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Heavy sentences at further mass trial of Muslims

Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (21.12.2010) / HRWF (22.12.2010) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - More than two and half months after the trial began, Andijan [Andijon] Regional Criminal Court in eastern Uzbekistan handed down prison sentences of between three and nine years on 26 November to 19 members of Shohidiya, an Islamic religious movement, Saidjakhon Zainabitdinov, a human rights defender from Andijan, told Forum 18 News Service. The Court also gave suspended prison sentences of two to six years to six other members of the movement. He said the Court did not allow human rights defenders to observe the trial. Court and Prosecutor's Office officials refused to discuss the cases with Forum 18.

Among the imprisoned are Nasibullo Karimov, the leader of the movement who received a nine-year sentence, Nadyrzhon Turojonov, an Associate Professor of the local Agriculture Scientific Institute, Abdumannop Mamajanov, Azizbek Sodykov, Ahmadullo Tillabayev, Madamin Kholmirezoyev and Karim Yusupov.

Zainabitdinov told Forum 18 that the Court tried the 25 Muslims under Criminal Code Article 244-2 ("creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations"). The trial began on 7 September. Only nine of the defendants were put in custody during the trial and pre-trial investigation.

Andijan authorities refused to comment on the case on 21 December. Dilshod Tajibayev, Chair of Andijan Regional Criminal Court, took down Forum 18's name but put the phone down when asked to explain why the group had been sentenced. Both the Andijan City and Regional Prosecutor's offices told Forum 18 no one was available to comment on the case. Shaket Gulomov, Andijan Regional Administration's religious affairs official, told Forum 18 to get the Foreign Ministry's consent for him to comment.

Other prisoners of conscience

Many Muslims have been given long prison sentences in 2010 to punish them for exercising their freedom of religion or belief. Among them were Mehriniso Hamdamova and two other women, sentenced to between six and a half and seven years in jail in April; nine men jailed for between six and nine years in April; and sports journalist Hairulla Hamidov and 18 others fined and jailed for up to six years in June (see F18News 8 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1465). Some Protestant Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses are also serving long prison terms for exercising their freedom of religion or belief. These are a Pentecostal Pastor from Andijan, Dmitry Shestakov, who is serving a four year sentence, and three Jehovah's Witnesses: Abdubannob Ahmedov, Sergei Ivanov, and Olim Turaev.

Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses are also regularly punished with short-term detentions of up to fifteen days under the Code of Administrative Offences.

Why were Muslims punished?

Human rights defender Zainabitdinov said that the Muslim Shohidiya movement was not engaged in any political or missionary activity. "They may have some differences to the Islamic traditions and teachings generally accepted in Uzbekistan, but they are a peaceful movement," he pointed out. Among the differences he indicated that Shohidiya followers fast before, during and after the month of Ramadan. They are allowed to eat at any time of the day except they are not allowed to eat certain types of food.

The movement also adheres only to what is written in the Koran and not the hadiths, the collections of oral sayings attributed to the Muslim prophet Muhammad, Zainabitdinov said. Praying five times a day as is generally accepted is also not necessary for the followers, and they recite their prayers in Uzbek, not Arabic.

The movement was established in the 1950s during the Khrushchev era, Zainabitdinov noted. It has continued up till today in Andijan, and was headed until recently by Habibullo Karimov, who translated the Koran into Uzbek. Karimov was paralysed and bedridden, and died in November. Charges were not brought against him as he was old and ill. When Karimov became ill, the leadership of the movement passed to his brother Nasibullo, who was among those imprisoned.

The criminal case against the 25 Shohidiya followers may have been opened after the apparent trial in August and conviction of one young male member of the movement in Andijan in a separate case allegedly for killing his father for not observing the movement's rites, Zainabitdinov told Forum 18. "I do not know the young man or his family, but I was told this by relatives of the Shohidiya followers, who are afraid to reveal their identity," he said. "However, it is not sure that the young man killed his father or even if he did, whether he did it because of his religious beliefs."

Zainabitdinov said he does not know of any other details of the alleged homicide case. "The authorities would not give information about the case," he said.

Will Supreme Court hear imprisoned Baptist's complaint?

Baptists from Tashkent told Forum 18 on 21 December that they filed a second complaint on 27 November to Uzbekistan's Supreme Court to reverse the punishment handed down to Tohar Haydarov.

The young Baptist had been sentenced to ten years' imprisonment in Guliston on 9 March for "illegal sale of narcotic or psychotropic substances in large quantities" and Syrdarya Regional Court had upheld the sentence on appeal in April. Church members have consistently maintained that the allegations were fabricated as a way to punish Haydarov for his religious affiliation. An appeal against the sentence was first registered at the Supreme Court in September.

The Supreme Court earlier had referred the Baptists' first complaint back to Syrdarya Regional Court, which upheld its previous decision.

"We have new evidence of Tohar's innocence, which is why we filed the second complaint," the Baptists said. "Tohar's mother indicates in the new complaint that she had earlier slandered her son during the pre-trial investigation. Forum 18 notes that Haydarov's mother's testimony was the major evidence used by the authorities to prove that he used drugs.

The Baptists told Forum 18 that also two of the official witnesses used when making the search in Haydarov's home were not residents of Karshi city as indicated in the case files. The third witness, who according to official records was Haydarov's neighbour, did not live at the address officially indicated. The Baptists said that when they found him and talked to him, he told them that he was made to sign the official records of the search. The witness however was afraid to testify in the court.

The Baptists told Forum 18 that they have not heard back from the Supreme Court when or if their new complaint will be heard.

Supreme Court officials refused to tell Forum 18 on 21 December when the court would hold its hearing of the complaint. One official, who did not give his name, told Forum 18 to convey its questions in writing, but when Forum 18 insisted he asked it to call the Court's chancellery. The phone of the chancellery went unanswered on the same day.

"Prisoners are prohibited to have a personal Bible"

The Baptists complained to Forum 18 that the management of the Shaykh-Ali labour camp in Kashkadarya region's Karshi city, where Haydarov is being held, do not pass on all the letters and gifts sent to him.

As a result of their 20 November visit to Haydarov in the labour camp, the Baptists told Forum 18, "we found out that he did not get most of the letters we wrote to him to encourage him". An official of the prison (the name was not given) told the Baptists that some of the letters were not passed on to him "because they were full of religious words like God, and needed to go through censorship."

The Baptist also complained that recently a parcel of gifts was sent to Haydarov from Germany. However, the management of the prison confiscated the contents, giving him only a small chocolate bar.

They also expressed doubts that Haydarov, after work under trying conditions at a brick-making factory near the prison, is allowed to go to the library to read the Bible. The prisoners work at the factory from 8 am till 5 pm, the Baptists said. "When we found out the Bible we sent for him was not given to him, we asked the prison management what

the reason was," the Baptists said. "One prison official told us that prisoners are prohibited to have a personal Bible - they could only be placed in the library."

Prison official claims "we have religious freedom"

One official of the Prison who presented himself to Forum 18 on 20 December as Major Kholmurodov, deputy Chief of the Prison, rejected the Baptists' complaints. He claimed that letters were being passed on to Haydarov, though he added that the Bible could only be placed in the library of the prison. "We have religious freedom in our prison, but according to the law religious books must be placed in the library." He could not tell Forum 18 where exactly in Law this was established.

Asked if the Bible sent for Haydarov was placed in the library and if Haydarov had any free time or opportunity to read the Bible in the library, he said he did not know. "I will look into the matter soon."

Asked why the contents of the parcel from Germany for Haydarov were taken away, Kholmurodov said he did not exactly know what parcel Forum 18 referred to. "Maybe it had unprocessed food stuffs in it like raw meat," he told Forum 18, insisting that such contents are usually confiscated.

Another unexplained entry denial

Meanwhile, another foreign national coming to Uzbekistan to meet with fellow-believers has been denied entry to the country at Tashkent airport. Russian Pentecostal Pastor Viktor Sudakov, who leads the New Life Church in the Urals city of Yekaterinburg, was denied entry late on 17 December after arriving on a flight from the Kazakh city of Almaty, Protestants told Forum 18.

As a Russian citizen, Pastor Sudakov does not need a visa to enter Uzbekistan. However, border guards spent a long time examining his passport before refusing him entry without explanation. His baggage was returned and he was placed in the transit lounge to await his onward flight to Yekaterinburg three days later. Local church members also tried unsuccessfully to find out why Pastor Sudakov was being denied entry.

Pastor Sudakov arranged for others to buy him a ticket to Moscow and left on 18 December. A border guard and a man in plain clothes accompanied him to the plane and returned his passport only as he boarded the flight.

Protestants pointed out to Forum 18 that Pastor Sudakov had visited Uzbekistan a number of times without problems and never committed any crimes there. They believe he was prevented from entering because he is a pastor.

The head of Ukraine's Baptist Union, Vyacheslav Nesteruk, was denied entry to Uzbekistan at Tashkent's airport on 31 October and put on a return flight to his homeland. He too was given no reason for the entry denial (.

Scepticism that any new Administrative Code will end punishments for religious activity

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (26.11.2010) / HRWF (30.11.2010) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - As Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov announced to parliament in the capital Tashkent that a new Code of Administrative Offences will be prepared, religious believers continue to face

punishments under numerous Articles of the current Code for religious worship and religious education without state approval. Administrative punishments include fines – often massive – or imprisonment of up to 15 days. In October, three different Protestant churches in the town of Chirchik [Chirchiq] near Tashkent – all of which have state registration - faced official harassment and punishment, including raids on worship services, local Protestants complained to Forum 18 News Service. Fined in November was a mother of eight who offers her home in the southern Kashkadarya Region for a Baptist congregation to meet.

As is their usual practice, officials of the government's Committee for Religious Affairs declined to discuss any of these issues. "We only answer questions in writing," Committee specialist Begzot Kadyrov told Forum 18 on 25 November and put the phone down.

President Karimov made the announcement of a new Administrative Code to a joint session of parliament on 12 November, the parliament website noted. He pointed out that the Administrative Code had been adopted in 1994 and, since then, has been amended more than 60 times. He said it needed to be "systematically" revised as part of what he claimed was the "liberalisation of the judicial-legal system".

Forum 18 understands that no text of a new Code has yet been drafted. "But when our chief tells us something will happen, it will happen," one informed Tashkent resident told Forum 18.

Each time Articles of the Administrative Code prescribing punishments for religious activity have been amended, punishments have become greater or new punishments introduced, Forum 18 notes. New and sharply increased penalties for unapproved religious literature publication or distribution were, for example, introduced in amendments which came into force in June 2006.

Scepticism over proposed new Administrative Code

Some religious believers have expressed scepticism to Forum 18 that any new Code of Administrative Offences will end punishments for religious activity. However, Tashkent-based human rights activist Surat Ikramov told Forum 18 on 25 November that he is more optimistic that there might be some improvements. Yet he points out that "without concrete reforms to the judicial and law-enforcement systems, there's little likelihood of any improvement". He says that in the absence of judicial independence, judges merely carry out instructions handed down to them, both in administrative and criminal cases.

"Harsh treatment, brutality and fabrication of criminal cases on the part of the Interior Ministry, National Security Service secret police and Prosecutor's Office will continue and no improvement in freedom of conscience and conviction will come," Ikramov told Forum 18.

Religious believers face regular administrative fines. Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that more than 100 fines have been levied on their community members across Uzbekistan so far in 2010.

Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses are among those regularly punished with short-term detentions of up to fifteen days under the Code of Administrative Offences.

Of the 22 religious believers known to Forum 18 to have received prison terms of 3 to 15 days so far in 2010, 19 have been Protestants and three have been Jehovah's Witnesses. The most recent known cases were five-day prison terms handed down to two Baptists on 7 September.

Forum 18 knows of 25 people – Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and Baha'is – who received prison terms of 5 to 15 days in 2009.

Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestants have also been imprisoned for long sentences under the Criminal Code.

Two raids in Chirchik and pressure on a pastor

On 5 October, Pastor Ivan Drabkov of Chirchik's Generation of Faith Church was taken by his local police officer to the town Prosecutor's Office, where he was forced to sign a statement admitting that he was guilty of conducting "missionary activity". Uzbek law prohibits sharing of one's faith. "Officers used as proof an old, faded, tattered invitation to the church dating back to the 1990s," one local Protestant complained to Forum 18. "He refused for a long time and, although he was there with his small child, they held him there for two and a half hours. In the end they forced him to sign a statement and the warning from the prosecutor."

On 10 October, police officers raided and broke up the Sunday service of Chirchik's Full Gospel Pentecostal Church, where about 150 church members had gathered for a Harvest Festival. An official of the Hokimat (town administration) called the police because of the large number of people present, local Protestants told Forum 18. The following day, the church's pastor Leonty Fonov was fined ten times the minimum monthly wage - 452,150 Soms (1,700 Norwegian Kroner, 208 Euros or 275 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate) - under the Code of Administrative Offences for holding an illegal religious meeting.

"The court ignored the complete absence of any crime," Protestants told Forum 18. "The pastor decided to submit uncomplainingly as the judge admitted he could not do other than punish him, as he had been ordered to do so."

On 21 October, about 20 police officers in uniform and civilian clothes raided Chirchik's Presbyterian Church, which has been registered since 1998. They told the 15 or so church members present that their meeting was illegal as they had not given advance notice of this to the authorities. "Church members' arguments that the church has been registered for 12 years and that they regularly meet in the church building and that they do not need to inform the authorities specially had no impact," one Protestant lamented to Forum 18.

Police searched all rooms in the church building, confiscated a computer and took the pastor, Roza Khen, and her son (who works as her assistant) Vladimir Kim, to the police station. Several hours later, the two were taken to Chirchik Court for violating Article 201 Part 2 of the Code of Administrative Offences ("violation of the procedure for holding religious meetings, street processions or other religious ceremonies").

According to the verdict seen by Forum 18, Judge Abdurahmon Tahirov found both guilty and fined Kim 80 times the minimum monthly wage - 3,617,200 Soms (13,600 Norwegian Kroner, 1,666 Euros or 2,202 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). Khen had her fine reduced because of her circumstances (presumably because she is a pensioner) to 1,808,600 Soms, half the minimum fine prescribed under this Article.

One local Protestant described the verdict to Forum 18 as a "mockery", as it failed to identify any offence caused by a meeting of 15 people in a registered place of worship. The Protestant also pointed out that the verdict notes the presence only of Lieutenant M. Dormonov of the Crime Prevention Police, ignoring the 19 or so other police officers who took part in the raid. The verdict also fails to mention the confiscated computer.

Official denial

Dilorom Kasymova, the official of Chirchik Hokimat responsible for religious affairs, angrily denied to Forum 18 on 26 November that any religious community in Chirchik had been raided or faced official harassment. "Who gave you such information?" she asked. Told about the pressure on one pastor and the raids on two other churches, with subsequent punishments, she responded: "I can only talk to you with permission from the Hokim [head of administration]." She then put the phone down.

On 26 November, Judge Tahirov at Chirchik Court listened to Forum 18's questions then put the phone down. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

Raid and fine in Shakhrisabz

In Shakhrisabz in Kashkadarya Region, the owner of the house where the Council of Churches Baptist congregation meets was fined, one month after a mass police raid as they were about to begin worship, local Baptists told Forum 18 on 24 November. Like all other Council of Churches Baptist congregations, it refuses to seek state registration, insisting that it does not need state permission to be able to operate.

Brought to court on 15 November, Munira Gazieva was accused of "conducting illegal activity by gathering several people, believers in the Christian faith, and conducting religious circles, thereby violating Article 240 Part 1 of the Code of Administrative Offences" ("violation of the law on religious organisations"), the verdict reads. At the hearing, Furkat Badalov, chair of the Mahalla Committee – the lowest level of official administration – testified that "on 18 October, I saw that several people who had gathered in her home and various posters on the walls". The court found her guilty and fined her 452,150 Soms (1,700 Norwegian Kroner, 208 Euros or 275 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

The fine followed a police raid on 18 October, as church members were preparing to begin an evening worship service. The local policeman climbed through the fence around the private home and let in a group of other police officers. Joining them was Badalov of the Mahalla Committee and his deputy.

Entering the room where the church meets for worship, police immediately began filming. They then took eleven church members by car to the local police station, leaving behind about ten others – mostly women and children. Police tried to pressure the eleven to sign statements, but they refused. Police drew up an official record on each and, after several hours, let them go.

The duty officer at Shakhrisabz Police declined to discuss why police had raided the service in Gazieva's home. "I don't know," the officer – who would not give his name – told Forum 18 on 26 November. "It was the court that fined her, not the police." He then put the phone down.

Local Baptists point out that Gazieva and her husband (who cannot hear or speak) have eight children. They call on people to appeal for the court decision to be annulled and for "church members both in this town and all over Uzbekistan to have the legal right to hold worship services without obstruction and to be able to preach to others about Christ".

Fergana fine and literature destruction

On 13 October, Judge O. Yuldashev of Fergana [Farghona] Criminal Court fined three members of an unregistered Protestant church and ordered Christian books confiscated from them to be destroyed, according to the verdict seen by Forum 18. Murodiljon Umurzokov, Kavsar Rahimov and Umidjon Hasanov were all found guilty of violating Article 184-2 of the Code of Administrative Offences ("illegal storage, production, import,

distribution of religious materials"). They were each fined 452,150 Soms (1,700 Norwegian Kroner, 208 Euros or 275 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

The verdict reveals that the judge ordered that twenty named Christian books – including various editions of the Bible, among them an illustrated Bible – be destroyed. The men had acquired the literature from the legally-registered Bible Society in Tashkent.

Uzbek courts frequently order religious literature confiscated from religious believers to be destroyed.

The verdict mistakenly describes the three men as Jehovah's Witnesses, Forum 18 notes.

Some punishments overturned

A number of religious believers have however occasionally been able to overturn Administrative Code punishments handed down by lower courts. On 18 November, Judge A. Tohirov of Chirchik Criminal Court overturned a punishment imposed by a lower court on local Pentecostal pastor Stanislav Kim.

In a separate case, Pastor Kim was one of two church members threatened with punishment after police broke up a Christian youth meeting being held in Chirchik in June. However, on 24 August, Judge M. Usmanov ruled that the cases against Pastor Kim and a colleague should be halted as the time allowed for such cases had run out.

Local Protestants also told Forum 18 that after more than 100 complaints from church members in Chirchik about the actions of police officer Husniddin Yuldashev, the head of the town police, A. Bobohujaev, had written on 26 October that "for irresponsible, cold, unqualified, incomplete and untimely fulfilment of his official duties", Yuldashev had been reduced in rank.

"It's not confiscation, it's temporary removal"

By Felix Corley,

Forum 18 (25.11.2010) / HRWF (29.11.2010) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Uzbekistan has confiscated Christian books from a youth group returning from visiting neighbouring Kazakhstan, Forum 18 News Service has learned. The head of Ukraine's Baptist Union has been denied entry to Uzbekistan, and two more foreign religious websites have had access from within Uzbekistan blocked.

Police continue to raid worship services and punish those taking part. Three registered Protestant churches in the town of Chirchik [Chirchiq] have in October faced such raids and court-imposed punishments.

The confiscation of Christian books is, an Uzbek customs official has claimed, "not confiscation" as he put it to Forum 18 on 25 November. "It's temporary removal", he insisted, declining to say whether every border post will confiscate every religious book from travellers crossing the border. The Tashkent Region Customs official claimed that the "temporary removal" of religious literature is necessary to allow it to be "checked", but refused to say why this is necessary. "We have a Religious Affairs Committee. They do this", was all he would say.

As is their usual practice, officials of the government's Committee for Religious Affairs declined to discuss any of these issues. "We only answer questions in writing," Committee specialist Begzot Kadyrov told Forum 18 on 25 November and put the phone

down.

"We are the bosses here and we will do what we like"

On 9 November, a group of 23 young Baptists and their leaders from churches in Tashkent, Fergana [Farghona] and Samarkand [Samarqand] were stopped by Uzbek border guards at the Navoi/Kaplonbek crossing point in Tashkent Region. They were returning to Uzbekistan from a visit to a church meeting in neighbouring Kazakhstan.

"Although each person had just one copy of any book or magazine, which was their personal property and had their name in, these were confiscated as being illegally imported," local Council of Churches Baptists complained to Forum 18 on 12 November. "After an initial check, their Bibles were returned, but everything else was confiscated." Books confiscated included children's hymn books and books of Christian poetry.

One girl had a personal notebook with names and telephone numbers, as well as a disc with photographs confiscated.

The Head of the Customs shift, Captain Bahodir Saidhojaev, and customs officer Z. Rajabov told them that the literature was being sent for an "expert analysis". This analysis, they said, would be handed to a court which would decide the fate of the confiscated literature.

The Baptists complained that Rajabov swore at them and told them: "We are the bosses here and we will do what we like. If we need to, we'll lock you away."

"Although our friends insisted to the officers that they should give them a copy of the Confiscation Certificate, the officers refused to do so," church members added. The Baptists were allowed to go in the early evening after being held for nine hours.

The Baptists appealed for support so that their literature would be returned, that "further persecution would stop" and that they would be able to freely acquire, read and distribute Christian literature. They point out that the confiscations violate Article 29 of Uzbekistan's Constitution - which guarantees the right to "freedom of thought, speech and convictions", including the right to "search for, receive and distribute any information" unless it is forbidden by law - and Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which includes the right "to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers".

The Tashkent Region customs official refused to give Forum 18 the telephone number of the Navoi/Kaplonbek crossing point, claiming first that it has no telephone, then insisting that it "does not work".

No explanation for Ukrainian Baptist's entry denial

The head of Ukraine's Baptist Union, Vyacheslav Nesteruk, was denied entry to Uzbekistan at the capital Tashkent's airport on 31 October and put on a return flight to his homeland, as he told Forum 18 from the Ukrainian capital Kiev on 22 November. Pastor Nesteruk had been invited by Uzbekistan's Baptist Union to take part in the celebrations of the 110th anniversary of the founding of Tashkent's Baptist church. As a Ukrainian citizen, he did not need a visa to enter Uzbekistan. He had been due to return to Ukraine on 2 November.

Deportation of or denial of entry to foreign citizens known to be involved in religious activity is part of Uzbekistan's apparent policy of isolating as far as possible local religious communities from their fellow-believers abroad.

Pastor Nesteruk said when he presented his passport on arrival at Tashkent airport, "the officers spoke among themselves" before summoning him to a separate room. "It was Sunday morning, and I told them church members were waiting to take me direct to the church for the festive service at 10 am," he told Forum 18. However, he said the passport officers would give him no explanation for refusing him entry. They insisted he was put on the return flight to Kiev several hours later and while he was waiting held him in a room with two other men.

Nesteruk said officers gave his passport to the Ukrainian aircrew when they put him on the plane, and he did not get it back until it was handed to him by the Ukrainian Migration Service in Kiev. The Uzbek authorities had not stamped his passport. "They didn't say if I have been banned from visiting in future," Pastor Nesteruk told Forum 18.

The Tashkent church service with around 600 people went ahead without Pastor Nesteruk.

After his return, Pastor Nesteruk asked the Uzbek Embassy in Kiev why he had been denied entry, but it responded that he should send an official request to the Foreign Ministry in Tashkent. He told Forum 18 that the Institute for Religious Freedom in Kiev wrote on his behalf to the Uzbek Foreign Ministry, but has had no response.

Asked about the entry denial, the Foreign Ministry referred Forum 18 to spokesperson Ishnor Jabarov. However, he was not available on 25 November and his colleagues said they could not immediately find out why Pastor Nesteruk was denied entry.

Uzbekistan often denies entry to religious believers it thinks will take part in religious activities. Reasons for entry denials are rarely given.

Exit denial

For Uzbek passports to be valid for international travel, citizens must obtain exit permission valid for two years. This has been denied to those the authorities dislike, such as an October denial to a delegate from Uzbekistan to a large Protestant conference in South Africa, the 'Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization'. Forum 18 was told that the would-be delegate did not already have the two-year exit permission, and was unable to obtain it.

Such denials have sometimes been overturned after protests. Natalya Kadyrova, wife of a Protestant pastor in Tashkent, received an exit visa in April 2009 after months of exit denials.

Uzbekistan also deports legally-resident foreigners it suspects of conducting religious activity. Two South Korean Protestants were deported after allegations were made against them this year. In late 2009 a Baha'i and a Protestant were similarly deported.

