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UZBEKISTAN: Imprisoned pastor transferred to harsher camp

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

After twice being punished in the isolation cell in his open work camp near Tashkent, imprisoned Pentecostal pastor Dmitry Shestakov is being transferred to a harsher labour camp to serve the rest of his punishment, Protestant sources have told Forum 18 News Service. "Cunning by nature, he does not keep his promises," the 25 May court verdict alleged. "He does not repent for the crime he has committed." Shestakov, who leads a church in Andijan in the Fergana Valley, is to be transferred to a labour camp in Navoi, further from his wife and their three children. One Protestant told Forum 18 the harsher punishment against Shestakov was "deliberately set up". Officials at the government's Religious Affairs Committee declined to discuss his case with Forum 18. Two members of Shestakov's congregation have already been fined, with others facing administrative cases.

Pentecostal pastor Dmitry Shestakov, given a four-year sentence in an open work camp on 9 March to punish him for his religious activity, has been transferred to serve the rest of his sentence in a closed labour camp. "The authorities claim he misbehaved in the open work camp and that's why they ordered his transfer to a harsher camp," one Protestant who preferred not to be identified for fear of reprisals told Forum 18 News Service on 12 June. "We believe this was deliberately set up."

Shestakov's transfer to a harsher labour camp comes as further administrative trials are being prepared against members of his embattled congregation in his home town of Andijan [Andijon] in the Fergana Valley in eastern Uzbekistan. Moves against other Protestant churches continue elsewhere in Uzbekistan (see F18News 19 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=976).

Reached by Forum 18 on 12 June, an official of the government's Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent, who would not give his name, declined to discuss Shestakov's increased punishment – or wider recent moves against Protestants. He said that the committee chairman, Artyk Yusupov, was away on a work trip and put the phone down.

Judge B. Ergashev handed down the harsher punishment on Shestakov at a new trial on 25 May at Pskent district criminal court near Tashkent, as the verdict, of which Forum 18 has seen the text, reveals.

Protestant sources told Forum 18 that in the wake of the verdict, Shestakov was due for transfer to the closed ordinary regime labour camp UYA 64/29, known as the "red zone", in the central Uzbek town of Navoi [Nawoiy]. A "red zone" is normally where former law enforcement personnel are imprisoned. "His relatives have not been informed about this, they still don't know which prison he is being held in," one Protestant told Forum 18 on 12 June from Tashkent. Forum 18 has been unable to find out if Shestakov has already been transferred from the open work camp in Pskent to Navoi.

Imprisonment in Navoi takes Shestakov even further away from his wife Marina and their three children in Andijan.

The 38-year-old Shestakov, also known as David, has led a Full Gospel congregation in part of the family home in Andijan since 2003. He was arrested by the National Security Service (NSS) secret police during his church's Sunday service on 21 January. The trial revealed the extent of state surveillance of his church and the collaboration of numerous state agencies in ensuring his conviction.

On 16 March Shestakov lodged an appeal against his conviction, but is said to have renounced his right to an appeal shortly afterwards. Forum 18 has been unable to determine if he did so voluntarily (see F18News 3 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=950).

Shestakov was held at Andijan's main prison before being sent to an open labour camp at Pskent, 60 kilometres (35 miles) south of Tashkent, arriving on 7 May. The verdict at his 25 May trial reveals his repeated punishment in the Pskent camp. The day after he arrived he was given a five-day term in the camp isolation cell for "violation of the internal regulations". On 14 May, the day after he was freed, he was given ten days in the isolation cells on the same accusation.

The verdict said Shestakov had taken part in educational events at the camp "but failed to draw the conclusions for himself". It said he also failed to take part in his brigade's social activities. "Cunning by nature, he does not keep his promises," the verdict alleged.

"He does not repent for the crime he has committed."

Shestakov is unable to appeal against this verdict. Only the prosecutor is allowed to challenge it.

Meanwhile, Protestant sources told Forum 18 that two members of Shestakov's congregation have already been fined under the Code of Administrative Offences, while others face continuing investigation. On 16 May Judge T. Melibayev at Andijan Criminal Court found Igor Von and Sherzodbek Ismailov guilty of violating Article 197 of the Administrative Code, which punishes "obstruction of the legal activity of a prosecutor and failure to fulfil his orders". They were each fined 24,840 Sums (120 Norwegian Kroner, 15 Euros or 20 US Dollars).

M. Mamadaliev, a senior aide to the Andijan City Prosecutor, began summoning church members for questioning on 5 April. At least 14 have since been summoned, though many refused to attend, regarding the summonses as illegal. Mamadaliev and officers of the National Security Service (NSS) secret police have visited the registered Jesus Christ Full Gospel church, a congregation associated with Shestakov's, to put pressure on the pastor (see F18News 3 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=950).

The Andijan authorities' determination to crush what it regards as Pentecostal missionary activity in the region is clear from a leaked document from the Andijan regional Hokimat (administration) seen by Forum 18 (see F18News 21 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=959).

One local Protestant, who asked not to be identified, attributed Shestakov's harsh punishment to the strong influence of Islam in the Fergana Valley, including on state officials. "Such people regard anyone who converts from a Muslim background as a traitor," the Protestant told Forum 18 on 12 June. "They are trying to stop Christian preaching through intimidation and, if that doesn't work, driving out those who continue to try to preach."

The Protestant complained of state-inspired hostility to religious minorities – including Protestants – in the state-run media (see F18News 19 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=890). "The government is stirring up this inter-religious hostility through television and the press. It is creating the same atmosphere as in Turkey, which led to the murder of three Christians [in Malatya in April]. I fear the same thing could happen here." (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all faiths as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338.

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=777.

Full reports of the religious freedom situation in Uzbekistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

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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