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UZBEKISTAN: Prisoner's wife freed – but why was she jailed?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Halima Boltobayeva, a Muslim prisoner's wife, has been freed after two months in jail and given a one year suspended sentence, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Local human rights activists have told Forum 18 that she was framed by prison staff, after she refused to accept their claims that she dressed like a "shahidka", a term widely used for a female Muslim terrorist. As a devout Muslim, she wears the hijab headscarf and a long garment that covers her entire body. The Prosecutor had demanded that she be given a three year jail sentence, which demand Judge Zainuddin Begmatov did not accept. He told Forum 18 that he had "imposed an extremely light sentence" and couldn't understand why human rights activists were not happy with the situation. But local human rights activist Ahmajon Madmarov commented to Forum 18 that "an innocent person was not vindicated and spent almost two months in prison. So the authorities have once more demonstrated that they can punish believers at their discretion."

On 11 February Halima Boltobayeva, from Margelan in the Uzbek part of the Fergana [Farghona] valley, was given a one year suspended prison sentence the Navoi [Nawoiy] city court in central Uzbekistan. She had already spent two months in jail before the trial, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Judge Zainuddin Begmatov, who presided at all three sessions of the trial, imposed this sentence for Boltobayeva's alleged breaching of both came under article 25 of the Criminal Code (preparation for a crime or attempt to commit a crime) and article 159 (undermining the constitutional order). The Prosecutor had called for Boltobayeva to be sentenced to three years in jail under article 25.

Boltobayeva, a Muslim whose husband is in jail, insists that she is innocent of any offence and that the real reason for her trial was that she annoyed prison staff when visiting her husband. She states that she was told by prison staff that she dressed like a female Muslim terrorist, as she wears the hijab headscarf and a long garment that covers her entire body. She retorted that she would dress as she believed was fitting which, according to a local human rights activist, led to prison staff arresting her to, as they put it, show "who is boss here." As a reason for their actions, prison staff claimed to have found leaflets on her from the banned Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir. Boltova has insisted that these leaflets were planted (see F18News 21 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=495). An outline of Hizb ut-Tahir's aims is given at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170 .

In a telephone interview with Forum 18 on 15 February, Judge Begmatov stated that he had "imposed an extremely light sentence" and couldn't understand why human rights activists were not happy with the situation. Previously, the judge has refused to comment on the case to Forum 18.

However, local human rights activist Ahmajon Madmarov, who was present throughout the trial, thought that there was reason to be concerned by the case. "Of course, it is good that Boltobayeva was not sent to prison. However, an innocent person was not vindicated and spent almost two months in prison. So the authorities have once more demonstrated that they can punish believers at their discretion," Madmarov told Forum 18 in Margelan.

No investigation is under way into the actions of the prison staff. (END)

For 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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