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UZBEKISTAN: Students to be expelled for belonging to "banned Protestant sect"?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Following similar threats in April and May to other Protestant students in Nukus, the capital of Karakalpakstan in north-western Uzbekistan, three students of Karakalpak University were threatened with expulsion in June. The dean of their faculty, Dina Mamyrbayeva, said the secret police had written to her identifying them as members of a "banned Protestant sect". She warned the three that if they do not stop meeting their fellow Protestants they will be expelled. University rector Kuanyshbai Niyazov refused to confirm or deny the threats, though he told Forum 18 News Service that no students have yet been expelled. On 5 June police and secret police raided the home of another Nukus Protestant, Miyrasa Uralbayeva, warning that if she did not stop preaching Christianity she would have drugs planted on her and be put in prison for years.

Protestant students continue to face pressure in the town of Nukus, the capital of the autonomous region of Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] in north-western Uzbekistan, Protestant sources who preferred not to be identified have told Forum 18 News Service. In June the dean of the Romance and Germanic literature faculty at Karakalpak University, Dina Mamyrbayeva, summoned three Protestant students and told them she had received a letter from the secret police, the National Security Service (NSS), identifying them as members of a "banned Protestant sect". Mamyrbayeva told the students to call their parents to see her and threatened the students with expulsion if they do not stop visiting "sect members".

Kuanyshbai Niyazov, the rector of Karakalpak University, refused to confirm or deny that the Protestants had been summoned and threatened with expulsion. "Both I and Mamyrbayeva have the right to call any student in to see us," he told Forum 18 from Nukus on 7 July. "When they are excluded, then you can complain about the persecution of Christians - it's all the same to me. But so far we have not excluded anyone. When will the West finally stop meddling in the affairs of independent Uzbekistan?" Niyazov complained, before hanging up.

Forum 18's attempts to find out why the Karakalpakstan NSS had written to the university about the students were fruitless. Reached by telephone in Nukus, the NSS duty officer, who refused to identify himself, said "no-one intends to make any comment to journalists" and hung up.

Protestant students in Nukus have faced repeated pressure from the authorities this year. However, earlier pressure from university leaders came on the advice not of the NSS but of the police.

In early April city prosecutor M. Arzymbetov wrote to the rector of the local Medical University, Oral Atamniyazova, to inform her that final year student Iklas Aldungarov was taking part in "an illegal religious sect", the Church of Christ, and telling her that the prosecutor's office had already sent documents to the court for it to take action under the code of administrative offences. The prosecutor asked for Aldungarov to be removed from the university (see F18News 21 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=303).

At the end of April a teacher at the same institution, Alima Urazova, organised a search of a private apartment rented by Protestant students Shirin Artykbayeva, Maksuda Bekniyazova, Zukhra Muriyeva and Aliya Sherimbetova. Urazova seized religious literature belonging to the students and made them leave the apartment and move into communal lodgings. She warned the students that they would be monitored in the communal lodgings to ensure that they did not read Protestant literature. Urazova also told the students that "it would be better for you to work as prostitutes than to read those dreadful books" (see F18News 27 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=329).

So far significant pressure on Protestant students in Uzbekistan has been seen only in Karakalpakstan, a region where it is almost impossible for Christian churches of any denomination to gain official registration and therefore to meet legally for worship.

The Karakalpak authorities continue to pressure not only Protestant students, but also simple believers. Protestant sources told Forum 18 that at one o'clock in the morning on 5 June, four police officers led by an NSS officer raided the apartment in Nukus of Miyrasa Uralbayeva while she was being visited by 10 fellow Protestants. The officers immediately told the believers that they

intended to put a stop to this "Christians' den of corruption". They then began a search in the absence of official witnesses and also crudely insulted the believers. They warned Uralbayeva that if she did not stop preaching Christianity, she would have drugs planted on her and be put in prison for years.

For more background, 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>

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY