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UZBEKISTAN: Baptist women are latest secret police victims

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

A group of police officers and officers of the secret police, the National Security Service, raided an apartment on 28 February in the town of Khojali. A Baptist who asked not to be named told Forum 18 News Service that ten Baptist women of the local ethnicities, Kazakh and Karakalpak, had gathered in the apartment for a Christian meeting. They were insulted and held for 27 hours, although a local police officer denied this to Forum 18. "Nobody insulted them and there were no violations of the law by the police," he declared. This is the latest in a series of raids on Protestant Christians in Uzbekistan's western autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan.

In the latest of a series of raids on Protestant Christians in Uzbekistan's western autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan, a group of police officers and officers of the secret police, the National Security Service, entered an apartment on 28 February in the town of Khojali, a suburb of the Karakalpak capital of Nukus. A Baptist who asked not to be named told Forum 18 News Service that ten Baptist women of the local ethnicities, Kazakh and Karakalpak, had gathered in the apartment for a Christian meeting. They were held for a total of 27 hours before being freed.

The women were taken to the Khojali police station where they were insulted for being Christians. Illogically, the police also called the Baptist women "Wahhabis", a label widely applied in Central Asia to Islamic fundamentalists. The women were held at the police station for ten hours (although under Uzbek law the police may not hold anyone for more than three hours without pressing charges). Also the women were illegally held in a cell with male prisoners. After ten hours the women were sent to a special reception centre - an investigation prison where vagrants and the homeless are held while their identities are established - and were held there all night.

A senior local police officer denied that there had been anything improper in the way the Baptists had been treated. "The women were detained for identification, since none of them had any documents," the deputy police chief in Khojali, Janabai Ametov, told Forum 18 from Nukus on 24 March. "They were held for not more than ten minutes at the police station and then they were sent to the investigation prison. Nobody insulted them and there were no violations of the law by the police."

Karakalpakstan is a region of Uzbekistan where the rights of religious minorities are violated particularly frequently. Only one Christian church - the Emmanuel Full Gospel Church - has been able to gain registration in the autonomous republic. Christians of local ethnicities - Karakalpaks and Kazakhs (historically both Islamic peoples) - are the primary target of government harassment.

In one incident earlier this month in the town of Muinak in northern Karakalpakstan, the police burst into a private house for a second time where two ethnic Kazakh Protestants were talking. In a separate raid last December, the two men were taken to the police station where they were tortured (the police put gas masks on them and closed off the air supply) in an attempt to force them to sign a statement that they had been preaching to each other. Several days later the two men were sentenced to five days' imprisonment (see F18News 17 March 2003).

A recent interview about religious minorities in the Russian-language newspaper Vesti Karakalpakstana (News of Karakalpakstan) with a leading specialist from the hakimiat (administration) of Nukus city, Raftdin Turdymyranov, is indicative of official attitudes (see F18News 12 March 2003). The title of the interview is telling: "Unlawful activity continues. If we sell our faith, then what sort of people are we?" It is noteworthy that Turdymyranov calls the Protestant churches, along with the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Baha'i community, "sects" (in Russian this word has very negative connotations). The tone of Turdymyranov's discussion with the journalist, Khojamuratova, demonstrates that both consider religious minorities an evil that threatens the population of Karakalpakstan.

Accusing Protestants of "Wahhabism" is also typical for Karakalpakstan. In 1999 drugs were planted on three Protestants of local ethnicity, who were then sentenced to ten years' imprisonment. They were freed under international pressure after six months, though only after signing a petition for a pardon. During their trial Karakalpak television broadcast a report about them in which they were called "Wahhabis".

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