More website censorship

In early October the Uzbek authorities blocked access within the country to the news part of a Ukrainian Russian-language Christian website news.invictory.org, Tashkent residents told Forum 18. The non-news part of the site remains accessible. The site regularly publishes articles detailing harassment of Christian communities in Uzbekistan, including material from Forum 18's reports.

An American-based Russian-language site run by a Protestant from Belarus, Vlad Kusakin, has also been blocked. Among the subjects on this site is denial of religious freedom experienced by Christians in Uzbekistan and neighbouring countries.

No-one at the State Agency of Communications and Information in Tashkent would explain to Forum 18 on 25 November why these websites have been blocked in Uzbekistan.

The Uzbek authorities have long blocked access to three prominent Russian-based religious news websites, Portal-credo.ru, Religion.ng.ru and I-r-p.ru, as well as to a range of general news and opposition websites based abroad. Also, Uzbek-based religious websites - such as those of the Full Gospel Protestant Union and detained Muslim journalist Hairulla Hamidov - have been forced by the authorities to close.

"Anti-terror" raid on Protestant worship, beatings, and fines

Felix Corley

Forum 18 (26.10.2010) / HRWF (28.10.2010) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Five Baptists in Samarkand [Samarqand] in Uzbekistan have failed to have fines for taking part in an unregistered worship service overturned on appeal, local Baptists have told Forum 18 News Service. On 14 October Judge S. Ashurov of Samarkand Regional Criminal Court, in the centre of Uzbekistan, rejected the Baptist's appeals against the fines imposed on 21 September. The Baptists told both courts they consider the fines unfounded, and a violation of their religious freedom. They have continued to lodge official protests, are pressing for the confiscated religious literature to be returned - and for action to be taken against a police officer who beat two of them.

The fines and beatings followed a so-called "anti-terror" raid by 20 police officers on the congregation, while they were worshipping in August. They belong to the Baptist Council of Churches, which rejects state registration in all the former Soviet states where it operates. Witnesses present described the raid as being conducted "using physical force, even tearing books from the hands of children"

"No-one has been beaten"

Forum 18 tried to reach Senior Lieutenant Lutfullo Pardaev, who the Baptists say beat two of them during the raid, but local police refused to give his telephone number. The duty officer at police station 17 in Samarkand, who did not give his name, told Forum 18 on 25 October that Pardaev was not at the station, and he could not pass on a mobile number. "If he beat someone, you'll have to come and talk to him," the policeman said.

The telephone in the office of Anvar Ikramov, head of Samarkand City Police, went unanswered when Forum 18 called on 25 October.

The duty officer at Samarkand police, who would not give his name, insisted that "we do not beat believers". "No-one has been beaten," he told Forum 18 on 25 October. "If it does happen we take measures." He declined to discuss anything further, including why the police launched an "anti-terrorist" raid on the Baptist congregation.

No one at the government's Religious Affairs Committee was prepared to tell Forum 18 on 25 October why it ruled that the church's literature is banned simply because the congregation is not registered.

"Anti-terror" raid "using physical force"

Trouble began for the Baptists when 20 police officers, only three of them in uniform, raided the church's Sunday morning worship service on 15 August. Police claimed to

people in the congregation that this was an "anti-terror" operation. Church members told Forum 18 that police filmed the congregation against its wishes with several cameras.

Officers swore at church members and seized hymnbooks, personal Bibles and even handwritten notebooks from church members "using physical force, even tearing books from the hands of children". Officers drew up a record of the confiscated books but refused to hand over a copy of the record. "They seized a digital camera from one sister, forcing back her fingers," church members complained. "They took away one brother, having forced his hands behind his back."

Officers forced those present to write statements about their activity. In the presence of two official witnesses, both from the local Mahalla Committee, police also recorded the identity of all those present. Veniamin Nemirov, in whose home the church meets, had his passport confiscated. Police then refused to return it.

Church members managed to get the police to allow mothers of young children and disabled church members to leave, but officers took ten church members to the local police station. There they were questioned individually about why the church refuses to register, and officers tried to pressure individual church members to "co-operate" with them. Police accused one of the detained church members, Alisher Abdullaev, and his family of "betraying" their Muslim faith. Nemirov was threatened with criminal prosecution. However, all ten were freed after several hours.

The police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police seek to closely monitor religious communities, for example with the use of informers "co-operating" with the authorities.

Certificate of conduct from Mahalla Committee demanded

On 16 August, local police officers telephoned church members, telling them to come to the local police posts with certificates about their conduct from the Mahalla Committee, the local official body in charge of city districts. Church members refused to do so without a written summons.

Mahalla Committees retain extensive records on local residents, especially on known active religious believers. These committees are used by the authorities as a key instrument in their attempts to control Uzbek society.

Beatings by police go unpunished

On 17 August, Senior Lieutenant Pardaev took Vladimir Abramov to police station 17. When Abramov refused to write a statement, Pardaev "hit him several times in such a way as not to leave a mark", church members told Forum 18. Pardaev then went to Abdullaev's home, but Alisher was not present. Instead he took Abdullaev's wife Oksana and their 20-day-old baby to the police station. There he threatened to send Oksana to a special reception centre and her baby to a children's home. After three hours he let her leave with her baby.

The following day, 18 August, Senior Lieutenant Pardaev returned to the Abdullaev home and took Alisher to the police post. When Alisher refused to sign a statement, Pardaev hit him in the chest and the face, leaving visible bruises. "Witnesses to the swearing and the shouts of the police officer were Alisher's mother and church members, who were standing at that time near the police station," church members told Forum 18.

After Abdullaev complained to the Samarkand Prosecutor's Office about the beating, Alisher Zakirov of the Prosecutor's Office ordered that a medical examination be carried

out. Although the medical examination took place on 20 August, no action was taken against Pardaev. Abdullaev complained about this inaction.

The Prosecutor's Office declined to put Forum 18 through to Zakirov on 25 October, insisting that Forum 18 should visit them in person. Abramov has declined to file a complaint against Pardaev.

The authorities often use violence and torture, or threats of this, against those they detain.

Pressure in Samarkand, and on unregistered activity elsewhere

In defiance of its international human rights commitments, Uzbekistan bans religious activity without state approval. Fines for unregistered worship are frequent, as are fines for possessing or offering others religious literature or films which the state Religious Affairs Committee has banned.

Religious communities in Samarkand face particular pressure, with many Christian churches having been closed down by the authorities, usually by denying them state registration. Seven churches are known to have been stripped of registration in the past four years. Amongst pressure on other faith communities in the city was the sentencing, in July 2009, of 11 readers of the Muslim theologian Said Nursi to between seven and eleven years' imprisonment.

Bibles and hymnbooks illegal

After the raid, police sent the confiscated Christian literature to the Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent. In an 18 August assessment, it ruled that such literature – including Bibles and hymnbooks – can only be used within a religious organisation that has a centralised, registered body which can give such permission. It said that as the Samarkand Baptist congregation does not have such a body, such literature is illegal.

The assessment added that two of the fifteen items, a Russian-language children's Christian magazine 'Tropinka' (Path) and an Uzbek-language leaflet 'Iso Masih Kim Uzi' (Who is Jesus the Messiah), are banned for import or distribution within the country.

All religious literature – even texts such as the Bible and Koran – is under severe censorship administered by the state Religious Affairs Committee.

The trial

On 21 September, Judge J. Gaybullaev at Samarkand Criminal Court found the five Baptists – Nemirov, Abramov and Abdullaev, as well as Mikhail Lyubivy and Lyubov Lyubivaya – guilty of breaking the Administrative Code's Article 241, by holding a worship service in Nemirov's home. This Article bans "teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately".

The five Baptists told the court that they did not consider they had committed any "offence" by meeting "for joint prayer and worship of God" without state registration, which they said they did each Sunday. They referred to Article 29 of the Constitution and Article 3 of the Religion Law, which both guarantee freedom of conscience.

Article 29 of Uzbekistan's Constitution states that "everyone shall be guaranteed freedom of thought, speech, and convictions", and states that "everyone shall have the right to seek, obtain, and disseminate any information" – but with a significant diluting of the

claim with an unspecific all-embracing phrase: "except that which is directed against the existing constitutional system and in some other instances specified by law". The vagueness of meaning of this additional phrase breaks the country's international human rights obligations.

Article 3 of the Religion Law includes the commitment that "freedom of conscience is the guaranteed, constitutional right of citizens to confess any religion or no religion." It adds that force cannot be used to force someone to conduct religious activity, or to prevent them from "taking part in services, religious rites and ceremonies or receiving religious education".

The verdict

Nemirov, Abramov and Abdullaev were each fined 452,150 Soms (1,600 Norwegian Kroner, 200 Euros, or 275 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). Lyubivy was fined 361,720 Soms (1,290 Norwegian Kroner, 160 Euros, or 220 US Dollars) and Lyubivaya 271,290 Soms (970 Norwegian Kroner, 120 Euros, or 165 US Dollars).

Since 1 December 2009 the minimum monthly salary has been 37,680 Soms (around 140 Norwegian Kroner, 20 Euros, or 25 US Dollars at the inflated official rates). Reliable economic data is a state secret in Uzbekistan, but it is known that much of the population is economically poor.

The verdict also ruled that all the confiscated literature – including personal Bibles and handwritten music – must be given to the state Religious Affairs Committee. The Court did not order that the literature must be destroyed, although this often happens.

Massive fine for having a film of Jesus' life

Felix Corley

Forum 18 (25.10.2010) / HRWF (27.10.2010) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - A court in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent found a Protestant, Murat Jalalov, guilty of owning one copy of a Christian film, Protestants who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 News Service. Jalalov narrowly avoided a 15-day jail term in the trial on 30 September, and was instead given a massive fine - apparently on the instructions of the National Security Service (NSS) secret police. Other religious believers have been fined for offering religious literature on the street. One man – not a religious believer – was fined for refusing to give police the whereabouts of his son, whom police were seeking to prosecute for his religious activity. Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 that more than 100 fines have been levied on their community members across Uzbekistan so far in 2010.

Fines for unregistered religious worship are frequent. In defiance of its international human rights commitments, Uzbekistan bans religious activity that does not have state permission. In one recent case, five members of a Samarkand [Samarqand] Baptist congregation were given large fines in September, which they failed to overturn on appeal on 14 October.

Fined for one film

On the evening of 29 September, five police officers in Tashkent's Sergeli District raided the home of the Jalalov family, claiming to be conducting an identity check. The raid was led by Zufar Rashidov of the Criminal Investigation and Anti-terrorism Department, as

well as local crime prevention officer S. Yuldashev. After taking Murat Jalalov's passport, the officers burst into his flat and searched it.

Police confiscated 75 DVDs and CDs. The discs included an American film about the life of Jesus produced by Campus Crusade for Christ (often known as 'the Jesus film') in Uzbek, Mel Gibson's film 'The Passion of the Christ', and an American Christian film 'Fireproof', as well as other Christian films he had bought at a bazaar. Also confiscated were films featuring Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bruce Willis, and family photographs.

The two witnesses did not identify themselves as the law requires them to do, and one of them maintained contact with unidentified people via a two-way radio. The formal record of confiscation identified the two as Dilshod Boykulov and Iles Kultaev. However, Protestants told Forum 18 that no such individuals are listed as resident in the Interior Ministry register for either Tashkent or the surrounding Tashkent Region.

Jalalov refused to make any statement to the police, and refused to sign the documents they presented to him.

The officers insisted he should come to the police station. Jalalov told them he would change his clothes first but, while the officers were waiting outside the flat, he locked them out. Despite their threats, he refused to let them in and refused to go to the police station. They told him to go the following morning, when his passport would be returned. Protestants told Forum 18 that when he went to the police station on the morning of 30 September, Jalalov was subjected to various threats over his religious activity.

That same day, police sent the confiscated materials for analysis by the national state Religious Affairs Committee. In a response the same day, signed by Committee Chair Yusupov which Forum 18 has seen, the Committee said that 'the Jesus film' "could be used among local ethnicities for missionary purposes" and was therefore not recognised as being allowed for import into and distribution within Uzbekistan. Article 216-2 of the Criminal Code bans - against international human rights commitments - "attracting believers of one faith to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity", and imposes a maximum of three years' imprisonment as punishment.

Trial and massive fine

The same day, 30 September, Judge H. Tulyaganov of Sergeli District Criminal Court found Jalalov guilty of violating Article 184-2 of the Code of Administrative Offences ("illegal storage, production, import, distribution of religious materials"). The judge told him he would serve 15 days in prison, even though this Article does not specify a punishment of short-term imprisonment, and told his family to bring warm clothes for him. Jalalov protested against this, and after receiving a phone call - from an unannounced caller - the judge then said he would be fined 3,164,050 Soms (11,200 Norwegian Kroner, 1,400 Euros, or 1,930 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

Jalalov told the judge he could not pay such a large sum. He was then told to return on 4 October to receive the verdict. The police told him that his passport would not be returned until he paid the fine.

Since 1 December 2009 the minimum monthly salary has been 37,680 Soms (around 140 Norwegian Kroner, 20 Euros, or 25 US Dollars at the inflated official rates). Reliable economic data is a state secret in Uzbekistan, but it is known that much of the population is economically poor.

Sources told Forum 18 that Judge Tulyaganov stated privately that he had to impose the fine, as he had received a telephone call from the NSS secret police instructing him to do this.

According to the verdict which was finally handed down on 4 October, seen by Forum 18, the court also ruled that all 75 discs be destroyed, even though only one – 'the Jesus film' – had been ruled illegal by the Religious Affairs Committee and was specified in the verdict.

"We all know that Murat was singled out by the secret police for special treatment as no-one is taken to court just for one disc," local Protestants told Forum 18, "but the NSS secret police know that he is an active evangelical pastor."

No one at Tashkent's Sergeli District Police nor at the court were available to talk to Forum 18 on 25 October.

Fined for refusing to reveal sons's whereabouts

Police visited the Kim family home in the town of Chirchik [Chirchiq] near Tashkent on 5 August, seeking Pentecostal Christian Roman Kim who, they said, faced criminal prosecution for religious activity. But his father Yury Kim – who is not a religious believer – refused to reveal the whereabouts of his son.

The following day, 6 August, Chirchik Criminal Court in Tashkent Region found Yury Kim guilty of violating Article 194 Part 1 of the Code of Administrative Offences ("failure to carry out the lawful demands of a police officer or other persons carrying out duties to guard public order"). He was then fined 45,215 Soms (160 Norwegian Kroner, 20 Euros, or 28 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate), according to court documents seen by Forum 18.

Police had been hunting Roman Kim after they raided a church youth meeting in Chirchik he had been taking part in on 23 June (see F18News 14 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1467). Police told his father that they want to prosecute Roman Kim under Article 201 ("violation of the procedure for organising and conducting meetings, street processions or demonstrations") and Article 240 ("violation of the law on religious organisations") of the Code of Administrative Offences. However, as police failed to locate Roman Kim within the time scale allowed to prosecute such "offences" he cannot legally be punished.

Yury Kim appealed against the fine, but on 6 September Judge A. Sadykov of the Appeals Division of Tashkent Regional Criminal Court rejected the appeal, according to the verdict seen by Forum 18.

"Yury Kim is not a religious believer, and punishing him for this is a complete nonsense," one local Protestant told Forum 18. The Protestant insisted that Yury Kim had the legal right not to give information to the police.

Fined for offering literature

Three Baptists who offered Christian literature to passers-by on the street, in Mubarek in the central Kashkadarya Region, on 7 August have been punished, local Baptists told Forum 18 on 11 October. At a local court on 21 September, Judge Sh. Rajabov fined Valery Stepanov 452,150 Soms (1,600 Norwegian Kroner, 200 Euros, or 275 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). The two women, Munira Jurataeva and Nadezhda Shvindina, were each fined 135,645 Soms (480 Norwegian Kroner, 60 Euros, or 83 US Dollars).

The court ordered that 66 Christian books and leaflets in Russian should be handed to the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent. It also ordered that 47 books and leaflets in Uzbek – including copies of the New Testament – should be destroyed.

The congregation the three belong to is part of the Council of Churches Baptists, who refuse on principle to seek state registration in any of the former Soviet states.

Local Baptists pointed out to Forum 18 that Article 29 of Uzbekistan's Constitution states that "everyone shall be guaranteed freedom of thought, speech, and convictions". It also states that "everyone shall have the right to seek, obtain, and disseminate any information," but with a qualifying – and against international law - statement "except that which is directed against the existing constitutional system and in some other instances specified by law". They add that Article 31 states that "freedom of conscience is guaranteed to all. Everyone shall have the right to profess or not to profess any religion. Any compulsory imposition of religion shall be impermissible".

Fined in 10 minutes

At a ten-minute trial in the eastern town of Fergana [Farghona] on 4 August, three Council of Churches Baptists - Vladimir Andoniu, Aleksandr Naiko and Nina Nikulina – were each fined 376,800 Soms (1,300 Norwegian Kroner, 165 Euros, or 230 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate), church members told Forum 18. They were found guilty of violating Article 184-2 of the Code of Administrative Offences ("illegal storage, production, import, distribution of religious materials"). The court ordered that Christian books confiscated from them on 24 July, when they were running a Christian street library be destroyed.

More than 100 Jehovah's Witness fined so far in 2010

A total of 104 cases of fines levied against Jehovah's Witnesses across Uzbekistan between the beginning of 2010 and the end of August have been recorded, they told Forum 18 on 12 October. "Even this may not be a full list." Some of the fines have been as high as 4,500,000 Soms (16,000 Norwegian Kroner, 2,000 Euros, or 2,750 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate), with many more at over 2,000,000 Soms (7,000 Norwegian Kroner, 875 Euros, or 1,220 US Dollars).

Local Jehovah's Witnesses declined to give details of names and places, for fear of state reprisals. They note that such fines have been levied on community members for some years, 187 such fines being imposed between August 2007 and the end of 2009.

"I haven't seen any"

Officials at the government's National Human Rights Centre of Uzbekistan in Tashkent declined to put Forum 18 through to its director Akmal Saidov or deputy director Akhmat Ismailov on 25 October. They referred Forum 18 to Ikrom Saipov, but he was out of the office each time Forum 18 called.

Only an assistant to Artyk Yusupov, Chair of the Religious Affairs Committee, was available to talk to Forum 18 on 25 October. Giving his name only as Muhadi, he said he had been working there only one month. Asked about raids, confiscations of religious literature, fines, imprisonments and beatings inflicted on members of various religious communities, he referred all questions to Committee specialist Bekzot Kadyrov. However, his telephone went unanswered.

Asked what happened to religious literature confiscated by the courts and ordered to be sent to the Religious Affairs Committee, Yusupov's assistant responded: "I haven't seen any." Asked whether the Committee itself destroys such literature, as court verdicts often order it to be destroyed, he responded: "We don't destroy religious literature".

All religious literature - even texts such as the Bible and Koran - is under severe censorship, and is often ordered to be destroyed by courts.

Short-term detentions

As well as fines on Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses, members of these communities are among those regularly punished with short-term detentions of up to fifteen days under the Code of Administrative Offences.

Of the 22 religious believers known to Forum 18 to have received prison terms of 3 to 15 days so far in 2010, 19 have been Protestants and three have been Jehovah's Witnesses. The most recent known cases were five-day prison terms handed down to two Baptists on 7 September.

Forum 18 knows of 25 people - Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and Baha'is - who received prison terms of 5 to 15 days in 2009.

"Experts in the country and abroad affirm.."

Despite Uzbekistan's many violations of religious freedom, the Foreign Ministry claimed in a 30 September statement on its website that: "Experts in the country and abroad affirm that at present the population of Uzbekistan, whether confessing one religion or another, is secured the necessary number of religious organisations and is provided all possibilities for the full carrying out of all religious rites."

The "experts" were not named, and the phrase "the necessary number of religious organisations" was not explained - even though this concept does not exist in international human rights law.

Three years in labour camp "not a severe punishment"

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (23.09.2010) / HRWF (28.09.2010) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Uzbekistan has continued to imprison devout Muslims for long terms and devout Christians for short terms, Forum 18 News Service has found. A court in the capital Tashkent imposed three-year jail terms on seven Muslim men, with four others receiving suspended jail terms, for holding unauthorised private religion lessons. Another court in Tashkent Region gave five-day administrative detentions to two Protestants for unregistered religious activity, with two others being fined. Uzbekistan has also deported two South Korean citizens for alleged "unauthorised missionary activity".

Long-term and suspended prison terms

In late August, Judge Rahimzhon Aliyev at Tashkent's Sobir-Rahimov District Criminal Court found the 11 Muslims guilty under Uzbekistan's Criminal Code's Article 216 ("Illegal establishment or reactivation of illegal public associations or religious organisations, as well as active participation in their activities").

Seven - Abdukahor Aripov, Hassan Sadykov, Komilzhon Inagamov, Hassan Usmonov, Mirzokir Muhamedsaidov, Muminzhon Zakirov and Bakhtiyor Kadyrov - were each given three years in a labour camp. Four - Murad Manapov, Mirsharof Mirzayev, Farhod Abdusattarov and Zhura Irgashev - were each given three year suspended sentences, human rights defender Surat Ikramov told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 22 September.

All 11 defendants are residents of the same Tashkent district, are between 29 and 32 years old, and have between two and four children. Ikramov told Forum 18 that, based on the advice of their lawyers, all 11 pleaded guilty to the offence, hoping that this would lead to them being fined and released from custody.

The seven who received jail terms have been under arrest since early March, with the four who were fined having been allowed out of custody after they signed a statement promising not to leave the country.

The eleven Muslims were accused - in an indictment which Forum 18 has seen - of holding unauthorised private religion lessons after having got to know each other since 2007 at a mosque near the Hotel Olympia in Tashkent. It was signed on 29 May by Colonel Sh. Rakhmatullayev, endorsed by Major D. Mirsodikov of the Interior Ministry's Chief Investigation Department, and approved by Alisher Sharafutdinov, Deputy General Prosecutor.

Human rights defender Ikramov stated that the case was "fabricated", pointing out that "all the defendants have positive testimonials from their places of work and residence, and none has been previously convicted".

Three years in labour camp "not a severe punishment"

Judge Aliyev defended his punishments to Forum 18, stating that the 11 men did not have permission to teach religion privately. Asked why he gave such harsh punishments for unregistered religious activity, he told Forum 18 on 20 September that three years in a labour camp is "not a severe punishment". When told that this meant three years of deprivation of liberty, he responded that "the defendants have filed a complaint to the Tashkent City Criminal Court, and the court decision has not entered into force yet."

Conditions in labour camps can be particularly harsh, with unsanitary and dangerous living and working conditions, beatings by guards, and criminal gangs having a ruthless hold over other prisoners. Prisoners in labour camps and jails are denied their right to freedom of religion or belief - for example to pray visibly, to have religious literature, or to receive visits from religious clergy.

Labour camp terms are often imposed on devout Muslims for religious activity outside state control.

Judge Aliyev did not indicate what he would describe as a "severe punishment".

When Forum 18 asked Judge Aliyev again why Uzbek courts, including his court, have given such severe punishments for unregistered religious activity, he said that it is "because of Uzbek law". He did not want to elaborate on this statement, and declined to talk to Forum 18 further.

Five-day detentions and fines

On 9 September, Judge Gulsara Buranova of Tashkent Region's Bostanlyk District Criminal Court handed down five-day administrative detentions on two Baptists, Aleksandr Yugay and Vitaliy Dudatkin. Two others, Nikolai Shnayder and Nikolay Savorovsky, were each fined 45,215 Soms (165 Norwegian Kroner, 21 Euros, or 28 US Dollars at the inflated official rates).

The four were convicted - in a verdict which Forum 18 has seen - of breaking the Administrative Code's Articles 201 part 1 ("violation of the procedure for organising and conducting meetings, street processions or demonstrations"), 202 ("creating conditions for unapproved meetings, street processions and demonstrations"), 240 ("violation of the

law on religious organisations") and 241 ("teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately").

All four defendants are members of the Baptist Church in the town of Gazalkent which belongs to the Council of Churches. These churches refuse on principle to seek state registration in the countries they operate in, thinking that this leads to state interference in normal religious activities.

Judge in 2009 punished one defendant for same 'offence'

Judge Buranova refused to comment on the case over the phone, telling Forum 18 on 20 September that "you need to come to the court".

Baptists told Forum 18 on 21 September that Yugay and Dudatkin had already been detained for five days and so were released. However Shnayder and Savorovsky have not paid the fines, and all four are appealing against the court's verdict.

Judge Buranova in August 2009 had previously fined Yugay for breaking the Administrative Code's Article 240, and at that time refused to tell Forum 18 what punishment would be given for a repeat 'offence'. Dudatkin, Shnayder and Savorovsky were questioned by the court as witnesses during that 2009 trial.

South Koreans deported for "unauthorised missionary activity"

Uzbekistan has announced that it has deported two South Korean citizens - Song Ewi Kwang and Lee Ju Hwan - for alleged "unauthorised missionary activity". Two state-sponsored news agencies, gorizont.uz and 12.uz, on 13 and 25 in August respectively made a variety of accusations. Kwang's church, "Muhabbat" (Love) in Tashkent, was said to instead of registering its activity "instead gathering more members by brainwashing them." Hwan was claimed to have established a medical centre, and distributed Christian literature, CDs and DVDs from South Korea to his patients.

Article 216-2 of the Criminal Code makes illegal – against international human rights commitments - "attracting believers of one faith to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity", and imposes a maximum of three years' imprisonment as punishment.

Uzbekistan has often deported foreigners for religious activity. Gorizont's Director has declined to tell Forum 18 why he does not seek and publish responses from religious communities to the often serious allegations made against them.

"These acts openly contradict Uzbekistan's laws, in particular the Religion Law. Such imposing of foreign beliefs to our population may lead to unpredicted consequences between religions," the Gorizont article claimed. The article does not note that the beliefs followed by Uzbekistan's legally permitted religious communities – including the majority faith of Islam – were themselves originally "foreign beliefs".

"Come to our office"

Ishnor Jabborov, Head of the Foreign Ministry's Press Service on 21 September refused to comment on the deportations of the two South Koreans, referring Forum 18 to the state Committee for Religious Affairs. The assistant (who did not give his name) to the Committee's Chair, Artyk Yusupov, on 21 September said that Yusupov was not available to talk but he could answer Forum 18's questions. However, when asked about the two Koreans, he said that "we do not give interviews over the phone, please, come to our office." He then put the phone down.

"I was only obeying orders"

Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (16.09.2010) / HRWF (20.09.2010) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Uzbekistan continues to punish unregistered religious activity, as well as imposing controls on permitted religious activity, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Courts in the capital Tashkent fined one Baptist and warned a second Baptist who was a Soviet-era prisoner of conscience for religious activity, as well as rejecting appeals against the jailing of short-term prisoners of conscience and fines imposed on other Baptists. Also, in an intensification of previous years' practice, controls on Muslim activity were imposed across Uzbekistan during Ramadan.

One Baptist warned, another given a large fine

Judge D. Ubaydulloyev of Tashkent City's Hamza District Criminal Court on 21 August fined Igor Voloshin, a member of an unregistered Baptist Church, 452,215 Soms (1,690 Norwegian Kroner, 210 Euros, or 280 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rates) under Uzbekistan's Administrative Code's article 241 ("teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [state-registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately").

Judge Ubaydulloyev also convicted Nadezhda Matyukhina - a Soviet-era prisoner of conscience who belongs to the same church - of the same "offence", but she was only given a warning. Voloshin and Matyukhina are members of the local unregistered Baptist Church, which belongs to the Council of Churches Baptists who refuse on principle to seek state registration.

Matyukhina was only warned, Baptists told Forum 18 on 1 September, as she is 85 and disabled. In 1966 she was convicted of holding unauthorised religious meetings in her flat, and was imprisoned in a labour camp under severe conditions for three years.

The trial of the two Baptists followed a raid on 4 August on Matyukhina's private flat by local police and Mahalla Committee (local self-government district) officials, Baptists told Forum 18. (Mahalla committees are used by the authorities as a key instrument in their attempts to control Uzbek society. At around 8 p.m. in the evening, Police Inspector E. Parmonov, along with several other police officer and mahalla officials broke in "while Voloshin gathered around 50 people in Matyukhina's flat to teach Baptist Christian doctrines," the verdict stated.

Voloshin did not admit to breaking any laws, or sign any statement during the police raid. He told the court that he had not violated the law by participating in a religious gathering, the Baptists said. They complained that the authorities "in violation of the Constitution, without an official warrant, broke into Matyukhina's flat, took photographs of the attendees, and also did not take any official notes of what took place".

"I was only obeying orders"

Judge Ubaydulloyev on 15 September refused to talk to Forum 18, stating "if you want to receive information on this case you need to come to the court." He then put the phone down.

The state Religious Affairs Committee also refused to talk about this or other cases, claiming that no-one was available to talk as they were all in meetings.

Police Inspector Parmonov (who did not his first name) said that "I was only obeying orders" given by his superiors. "I have worked for 10 years at the local police, and I know these Baptists," he told Forum 18 on 15 September. "They don't drink, and do not disturb others." When asked why he broke in Matyukhina's private flat without an official warrant, Inspector Parmonov said, "I was only doing my official duties, obeying the order given by my chiefs."

Appeal against short-term jailings and fines fails

An appeal by Yuriy Garmashev – who was given five days detention – and Oksana and Yelena Kamyshina and David Goryachev against fines for unregistered activity has failed. Judge Arofat Alimova of Tashkent Criminal Court on 20 August - in the absence of the defendants - upheld the earlier verdict. The appeal court verdict states that the defendants' arguments that the administrative case was illegally brought against them contradicts the police records in the case, and the evidence of confiscated Christian literature.

Garmashev had been given five days detention, nine others were detained for three days, and three were fined 80 times the minimum monthly salary. All 13 are members of an unregistered Baptist Church.

Judge Alimova categorically refused to comment on the case to Forum 18 on 16 September. "Look I am very busy now, and I don't remember that case at the moment," she said, and then put the phone down.

Baptist long-term prisoner of conscience's appeal

An appeal in the case of Baptist long-term prisoner of conscience Tohar Haydarov was registered by Baptists at the Supreme Court on 13 September, they told Forum 18. They were told that officials would contact them in response, but not when – or if - a hearing would take place. Forum 18 called the Supreme Court on 16 September to enquire about the appeal, but officials refused to discuss it unless questions were submitted in writing.

Haydarov, was sentenced in March to 10 years in jail on what his fellow Baptists repeatedly and strongly insist are fabricated drugs charges. An initial appeal against the sentence was rejected in April, despite numerous violations of legal procedure in the original trial.

Greater controls on Muslim activity during Ramadan

Uzbekistan has also imposed greater restrictions on Muslim religious activity during the month of Ramadan (which this year ended on 9 September) by banning iftar meals in restaurants, greater surveillance of mosques, banning nightly prayers away from mosques, and cutting water and electricity at prayer times in different places across Uzbekistan. Although extra controls have been imposed during Ramadan in previous years, controls this year appear to be more extensive than previously.

Ban on iftar meals in restaurants

Iftar is a religious evening meal – often held by mosque communities – when Muslims break their fast each day during Ramadan. Explaining the ban on iftar meals in restaurants, Abdulazim Mansurov, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims or Muftiate's Deputy Chair, told Agence France-Presse on 3 September that in previous years "iftars have become too lavish and pompous like wedding ceremonies mostly held by the wealthy and for the wealthy." He denied allegations that Uzbek government officials were seeking to block religious gatherings during Ramadan.

Uzbekistan has imposed complete control on all open Muslim religious activity, including the Muftiate.

The Muftiate on 16 September declined to give any comments to Forum 18 on the ban. Mansurov's Assistant (who would not give his name) claimed that Mansurov was on leave, and that he could not comment on his statements in the press. He referred Forum 18 to the Board's Division of Fatwas (decisions on the matters of faith and practice). However, the Division's telephones went unanswered on 16 September.

A Muslim from Tashkent, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that several restaurants refused to serve a group including friends when they tried to order an iftar meal. The restaurants told them that it was not possible because of the ban.

Sources elsewhere in Uzbekistan noted to Forum 18 that it was not customary for Muslims outside Tashkent to have an iftar meal in a restaurant.

Greater controls on mosques

Another Muslim from Tashkent said that mosques are being closely monitored during Ramadan, but not many people are attending them because "people are afraid to do so." A source from Kashkadarya region told Forum 18 on 2 September that the central mosque Kuk Gumbaz in the region's central city Karshi was being monitored by secret police and videoed from a car standing nearby. The source said that he believed this was done because the authorities did not want greater religious activity during Ramadan.

Another source from Fergana [Farghona] Region told Forum 18 on 2 September that plain clothes agents of the authorities were "especially active" in monitoring and controlling mosques in Kokand.

The National Security Service (NSS) secret police and other state agencies routinely impose highly intrusive surveillance on many religious communities.

Bans on night prayers away from mosques

The source from Kashkadarya said that night prayers during Ramadan away from mosques were not allowed. However, the source from Tashkent said that they and friends had "no problem" meeting in private homes for prayers.

Water and power cuts at dawn and dusk

The source from Kashkadarya said the authorities cut water and electricity three to four times a day, at sunrise and sunset as well as throughout the day "exactly at prayer times".

However, the source from Fergana said that "it is usual – not specifically because of Ramadan – to provide the population with water and electricity for short intervals in the mornings and evenings".

Unregistered Baptists persecuted

Uzbek Baptists on trial for house church meeting

IUCECB (02.09.2010) / HRWF (07.09.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Dear brothers and sisters. Few recall that in the city of Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in 1966 Sister Nadezhda Petrovna Matiukhina, an invalid of Group 1 (without both legs above knees) was convicted. She spent three years in a camp in the most severe conditions simply because meetings of the unregistered church were held in her home. But despite continual interruption of worship services, fines, and threat, believers continued to gather in her home until the authorities took away this house in 1988.

Nadezhda Petrovna was forced to move to a different location, but joyously even to this day she continues to provide her home for services of the Tashkent church of the International Union of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists.

On 21 August 2010, Judge D.Kh. Ubaidullaev of the Khamzin regional court for criminal affairs reviewed an administrative protocol with respect to N.P. Matiukhina (who is now 85 years old) and I.E. Voloshin. The court ruled: "On 4 August 2010, at approximately 8 p.m., I.E. Voloshin, who was in N.P. Matiukhina's home, gathered approximately 50 persons and taught the religious doctrine of Christians-Baptists, without having a specialized religious education, and thereby violated the procedure for the teaching of religious doctrines.

"The law violator I.E. Voloshin, who did not acknowledge his guilt in court, proved that on 4 August 2010 he actually was in the house . . . belonging to N.P. Matiukhina, and he participated in a meeting devoted to the salvation of souls. He was told that officers of law enforcement agencies had arrived. He went outside and saw a precinct chief, the chairman of the Makhalsinsk committee, and several other policemen. He was ordered to write an explanatory note regarding this incident, but he refused to give explanatory notes. He explained that he had not violated any law and that he himself is a member of the International Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, whose primary literature is the Bible. . . . Their union has the requirement of meeting and worshiping God all together. In the future he also intends to serve God.

"The law violator N.P. Matiukhina testified in court that on 4 August . . . she was in her own home at the address: Tashkent, Khamzinskii region, 30 Khabarovsk St., which belongs to her. Her home is God's house, which every believer may enter. She did not know that police officers came to her house, and she learned about this later. Also no one approached her and asked her to write an explanatory note, and she did not know that any papers had been drawn up. At this meeting she and other participants . . . were praying, singing songs, praising God, and reading that literature that God had sent them, namely the Bible. One Christian who loves God preached a sermon but she refused to name him. . . .

"Witness E.K. Parmonov testified to the court that he is an inspector of the Khamzinsk Department of Internal Affairs. He drew up the administrative protocol regarding N.P. Matiukhina, since the meeting was conducted in her home. However, he did not take an explanatory note from N.P. Matiukhina because he knew earlier that N.P. Matiukhina refuses to sign a protocol. . . . This was obviously the attitude of the meeting's participants.

"Having studied the material, the judge rules that in the actions of N.P. Matiukhina there are indicators of law violations provided by article 241 of the administrative code of the republic of Uzbekistan—teaching religious doctrines without specialized religious education and without the permission of a central administrative agency of a religious organization, as well as teaching religious doctrine in a private manner, but considering that she is of advanced age and she is an invalid of group 1 and a woman, the judge rules to release her from administrative responsibility and be restricted to a warning. . . .

."

On the basis of the foregoing, the court ruled that Nadezhda Petrovna Matiukhina is guilty and restricted to a warning, and Igor Eduardovich Voloshin is fined a sum of 452215 soms (around US\$540).

