailed. Police Major Asliddin Mirzayev - who stopped the two Baptists - refused to explain why he did this. "It's our secret", he retorted to Forum 18.

Uzbekistan continues to punish religious activity without state permission, as well as restrict the freedom of religion or belief of those in permitted registered organisations, Forum 18 News Service notes. In the central Syrdarya Region, police have raided and are preparing to prosecute members of an unregistered Baptist Church, and Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church has spoken of the difficulties his church faces in Uzbekistan. Elsewhere, a Protestant has been taken off a flight leaving the country for not having an Exit Visa, and two short-term Protestant prisoners of conscience have been released.

Baptists raided

Police in Syrdarya, after raiding a meeting of local unregistered Baptists, are now preparing to prosecute church pastor Andrey Shevchenko and other church members, local Baptists who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 8 February. They are being prosecuted under the Code of Administrative Offences' articles 240 ("Violation of the law on religious organisations") and 184-2 ("Illegal storage, production, import, or distribution of religious materials").

Bakhrom Nurmatov of Syrdarya Police's Criminal Investigation Department, along with eleven other police officers, on 6 January broke into Shevchenko's flat. Around 25 people, mostly Baptists, were present that evening to celebrate the baptism of Christ, a local Baptist told Forum 18.

Police made some of the Baptists write statements, and confiscated 192 Christian books, and 10 DVD and CD discs. Among the confiscated books were five Bibles, 90 copies of the Gospel of St. John, eight Christian song books, and five copies of the New Testaments in Uzbek.

Pastor Shevchenko showed police an official invoice that the confiscated material was bought from the officially registered Bible Society of Uzbekistan. However, police told him that the literature will be sent to the State Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent, for "expert analysis". Such alleged "expert analyses" are routinely used as an excuse to confiscate any book the authorities decide to confiscate (see eg. F18News 20 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1298). A very strict censorship regime is applied against religious literature and other material of all faiths (see F18News 1 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1153).

Police officer Nurmatov refused to comment on the raid. "I will only talk to you about the case if you come to our office," he told Forum 18 on 8 February. Nurmatov refused to state on what authority or basis he and his colleagues broke into a private flat.

Orthodox face bans and problems gaining permission for parishes

Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church – which has state permission to exist in Uzbekistan - has spoken of problems it faces in Uzbekistan. Addressing the Bishop's Council in the Russian capital Moscow on 2 February, Kirill thanked Uzbekistan's authorities but also stated that "there is a ban on missionary activity, it is impossible to organize Orthodox secondary schools, and there are difficulties with registering new parishes" (see the Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1170). The Patriarch said that he hoped to "resolve these issues through constructive dialogue" with the authorities.

Dimitri Khabarov of the Russian Orthodox Church's Alexandr Nevski Parish in Tashkent told Forum 18 on 9 February that "I think we have two parishes which we have not been able to register, but I am not sure". He referred Forum 18 to the Tashkent Diocese, but no-one was available to discuss the situation on 9 February.

Officials of the state Religious Affairs Committee refused to discuss the matter on 9 February. An official who answered Committee Chair Artyk Yusupov's telephone, who did not give his name, said that Yusupov was not available to talk. He referred Forum 18 to their specialist Begzod Kodyrov. However, neither Kodyrov's nor other telephones at the Committee were then answered.

Two short-term prisoners of conscience released

Two Baptists, Eduard Kim and Artur Alpayev, who on 31 January were given seven days in jail, were released on 6 February, Baptists told Forum 18 on 8 February. Kim and Alpayev were "treated normally" while in detention, the Baptists said. "We are not sure if we will make an appeal against the convictions," one Baptist, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 (see F18News 3 February 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1535).

During their initial detention in Denau [Dinau], 120 km [75 miles] from their homes in Fergana [Farghona], Alpayev and Kim "had to sleep on tables overnight" before their trial.

"Seven or eight Christian books and three or four CDs" were confiscated, Baptists complained. All material in Uzbek was confiscated, but Bibles in Russian were returned. The Baptists "only gave one Christian book in Russian to a Russian lady in the Denau city bazaar", their fellow believers told Forum 18. "She was helpful to them giving them directions to the place they wanted to go, and so that's how they thanked her in return." Later, police stopped the two and searched their car, finding the Christian literature.

"It's our secret"

Major Asliddin Mirzayev of the Surkhandarya Regional Criminal Police, who stopped the two Baptists in Denau, protested when asked by Forum 18 what was wrong with presenting a Christian book as a gift. "It was not only one book", he claimed on 8 February. Asked why he stopped the Baptists, he retorted: "It's our secret". He then refused to talk further to Forum 18.

The National Security Service (NSS) secret police tries to maintain a close and intensive surveillance over religious believers of all faiths. Religious believers have identified the NSS Department to Fight Terrorism as the main branch controlling religious activity within the secret police. The NSS has refused to tell Forum 18 why it spies on religious communities (see F18News 5 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1014).

Lieutenant-Colonel Nuriddin Tukhtashev, Chief of Denau Police, said on 8 February that the Baptists were stopped for distributing literature "without having documents allowing them to do so". Asked why the Baptists were kept for many hours in a police station and had to sleep on tables, Lt-Col. Tukhtashev laughed and said, "Believe me, nothing like that happened. We questioned them, and immediately sent to the court." He did not comment when told that the Baptists were detained on 30 January, and were taken to court next day on 31 January.

Judge Bobojonov of Denau city Court, as he initially identified himself on 8 February, wrote down Forum 18's name but then refused to comment on the case. Changing his mind about what his name was, he claimed that "actually I am not Judge Bobojonov, but the Court's Secretary". His change of mind about what his name was happened after Forum 18 asked him why such heavy punishments were given to Alpayev and Kim. Asked if Forum 18 could talk to Bobojonov, the newly unnamed official said that Bobojonov was not available to talk.

Exit Visa regime still operating

Border guards at Tashkent International Airport stopped Murot Turdiyev, a Protestant from Tashkent, on 5 February at 4 am after he checked in for a Turkish Airlines flight from Tashkent to Istanbul, local Protestants told Forum 18 on 9 February. Turdiyev was then handed over to the Transport Police, where Captain Sultonmurod Baykobulov opened an administrative case under the Administrative Code's Article 224-1 ("Violation of regime at checkpoints at the state borders") against Turdiyev.

"A Border Guard stopped me because I did not have an Exit Visa in my Passport", Turdiyev explained to Forum 18 on 9 February. He said that he was questioned at a police station and questioned. "I was kept for six hours at the police station, and later was told that I should expect a call from the authorities to appear before a court on 14 February".

Uzbekistan is the only former Soviet state to have a formal Exit Visa requirement, Turkmenistan having on paper abolished its Exit Visa – but maintaining an exit ban list to achieve the same goal – in 2004. Human rights defenders, active religious believers, and others the authorities dislike have long been targets of Uzbekistan's Exit Visa regime (see F18News 6 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1264)

Turdiyev noted that he had previously had a standard two-year Exit Visa, which expired in January. He then asked the Tashkent Regional Visas Department on 7 January to extend his Exit Visa. The Department was "supposed within 15 days" to extend the Visa. "However, the Department took a long time with no explanation, although I called several times about it", he stated. "But yesterday, after I got into this problem the Visa Department called me saying that I could collect my Exit Visa".

Asked why he tried to leave Uzbekistan without an Exit Visa, Turdiyev said that he had heard recently that Turkey did not require an Entry Visa for Uzbek citizens, "so I thought maybe no Exit Visa was needed". Turkey does not require Uzbek citizens to have a Visa, so long as their stay in the country does not exceed 30 days.

Several members of Turdiyev's family have been punished for exercising their freedom of religion or belief, his niece Madina Turdiyeva, for example being fined in February 2010 (see F18News 15 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1421).

Tashkent Airport's border guards on 9 February declined to make any comments on the case, saying that it was being dealt with by the Transport Police. The Transport Police also declined to make any comment. (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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