

23 August 2004

UZBEKISTAN: Police break state and international law

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Police have raided a Jehovah's Witness meeting in Samarkand [Samarqand], without any legal documentation, closely questioning participants in the meeting under great psychological pressure, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The police told participants that they would be fined under Article 241 "breaking the law on giving religious instruction" of Uzbekistan's administrative code, and the internal affairs administration told Forum 18 that "we were acting within the law". Both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Uzbekistan has freely signed, and Uzbekistan's own religion law contradict this claim.

Without showing any legal documentation, about 10 police officers and representatives of the regional administration burst into a private apartment in western Uzbekistan, owned by Samarkand [Samarqand] resident Lora Chen, in which Jehovah's Witnesses were holding a meeting on 15 August, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Police then immediately filmed those present on a video recorder, and began to question each person individually. Police questioned those present closely for seven hours in the flat about why they were meeting, and which of them was a Jehovah's Witness. Those who refused to write statements were put under great psychological pressure, driving some of the women to tears, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 19 August.

The police told their prisoners that they would shortly be fined under Article 241 "breaking the law on giving religious instruction" of Uzbekistan's administrative code, and took three people, Zieddullo Chakanov, Akmal Ermatov and Irfon Khamidov, to the internal affairs administration for Samarkand region for questioning for a further three hours.

Lieutenant Sherzod Shamsiyev, of the internal affairs administration for Samarkand region, who took part in the raid, claimed to Forum 18 on 19 August that "we were acting within the law. The Jehovah's Witness organisation is not registered in Samarkand region, and so it has no right to hold religious meetings."

Under Uzbekistan's religion law, a religious community may only become active once it has been registered with the legal agencies. However, this provision of Uzbekistan's religion law contradicts the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Uzbekistan is a signatory. Also according to Uzbekistan's religion law, if an international agreement signed by Uzbekistan introduces rules other than those contained in the religion law, then the rules of the international agreement take precedence.

Of all the religious minorities, Jehovah's Witnesses are the most frequently persecuted by the authorities (eg. see F18News 8 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=358). According to order No. 17/3-165, which was drawn up by the Uzbek internal affairs ministry, for official use in the "war against terrorism", the Jehovah's Witnesses are the only religious minority singled out as a "radical extremist organisation". In a list of "illegal extremist religious organisations active on Uzbek territory", apart from the Jehovah's Witnesses, a wide range of organisations are listed, for example Hizb-ut-Tahrir, Tablikh and Tavda and other Islamic groups, as well as Satanists.

"We have tried to register the Jehovah's Witness community several times in Samarkand region and in other regions of Uzbekistan. But the authorities constantly refuse us registration on various pretexts. For example, we have made seven unsuccessful attempts to register our community in the city of Tashkent," Andrei Shirobokov, the press officer for Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan, told Forum 18 in Tashkent on 19 August. However, in spite of the fact that the Jehovah's Witnesses are included in the list of extremist organisations, they have religious communities registered at the justice administrations of two Uzbek towns – Chirchik [Chirchiq], a satellite town of Tashkent, north-east of the capital, and Fergana [Farghona] in eastern Uzbekistan.

For more background information see Forum 18's Uzbekistan 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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