Dear friends, according to the constitution of the republic of Uzbekistan, "Freedom of conscience is guaranteed for all. Everyone has the right to confess any religion or to confess none. Compulsory imposition of religious views is impermissible" (article 31). "All state agencies, public associations, and official persons of the republic of Uzbekistan are required to guarantee for citizens the possibility of becoming acquainted with documents, decisions, and other materials affecting their rights and interests" (art. 30). "Everyone has the right to protection from infringement upon his honor and dignity . . . and to the inviolability of his residence. No one has the right to enter a residence, to conduct a search or inspection, and to violate the secrecy of correspondence and telephone conversations other than in an instance and by a procedure provided by law" (art. 27).

In the above mentioned case the authorities, in violation of the constitution, not only entered the house without permission and photographed those present, but also, having drawn up a protocol regarding administrative violation of law against the owner, did not inform her thereof. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: "Every person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes the freedom to change one's religion or convictions and the freedom to confess one's religion or convictions both individually and in common with others, publicly and privately, in teaching, worship, and the performance of religious and ritual rites" (art. 18).

Believers, as citizens, have the complete right to the conduct of peaceful meetings, to say nothing of within their own private homes. The registration of a religious association per se should not be obligatory. Private persons and groups of citizens should have the right to confess their own religion without registration, if they want to.

Dear friends, we will pray and petition that the authorities will cease persecuting Christians in Uzbekistan for their religious convictions and will review all administrative cases and decisions of courts with regard to believers and will provide the possibility for them to perform service to God without hindrance. (tr. by PDS, posted 3 September 2010)

"We are bandits"

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (05.08.2010) / HRWF (06.08.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Uzbekistan is continuing its policy of short-term jailings of prisoners of conscience and large fines against Christians meeting together, Forum 18 News Service has learned. 10 Protestant short-term prisoners of conscience have recently been jailed for between three and five days, and three were fined 80 times the minimum monthly wage. As is often the case, the raid which preceded the punishments – in which 23 people including small children were detained – was carried out with great brutality.

The jail sentences given in the most recent known case are shorter than some other cases, which have often been for between 10 and 15 days, and the most frequent use of long-term sentences for religious activity has recently been against Muslim readers of the works of theologian Said Nursi. However in April one Baptist, Tohar Haydarov, was sentenced to 10 years in jail on what his fellow Baptists repeatedly and strongly insist are fabricated drugs charges.

Another trial of Muslims accused of reading Nursi's works has begun in the capital Tashkent (see below).

"Yes, we are bandits"

On 28 July Baptists from an unregistered church had gathered at the home of Yuriy Garmashev, in Tashkent's Mirzo-Ulugbek District, "to celebrate the spiritual birthday of a church member" they told Forum 18 on 5 August. "They were involved in nothing illegal, but having tea and singing some spiritual songs."

Mirzo-Ulugbek Police Major Ilyos Mustafayev along with Police Lieutenant Colonel Abdullayev (who did not give his name) and other police officers raided Garmashev's home at 9 pm, the Baptists said. The police had surrounded the house with five cars, and then broke into Garmashev's home. After confiscating two personal Bibles, four songbooks and one textbook of violin lessons, the police then began "pushing the believers forcefully" into cars outside, the Baptists complained. "Some believers were kicked and hit while they were dragged out of the house."

Baptists also said that Major Mustafayev "grabbed Garmashev's ten-year-old daughter by her dress and pushed her so hard that she could barely breathe." Major Mustafayev was "cynical and rude" when he was asked by the Baptists why the Police acted like bandits. He replied: "Yes, we are bandits".

Major Mustafayev at the District Police Station, who answered the phone on 5 August, confirmed his identity to Forum 18. But as soon as Forum 18 asked why his police officers raided the Baptist gathering and was abusive towards the Baptists, he denied that he was Major Mustafayev. "Please, call back tomorrow," he said. Refusing to talk further he put the phone down.

The UN Committee Against Torture has found that the use of torture by state officials is "routine" in Uzbekistan. The use or threat of torture is often reported by victims of religious freedom violations who do not wish to publicly testify to torture and other forms of brutality.

Twenty-three detained

Twenty-three people, including some young children, who were present at Garmashev's home, were taken to the District Police Station immediately after the raid. Ten of those detained were released almost 24 hours later at 8 pm on 29 July, after being warned, Baptists told Forum 18. "Three of those who were detained are hearing and speaking impaired, and a detained four-year-old boy was scared by seeing how badly the police treated his mother."

Baptists also complained that all the detained had to sleep on wooden chairs during the night. The remaining thirteen people, who were not released the following day, were taken to the District Court to be punished.

10 short-term prisoners of conscience, three massive fines

Judge Shukhat Bakayev of Mirzo-Ulugbek District Criminal Court in Tashkent Region on 29 July, under the Administrative Code's Article 194 Part 1 and Article 201 Part 2, handed down massive fines and short-term jail sentences to all 13 people brought before the Court. All 13 are members of the local unregistered Baptist Church, which belongs to the Council of Churches Baptists who refuse on principle to seek state registration. Forum 18 has seen a copy of the verdict.

Part 1 of Administrative Code Article 194 punishes "failure to carry out the lawful demands of a police officer or other persons carrying out duties to guard public order" with a fine of up to twice the minimum monthly salary.

Part 2 of Administrative Code Article 201 punishes "violation of the procedure for organising and conducting meetings, street processions or demonstrations" with a fine between five and 10 times the monthly minimum salary, or administrative arrest for up to 15 days.

Yuriy Garmashev was given five days under arrest, and nine others – Nikolay Serin, Gleb Izmestyev, Stanislav Kim, Stanislav Anin, Yevgeni Vinokurov, Davlat Ilakhunov, Dmitri Bilan, Vitali Liner, Nikolai Shaldayev were given three days under arrest. Sisters Oksana and Yelena Kamyshina, and David Goryachev, were each fined 80 times the minimum monthly salary, or a total of 3,014,000 Soms (11,150 Norwegian Kroner, 1,410 Euros, or 1,860 US Dollars) each.

Baptists told Forum 18 on 5 August that all the jailed short-term prisoners of conscience have now been released.

Both Judge Bakayev and Mirzo-Ulugbek Police refused to comment on the police's actions. Forum 18 called several numbers at the Police Station on 5 August to discuss the case, but was told that both the Police Chief and all his deputies were busy and not available to talk.

Judge Bakayev refused to comment on the case, stating that he will not explain his decision. "I gave them a copy of the decision, and if they disagree they can complain," he told Forum 18 on 5 August.

Raided again

A Baptist told Forum 18 on 5 August that yesterday (4 August) police again raided members of the same Church, this time raiding a church meeting. "Police this time were more reserved while talking to the leaders of the Church, but – after writing down the leaders' names - warned them that they would not leave the church alone."

Another Muslim trial

Tashkent Regional Criminal Court under Judge Rustamov on 17 June began the trial of nine former graduates of Turkish lycees for allegedly being members of the Nursi Muslim movement, human rights defender Surat Ikramov told Forum 18 on 5 August. The defendants are Zhasur Hassanov, Farhod Hassanov, Dilmurod Rahmatov, Tohir Vakkasov, Oybek Latipov, Sherzod Khaytboyev, Jamshid Zhabborov, Jahongir Tillayev and Asilkhuzha Turayev. All of them are between 31 and 32 years of age, married, graduated from the Turkish lycee in Angren in Tashkent Region in the same year, and have higher education degrees. The verdict is expected next week.

Readers of Nursi's works are often given long jail terms.

Officially permitted Christian literature destroyed

Elsewhere, in western Uzbekistan's Khorezm region, Judge Gayrat Sabirov of Urgench [Urganch] Criminal Court on 24 July ordered that Christian literature owned by Zoya Varakina should be confiscated and destroyed. The verdict notes that Varakina's home was raided on 9 June by Urgench City Police, who found and confiscated 14 Christian books and 64 leaflets. Among the confiscated books was a New Testament in Uzbek.

Varakina, a member of the local unregistered Baptist Church, was convicted under the Administrative Code's Article 184-2 ("illegal storage, production, import, distribution of religious materials"). A human rights defender, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 5 August that the "expert analysis" of Varakina's books – as the verdict notes – was made by the local Spiritual Administration of Muslims or Muftiate, instead of by the state Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent. The Muftiate is under total state control.

However it is illegal for the Muftiate to carry out such "expert analyses". The human rights defender also complained that these books are all officially permitted books by the Religious Affairs Committee.

Under a Cabinet of Ministers decree of April 2004, only the state Religious Affairs Committee is authorised to conduct expert analyses of religious materials. Despite this decree, such analyses of religious literature are frequently conducted by university staff, or other "experts" who have no legal right or authority to do this.

Judge Sabirov on 5 August refused to discuss with Forum 18 on what basis the police raided Varakina's home as well as why he ordered the destruction of officially permitted Christian literature. He introduced himself as Judge Sabirov when he answered the phone, but put the phone down as soon as heard Forum 18's question claiming that it was a wrong number.

All religious literature – even texts such as the Bible and Koran – is under severe censorship, and is often ordered to be destroyed by courts.

Two further short-term jailings, while raids and fines continue

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (13.07.2010) / HRWF (15.07.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Two Protestant Christians in the north-western region of Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] were each sentenced to ten days' imprisonment on 8 July to punish them for their religious activity, Protestant sources who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 News Service. The imprisonments bring to seven the number of religious believers in Uzbekistan known to Forum 18 to have been given prison terms of up to 15 days since the beginning of 2010. The jailings come as two mass trials are underway against readers of the works of the Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi, which could end in long prison terms, and continuing raids on religious services, fines and court-ordered destruction of religious literature.

No official at the government's Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent was prepared to discuss the latest violations of religious freedom with Forum 18 on 14 July. Each time Forum 18 called, the phone was immediately put down.

In Uzbekistan, Muslims, Protestant Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses are serving long sentences to punish them for their religious faith. In the most recent trial involving nine defendants, readers of the works of Said Nursi and some of their neighbours and acquaintances were sentenced in the central city of Bukhara [Bukhoro] on 28 June to prison terms of between six and eight years.

Another group of ten Nursi readers went on trial in Bukhara on 22 June, while a separate trial of nine Nursi readers began in the capital Tashkent on 17 June (see forthcoming F18News article).

Short-term jailings for up to 15 days are often used to punish people for their religious activity. Forum 18 knows of 21 people – Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and Baha'is – who received prison terms of 5 to 15 days between February and August 2009, when the process appeared to stop.

However, short-term jailings resumed in April 2010, when two Protestants were sentenced in Termez. Three members of Tashkent's Protestant Church of Christ - Assistant Pastor Artur Avanesyan, Vyacheslav Dechkov and Bahodiy Adambaev - were given 15-day administrative arrests on 18 May, in a trial which saw five other church members fined.

Crackdown in Karakalpakstan

The two Protestants, who live in the town of Muynak [Muynoq] close to the Aral Sea, were detained and tried for their faith. One of the two, Lepes Omarov, has already faced pressure. A former school sports teacher, he was dismissed in 2003 after rejecting pressure by a local ideology official for him to renounce his beliefs as a Protestant. In 2006, prosecutors launched a criminal case against him on charges of violating the law on religion, but it never came to trial.

The latest short-term imprisonments come amid a renewed crackdown on Protestant activity in Karakalpakstan, where only state-registered Muslim communities and one Russian Orthodox parish are allowed to operate. All other religious activity in Karakalpakstan is illegal, as – in defiance of its international human rights commitments – Uzbekistan bans all religious activity that does not have state permission.

Police raided many Protestant homes between May and early July, confiscating Christian books, DVDs and computers. Prosecutors brought more than a dozen cases but some of the cases were abandoned before they could be sent to court. One Protestant was summoned to the Prosecutor's Office in mid-June and pressured to sign a pledge not to keep Christian books in his home if he wanted to avoid criminal prosecution. Despite heavy pressure, the Protestant refused to sign and was eventually allowed to go.

The telephone of Nurula Jamolov, Karakalpakstan's senior religious affairs official, went unanswered each time Forum 18 rang between 12 and 14 July.

