

13 April 2004

UZBEKISTAN: Crackdown on all faiths follows terrorist bombings

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

After March and April's terrorist bombings that left nearly 50 people dead – blamed by the government on Islamic extremists and linked by some without evidence to Al-Qa'ida - a crackdown on religious believers of all faiths is taking place, Forum 18 News Service has observed. The crackdown's targets include Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Protestants and Hare Krishna devotees. A Jehovah's Witness has told Forum 18 that he was interrogated in a police station, told he was a potential terrorist, and threatened by police that "If you do not renounce your ridiculous beliefs, then I will simply plant drugs on you and put you away for a long time!" Most of those summoned for interrogation are devout Muslims and amongst those detained is a leading imam, Rustam Kilichev, who has tried to persuade imprisoned Muslims to renounce the views of the banned Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir. The NSS secret police have refused to say why he is being held. Police are engineering arrests of religious believers by planting leaflets by Hizb ut-Tahrir, drugs, and weapons on people. Also, police are searching believers' private homes, enquiring about their religious views, confiscating religious literature, and in one case detained 25 Muslim women for 24 hours because they were wearing headscarves.

In the wake of the series of violent attacks in late March and early April - including explosions reportedly set off by several female suicide bombers in the capital Tashkent - that claimed the lives of nearly 50 people, the situation for religious believers of all faiths has deteriorated sharply. During enquiries in various parts of Uzbekistan, Forum 18 News Service has found that all believers who have previously had a criminal or administrative conviction have been called in to the police station, where they have been subjected to warning interviews and have had their photographs and fingerprints taken.

Of all the Central Asian states, the Uzbek government has taken the harshest line towards Muslim believers (according to human rights organisations, there are around 7,000 Muslim prisoners today), and so it is Muslims who are initially being summoned to the police. However, members of religious minorities have not escaped the warning interviews. Uzbek law makes unregistered religious activity illegal, while the activity of an unregistered religious community is subject to administrative or even criminal prosecution. Given that it is very difficult in practice for representatives of religious minorities to register a religious community, many have been prosecuted at least under administrative law.

One Protestant in Tashkent told Forum 18 on 13 April that several Protestants, mainly ethnic Uzbeks or Karakalpaks, have been among those summoned by the police, including in Tashkent and in Nukus, the capital of the Karakalpakstan [Qorakalpoghiston] autonomous republic. A Tashkent-based Hare Krishna leader told Forum 18 the same day that none of their followers are known to have been summoned, but the authorities have warned the community since the bombings not to preach their faith and not to distribute their literature.

The majority of religious believers agreed to talk to Forum 18 about the crackdown only on condition of anonymity. In Forum 18's experience, the case of Jehovah's Witness Erkin Khabibov, who has agreed that his name can be given, is a typical example of the warning interviews that police are conducting with believers of all faiths.

Khabibov recounted that on 29 February several police officers came to his home in the central city of Bukhara [Bukhoro] and ordered him and his wife to go with them to the police station. Because they have a two-month-old child, he managed to persuade the police that he should go with them on his own. "At the police station there were lots of other believers who were in the same situation as myself," he told Forum 18 on 9 April, adding that most were "Wahhabis", a term commonly used in Central Asia to denote Islamic fundamentalists. "I could identify the so-called Wahhabis by their beards. We were all given a number (my number was 2), and were photographed holding the number in our hands."

He said he was then called for an interview with the head of the city police criminal investigation department, Fakrullo Khamrayev. "He spoke to me almost exclusively in abusive terms," Khabibov told Forum 18. "Khamrayev said that he despised my faith and that he believed I was a potential terrorist. 'If you do not renounce your ridiculous beliefs, then I will simply plant drugs on you and put you away for a long time!' he told me. Nevertheless I was released an hour later." He said police officers have since come to his house several times and threatened him and his wife.

News is also emerging that the authorities have begun mass arrests of people who have previously been convicted for participation

in radical Islamic organisations, though so far it is impossible to assess accurately the scale of this campaign. However, according to the latest report from Human Rights Watch, the repression is widespread and approximates in scale to the mass arrests that followed a series of bombs in Tashkent in 1999.

"So far, of course, it is hard to calculate the number of arrests, but information about such arrests is reaching us from virtually every region of the country," the head of the Human Rights Organisation in Uzbekistan, Talib Yakubov, told Forum 18. According to a report on 10 April from the regional department of the Society for Human Rights in the southern region of Kashkadarya, the mass arrests of Muslims began there on 4 April.

The arrests are engineered by planting on individuals leaflets of the banned Islamic movement Hizb ut-Tahrir, drugs and weapons. Among those arrested is the imam of the central Navo mosque in the southern town of Karshi [Qarshi], Rustam Kilichev, one of the best-known imams not just in Karshi, but throughout Kashkadarya region. He has visited prisons several times calling on prisoners to renounce Hizb ut-Tahrir's ideas. The regional National Security Service (NSS) secret police is in charge of Kilichev's case, but officials there refuse to say precisely why he has been arrested.

Forum 18 has established that after the terrorist attacks, police arrested 12 former members of Hizb ut-Tahrir who had earlier been released under an amnesty in the town of Margilan, a satellite town near the regional centre of Fergana [Farghona], in Uzbekistan's section of the Fergana valley in the west of the country. Those arrested are Shukhrat Solikhidinov, Ikrom Akhmajanov, Akhmajon Madukarov, Bakhodir Usmanov, Khairullo Obidov, Islambek Sabekov, Rustam Yusupov, Rasul Akhmadiyev, Alijan Ishankhojayev, Abdukhomid Azamov, Negmatullo Rakhmonov and Makhmajon Akbarov.

"Leaflets and weapons were planted on our husbands," the wife of one of those arrested, Mukudas Yusupova, told Forum 18 on 11 April in Namangan, which is in the eastern part of the Fergana Valley. "Now they are on hunger strike in jail in protest against their unlawful arrest. The wives and mothers of those arrested are also going on hunger strike shortly." She added that on 5 April around 10 mothers of those arrested blockaded one of Fergana's central streets, but the protest was dispersed by the police within ten minutes.

In fact, not only believers but all those resident in Uzbekistan have faced warning interviews with the police. Local police have carried out checks on apartments in all parts of the country. The manner of these checks has taken various forms. For example, the head of the regional department of the Independent Human Rights Organisation in Uzbekistan, Gulyam Khalmatov, told Forum 18 on 8 April from Namangan that police in the town have handed out a questionnaire to residents asking about their attitude to religion.

Speaking on 9 April from Almalıyk [Olmalıq], a town 70 kilometres (45 miles) south east of Tashkent, the head of a committee for aid to prisoners Polina Brauner told Forum 18 that during raids on private homes, police and NSS secret police officers asked residents about their attitude towards the terrorist attacks. Representatives of these agencies have also been looking at what sort of literature is in private homes. During one such "cursory search" the police found and confiscated Jehovah's Witness literature.

Brauner also reported that in Pskent, a town near Almalıyk, the police arrested and detained for more than 24 hours 25 women because they were wearing the hijab (a headscarf traditionally worn by Muslim women).

Forum 18 has not established any other cases where women have been arrested because of their religious clothing. However, Muslim women in Tashkent told Forum 18 that since the terrorist attacks the mahalla committees (low-level territorial administrative organisations) have advised them not to appear in public wearing the hijab. The women added that now they are afraid to appear in public wearing hijabs because they are afraid the police will suspect them of being female shahids (martyrs).

Many Muslims are also concerned that at the entrances to the city's underground system the police now often search women who look suspicious to them, although Islamic law categorically forbids men to touch women they are not related to.

For more background information see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105

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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