Concern over imprisonment threat

Protestants have expressed their concern over threats to prosecute Gennady Chen, a church leader in Yangibazar, a small town near Tashkent. In a 3 June written warning seen by Forum 18, Prosecutor O. Fuzailov of Yukorichirchik District of Tashkent Region told Chen that "monitoring" of him had revealed that "as the leader of an illegally functioning cell of Protestant tendency" he was breaking the law by holding religious services and sharing his faith.

Fuzailov warned Chen that such activity violated Article 240 of the Code of Administrative Offences (violation of the law on religious organisations), as well as three Criminal Code articles: Article 216 (illegal organisation of social or religious organisations), which carries a maximum five year prison term; Article 217 (violation of the procedure for organising and conducting meetings, street processions or demonstrations), which carries a maximum three year prison term; and Article 229-2 (violation of the procedure for teaching religious doctrines), which carries a maximum three year prison term. The letter threatened Chen with administrative or criminal prosecution for such violations of the Religion Law.

"The authorities have told Gennady that they will keep a close watch on him," one Protestant told Forum 18, "and at the first opportunity will launch a case against him."

The Protestant likened the Uzbek government's methods to those in the Soviet period. "The authorities told Gennady that if they give him a long prison sentence it won't be for religious activity – they understand that giving someone a three or four year sentence for religious activity will make a lot of noise."

The Protestant said they are likely to plant drugs on Chen – as they did with the young Baptist Tohar Haydarov, who received a ten-year sentence in March – or prosecute him for treason or for property offences.

Charges to follow raid on youth meeting?

Five police officers – including crime prevention officer Captain Husnuddin Mamatov – burst into a youth meeting held by a Pentecostal congregation in the town of Chirchik [Chirchiq] near Tashkent on 23 June, Protestants who asked not to be identified told Forum 18. Police questioned and filmed the more than 20 participants in the meeting. They also confiscated four copies of the Bible and a computer.

An investigation began over whether the group's leader, Stanislav Kim, should face charges under various Articles of the Code of Administrative Offences: Article 184-2 (illegal production, storage, import or distribution of religious materials), Article 201 (violation of the procedure for organising and conducting meetings, street processions or demonstrations), Article 202 (creating conditions for unapproved meetings, street processions and demonstrations), and Article 241 (violation of the procedure for teaching religious doctrines).

Forum 18 tried to reach Captain Mamatov on 13 July to find out why the meeting was raided, but the officer who answered his phone at the City Police told Forum 18 he was not there and put the phone down. In a subsequent call another officer said there was no-one by that name and put the phone down.

Church members – who insisted the raid was illegal – have lodged official complaints over the police action.

"Anti-Terror" operation targets religious book distributors

On 18 June, Judge D. Haliknazarova of Fergana [Farghona] City Criminal Court in eastern Uzbekistan found two Council of Churches Baptists guilty of violating Article 184-2 of the Code of Administrative Offences, according to the verdict seen by Forum 18. Vladimir Potekhin and Marina Avdeeva were each fined 113,040 Soms (437 Norwegian Kroner, 55 Euros or 70 US Dollars at the inflated official rate). The court also "considers it necessary" that the four Christian books confiscated from them be destroyed, the verdict records.

The verdict notes that the two were detained by police and the National Security Service secret police on 15 May during an "Anti-Terror" operation while they were "illegally" offering Christian books on the street "without appropriate documentation".

The 22 May "expert analysis" used in court, conducted by Fergana Pedagogical State University, claimed that the books were not authorised for distribution by the government's Religious Affairs Committee, "consist of information affecting the national integrity of the Republic of Uzbekistan" and contain material "not in accord with the principles of religious tolerance". "Such materials could be used for missionary activity," the verdict notes.

Church members complain that the use of an expert analysis by University staff is in defiance of a Cabinet of Ministers decree of April 2004, which declares that only the government's Religious Affairs Committee is authorised to conduct expert analyses of religious materials.

Despite this decree, such analyses of religious literature are frequently conducted by university staff.

Forum 18 was unable to reach Judge Haliknazarova to find out why an apparently unauthorised analysis was used in court.

Potekhin was fined on the same charge in February 2009. However, considering himself guilty of no offence he refused to pay the fine.

Pastor fined

Following an 11 June check-up on all the activities and documentation of the registered Baptist Union congregation in Zarafshan in the central Navoi [Nawoiy] Region, initiated by Alijon Kakhramonov, head of the Department for Work with Social and Religious Organisations of the Regional Justice Department, the church's pastor Dmitry Butov has been fined.

The Justice Department claimed that he had violated the Religion Law because four church workers are not paid, no annual audit of the value of Christian literature in the church had been undertaken and the church had bought a metal fence in May 2009 but it had not been put up round the church building.

"This is all nonsense," one Protestant told Forum 18, pointing out that many church workers want to offer their service to the congregation without pay and the Christian literature the church owns is not of great audit value. The Protestant added that none of these issues are covered in the church's registered statute.

The case was sent to Zarafshan Court where, on 24 June, Judge Nodir Rajapov found Pastor Butov guilty of breaking Article 240 Part 1 of the Code of Administrative Offences. He was fined five times the minimum monthly wage, 188,400 Soms (728 Norwegian Kroner, 92 Euros or 117 US Dollars at the inflated official rate). The Judge refused to give him a copy of the verdict, Protestants complained to Forum 18, insisting that he should simply pay the fine. Butov is appealing against the fine and is lodging complaints over the Justice Department's claims to various state bodies.

Kakhramonov's telephone went unanswered each time Forum 18 called between 12 and 14 July.

Fine and further court-ordered religious book destruction

On 1 April, Judge H. Hojiev of Tashkent District Criminal Court found Council of Churches Baptist Oksana Usmanova guilty in her absence of violating Article 227-22 Part 1 of the Code of Administrative Offences (failure to declare or incomplete declaration of goods [imported into the country]). She was fined 188,400 Soms (728 Norwegian Kroner, 92 Euros or 117 US Dollars at the inflated official rate), according to the verdict seen by Forum 18. The Judge also ordered that 72 Christian books confiscated from her be destroyed, including 28 copies of a Russian-language book entitled "Steps to the Knowledge of God".

However, the first Usmanova knew of the court case was in June, when she was informed of the fine by the court executor. She has since lodged an appeal and complaints to various state agencies, Protestants told Forum 18.

Usmanova was among three Baptist women fined in June 2009 for distributing Christian literature.

Illegal prosecution and fine

A member of a registered Baptist Union congregation in Angren in Tashkent Region has also been fined for "illegal" distribution of religious literature, Protestants told Forum 18. On 15 June, Judge M. Mirzaev of Angren Court found Jamilya Usmanova guilty of violating Article 184-2 of the Code of Administrative Offences and fined her 188,400 Soms (728 Norwegian Kroner, 92 Euros or 117 US Dollars at the inflated official rate). The court ordered the confiscation and destruction of three Christian books and eight DVDs.

Church members complained to Forum 18 that her prosecution was illegal, as the events they relate to took place back in February 2008. They point out that Article 36 of the Code requires cases to be brought to trial within two months of an alleged administrative offence.

Church members also say that crime prevention officer Maksud Markaev fabricated the case using testimony from a female local resident who had twice been prosecuted under the Criminal Code and twice more under the Code of Administrative Offences for theft and hooliganism. The same Judge Mirzaev had halted the resident's criminal trial in January 2010 under amnesty, but exactly three weeks before Usmanova's trial had sentenced the resident and her daughter to conditional sentences for forging documents.

The resident is "directly dependent" on the police, Protestants maintained to Forum 18. "On their instruction she could write whatever they want against anyone and about anything."

Forum 18 was unable to reach Markaev at the police to find out why testimony from the resident had been used. It was also unable to reach Judge Mirzaev to find out why activity had been punished long after the legal deadline to bring cases had passed.

Religious freedom concerns

Statement by the European Association of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses for the OSCE High-Level Conference on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination, Astana, 29 and 30 June 2010

EAJCW (30.06.2010) / HRWF (05.07.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Three of Jehovah's Witnesses serving prison terms have applied for amnesty. When the first one sought amnesty in February 2008, he was immediately found guilty of "violating the prison routine" which now disqualifies his being granted amnesty. As noted below, a similar pattern was observed in 2009 and this year.

Olim Turayev, a 34-year-old medical doctor and father of three small children from Samarkand and one of Jehovah's Witness, has been serving a four-year prison sentence since April 25, 2008. He was charged with teaching his religious beliefs to others and for organizing illegal religious activity, acts that, according to the Uzbekistan law, are punishable crimes (Articles 216 and 229(2) of the Criminal Code). On August 12, 2009, Turayev's attorney filed an appeal for amnesty with the prosecutor's office of the Pstdargom district of the Samarkand region. That same day, Turayev was taken to the Kattakurgan jail and later the Pstdargom court found him guilty of "violating the prison routine." His sentence was changed from an "open" to a "general" regime labor colony.

Later he was transferred to the "general" regime Tavaksay colony (Tashkent region). Hence, Turayev does not qualify for amnesty.

Abdubannob Akhmedov (age 32, citizen of Margilan, Fergana region) has been serving a four-year prison sentence since July 23, 2008, for violating Article 216 of the Uzbekistan Criminal Code, which penalizes activity of unregistered religions organizations. When Akhmedov requested amnesty in 2009, he was moved from the "open" regime settlement to the "general" regime colony in the town of Navoi (KIN 29). Thus, he is not eligible for amnesty.

Sergey Ivanov, age 20, was sentenced by the Margilan City Criminal Court on July 23, 2008, to three and a half years in an "open" labor colony for religious activity under Article 216 of the Uzbekistan Criminal Code. After applying for amnesty, he was accused of violating the "prison routine," and his sentence was changed from an "open" to a "general" colony. He was transferred to a prison in Tavaksay colony (Tashkent region). Thus, he is not eligible for amnesty.

Prison sentences for Jehovah's Witnesses who were found guilty of "criminal activity" would be eliminated if the government would accept applications for congregations in the localities where these Witnesses lived. We call upon the government of Uzbekistan to free Jehovah's Witnesses who are prisoners of conscience. This would be in compliance with the Uzbekistan Constitution and international guarantees of religious freedom.

A delegation of Jehovah's Witnesses is ready to meet with representatives of Uzbekistan attending the present high-level conference in order to clarify any misunderstanding and to promote a constructive dialogue.

Samarkand – city of closed Protestant churches

By Felix Corley,

Forum 18 (15.06.2010) / HRWF (16.06.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - One year after being stripped of state registration for "crude mistakes and inadequacies" – thus rendering all its religious activity illegal and its leaders and members liable to punishment – the Central Protestant Church in the central city of Samarkand [Samarqand] is fighting for survival. The church has failed in its challenge through numerous courts, including Uzbekistan's Supreme Court, Forum 18 has learnt. "For more than a year our church has been trying to establish the illegality of the stripping of registration," one church member told Forum 18. "All the courts either say it is not within their competence or remain silent."

The Central Church was the seventh Protestant church known to Forum 18 to have been stripped of registration in Samarkand by the Regional Justice Department in the past four years. At least one further local Protestant church has applied in vain for registration for the past decade. "Now all of us have been deprived of the fundamental right to pray together and worship God," one local church leader complained.

As successive Protestant churches have been closed down in Samarkand, local Protestants have often chosen to attend the ever-fewer open Protestant congregations.

Even registered communities face pressure. Pastor Andrei Kosulitsky, who leads the registered Baptist Church in Samarkand, was given an official warning in February 2009.

Unregistered religious activity banned

In defiance of Uzbekistan's international human rights commitments, all unregistered religious activity is banned and can be punished with heavy penalties.

State registration is very difficult to get for religious communities the state does not like. Jehovah's Witnesses have faced particular difficulties. Of the more than 30 communities believed to exist, only one now has state registration, in the town of Chirchik [Chirchiq] near the capital Tashkent.

In its submissions to the Universal Periodic Review of its human rights record at the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2009, Uzbekistan brushed off any complaints about the compulsory registration requirement and the difficulty many religious communities face acquiring registration.

Religious communities which have been able to get state registration often live in fear that such registration can be stripped from them at any moment, as has happened to mosques, churches and other religious communities.

Members of Tashkent's Protestant Church of Christ fear that a massive 16 May raid and imprisonment for up to 15 days of six church members might be a prelude to the stripping of registration.

Stripped of registration

Samarkand's Central Protestant Church – which was founded in September 1991 and is led by Pastor Sergei Kim – was stripped of registration at a Justice Department meeting on 27 March 2009, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. The decision, signed by Alisher Mardiyev, Head of Samarkand Regional Justice Department, was handed to Pastor Kim on 3 April. Samarkand Regional Justice Department claimed that the church building where it had been meeting for many years was a residential property and therefore not to be used as a place of worship.

Church members complain that the congregation has repeatedly tried to have the building redesignated over many years – in vain. They also complain that the Justice Department had ignored their letter of 25 February 2009 responding to its questions.

In the previous three years, local Protestants pointed out to Forum 18, the Regional Justice Department had already stripped registration from six other local Protestant congregations: Samarkand Church, Miral Church, the Seventh-day Adventist congregation, Esther Church, Grace Church and Namdemun Church.

In addition, Samarkand's Greater Grace Church has applied for registration in vain since 2000 and its members have been intermittently harassed and fined, most recently in February 2010.

The Samarkand Jehovah's Witness community also sought state registration in vain. Its application was rejected in June 2002, with the mayor explaining that there were already ten registered religious minorities and the city did not need any more. Two community members have been imprisoned in recent years for their religious activity.

Local Adventists told Forum 18 that their Samarkand congregation was stripped of its registration after a police raid. Officials said the church building was not registered as a place of worship. "The building is still standing but we've been banned from meeting there," one Adventist told Forum 18 on 15 June. "No other registered Adventist congregations exist in the city."

The Adventist congregation tried to regain its registration from the Regional Justice Department, most recently in 2009. "But officials there wouldn't even listen to our request," one Adventist noted sadly.

Long, fruitless legal battle

In the wake of the March 2009 stripping of registration, Central Protestant Church tried to defend its rights in court. Three days after receiving the decision, Pastor Kim lodged a challenge in Samarkand City Criminal Court. However, on 20 April Judge B. Vakhobov rejected the suit. On 2 June 2009 Pastor Kim took his challenge to Samarkand Regional Criminal Court. However, it rejected his suit on 27 June, referring him to the civil courts.

On 1 July 2009 Pastor Kim lodged a challenge to the stripping of registration in Samarkand City Civil Court. However, "in violation of procedural law", no response came.

Pastor Kim therefore brought a suit on 10 August 2009 to Uzbekistan's Supreme Court in Tashkent. However, no response from the court arrived. "We have been deprived of the right to defend ourselves in court," Pastor Kim wrote in a complaint to the General Prosecutor's Office in Tashkent on 18 February 2010. He lodged similar complaints to the Uzbek Parliament's Ombudsperson for Human Rights in Tashkent and the Presidential Administration.

After a further challenge in the Civil Court, it responded on 15 May that as both parties are legal entities, the suit has to be brought to the Economic Court.

On 19 May, Pastor Kim lodged a challenge in Samarkand Regional Economic Court. However, in a 27 May decision seen by Forum 18, Judge O. Khalmirzaev rejected the suit, insisting that it was not formulated correctly. He also ruled that its complaint was not the sort to be subject to the jurisdiction of Economic Courts.

Few comments, no explanation

Officials will not explain why so many local religious communities have been stripped of registration and why they will not return registration to them.

Mardiyev of Samarkand Regional Justice Department, who signed the cancellation of the Church's registration, was not available on 14 June to comment on the case. The official who answered Mardiyev's phone referred Forum 18 to Nosyr Berdiyev, the official responsible for registering religious organisations.

Berdiyev told Forum 18 on 15 June that Central Protestant Church should write a new letter asking for registration. "We will consider their request according the laws of the Republic of Uzbekistan," he responded. Asked if there was any hope that the church would be able to regain its registration, he responded: "I don't know what decision we will take. I am not a doctor."

Berdiyev would not give any details of how many other religious communities were registered or stripped of their registration in Samarkand Region. "We do not give such information over the phone."

No official at the Justice Ministry in Tashkent would explain why so many religious communities in Samarkand and elsewhere have been denied registration or stripped of their registration. On 15 June officials in several offices of the Ministry kept asking Forum 18 to call back, saying that the person responsible for registration of religious organisations was not there. Finally, Forum 18 was told to talk to Samarkand Regional Justice Department.

The state Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent refused to comment on any of the cases. The official (he did not give his name) who answered the telephone on 14 June of Artyk Yusupov – the Committee's Chairman – took down Forum 18's question but added: "You know very well that we don't give information over the phone. Please come to our office and we will talk."

Maruf Usmanov, the Uzbek Parliament's Deputy Ombudsperson, told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 14 June that Central Protestant Church "should apply for registration at the Regional Justice Department." Told that it was the same department that stripped it of registration, Usmanov declined to comment and referred Forum 18 to its Department for registering complaints.

An official of the Department, who did not give his name, confirmed to Forum 18 the complaint by Pastor Kim, and said that discussions between the Ombudsperson's Office and the Justice Ministry are underway. "Maybe the pastor should forward his complaint once again just to make sure the process speeds up," he said. He declined to make any further comment.

Religious repression in Samarkand

As elsewhere in Uzbekistan, religious communities in Samarkand face regular raids, fines, confiscations of religious literature and prison sentences. Three Protestants from an unregistered congregation were given massive fines in May 2009 for "illegal" religious literature and teaching. Their Christian books were ordered destroyed by the court, as routinely happens in Uzbekistan.

Other religious communities too have faced raids, imprisonments and punishments for religious activity in Samarkand. Eleven readers of the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi were given prison sentences of up to eleven years in July 2009 after five months' pre-trial detention.

A Hare Krishna festival being celebrated in a rented hall in Samarkand was raided and halted in February 2009.

Muslims jailed, lawyers, church and Christian former prisoners of conscience threatened

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (04.06.2010) / HRWF (15.06.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Uzbekistan has jailed and fined more Muslims engaged in peaceful religious activity, and threatened recently jailed and released Protestant Christians and those defending them, Forum 18 News Service has learned. It has also threatened to strip a church in the capital Tashkent of legal status, if church members continue to speak out about a raid, arrests, fines, jailings, book and equipment destructions and confiscations, as well as interruption of their worship service.

The state Religious Affairs Committee refused to comments on any of the cases. Through his Secretary, Committee Chair Artyk Yusupov told Forum 18 on 3 June to talk to Begzot Kadyrov, their leading specialist. Kadyrov stated that he did not want to make comments and put the phone down. The assistant of Muzaffar Akhmedjanov, advisor on Nationalities and Religions to Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov, on 3 June refused to comment any of the cases. She referred Forum 18 back to the Religious Affairs Committee. "We have not received any complaints," she stated. "Please talk to the

Religious Affairs Committee." She commented that "I don't know what to say", when told that Committee officials refused to discuss the cases.

Muslims jailed, fined and given suspended sentences

Following a closed trial, which took place outside the capital Tashkent, the Tashkent Regional Court under Judge Ikhtiyar Doniyarov on 27 May imposed prison sentences of up to six years and fines on 19 Muslims. Roadblocks were set up by the authorities around the court building.

Six defendants were given sentences in a labour camp. Well-known Muslim religious journalist Hairulla Hamidov, as well as Abdukarim Inamutdinov, Orol Tugaymurotov and Bahodir Batyrov were all given six year terms. Anvarjon Kayumov and Mukhamadniyoz Kayumov were each given four year terms, human rights defender Surat Ikramov told Forum 18 on 1 June.

Nine defendants - Umid Inamutdinov, Zoir Jurayev, Gulom Ziyoyev, Abdurahim Bayboyev, Ulugbek Payiziyev, Doniyor Ibrahimov, Abrar Turakulov, Davlatjon Ibrahimov and Tohirjon Ismoilov - were given three year suspended prison terms and freed in the courtroom, Ikramov said.

Four defendants - Aziz Saidov, Saidhuja Erhujayev, Jahongir Hikmatov and Izzatulla Saidullayev - who were not put in custody during the prosecution, were fined unknown amounts.

All 19 defendants faced a variety of serious Criminal Code charges.

A Tashkent Regional Court official asked Forum 18 to call back in three hours, when asked to comment on the case. Called back later, the same official said it was a wrong number.

"The case was fabricated," human rights defender Ikramov complained. He said that the trial was conducted in "flagrant violation" of the Criminal Procedure Code. Ikramov complained that the defendants were subjected to physical and psychological torture by police during the pretrial investigation. "The court did not prove the guilt of the defendants, and none of the defendants pleaded guilty of the charges brought against them." Lawyers in the case have said that the defendants will appeal against the court decision, Ikramov told Forum 18.

Fergana Muslims following Nursi's approach jailed

Uzbekistan frequently prosecutes and jails readers of the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi. The latest victims of this policy are 10 Muslims sentenced by Judge Sherali Komilov of the Fergana [Farghona] Regional Criminal Court on 31 May. The 10 were all jailed: Suhrob Zokirov was jailed for eight years; Islom Alikulov was jailed for seven years; Islom Manopov, Alisher Karimov, Farhod Sarymsokov, Botyr Sheraliyev and Kudrat Sulonov were jailed for six years; and Nosyr Mamazhanov, Muhammad Yarmatov and Ramzhon Abdukodyrov were jailed for five years and two months.

All the prisoners of conscience were charged under Uzbekistan's Criminal Code's articles 244-1 ("preparation or distribution of materials threatening public security and public order") and 244-2 ("creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist or fundamentalist or other banned organisations"), human rights defender Ikramov told Forum 18.

Although the Court did not prove the guilt of the defendants, some of them asked for forgiveness, which was ignored by the court, Ikramov complained. "Close relatives of the defendants consider that the criminal case was fabricated, and that the defendants' only guilt was that they were Muslim and prayed regularly," he stated.

Manopov's family on 1 June confirmed his conviction to Forum 18. They said they were not going to appeal since the court made a decision "based on the law" and "nothing can be changed now." The relative thanked Forum 18 for its concern, and said that "we live in this country, and we need to obey its laws."

Relatives and friends of those sentenced for peaceful religious activity are often reluctant to speak publicly, for fear that this may attract state reprisals against themselves or those known to them.

The official who answered the Fergana Court Chair's telephone on 3 June referred Forum 18 to Judge Komilov. Judge Komilov's phone went unanswered. When Forum 18 tried to reach him through the other phones of the court, it was given several responses. These varied between him hearing a case, or being on a business trip in the region.

More jailings

A court in the southern Surkhandarya Region has punished Obidjon Toshpulatov, Chori Tagayev, and Shavkat Mengniyazov, for "spreading fundamentalist religious ideas among the population," two government sponsored news agencies reported on 19 May. Both of the agencies - press-uz.info and 12.uz - published identical articles under two different headings: "Wolves in Lamb skins" and "Nursi extremist organisation's followers convicted in Uzbekistan". The agencies stated that the three were given prison sentences of between four and eight years.

The Chair of Surkhandarya Regional Court through his Assistant (who did not give their names) on 3 June listened to Forum 18's questions on when the three were tried and what charges were brought against them. Forum 18 was asked to call back in two hours, but when the Assistant answered the phone then they hung up the phone as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself.

"Instead the lawyers were threatened"

Three members of Tashkent's Protestant Church of Christ - Assistant Pastor Artur Avanesyan, Vyacheslav Dechkov and Bahodiyr Adambaev - who were given 15-day administrative arrests were all released on time on 2 June, Forum 18 was told by a church member on 3 June.

However, their lawyers have been threatened by the authorities that "they could be stripped of their licenses if they continue to defend these cases." Similarly, the Religious Affairs Committee has threatened to strip the registered church of its legal status if church members continue to complain about the raid, arrests, fines, jailings, book and equipment destructions and confiscations, as well as interruption of their worship service.

The Church of Christ has been able to meet for worship for the last two weeks, after the raid and the arrests. But electricity to the church building has been cut off by the Tashkent Fire Brigade, and the church cannot use its offices as they were sealed by law-enforcement agencies, a church member told Forum 18 on 3 June.

Assistant Pastor Avanesyan was held in custody separately from the other two prisoners of conscience. Although he was not physically harassed, he was put under "psychologically strenuous" conditions as the two non-Protestants he was held with were later given prison sentences. "We believe it was done to make the Pastor think that he

would also be imprisoned," a Protestant told Forum 18 on 3 June. "He has lost a lot of weight because of this pressure."

A church member complained on 3 June that the authorities have not taken seriously the church's complaint of 26 May against unlawful actions by law-enforcement agencies. "Instead the lawyers were threatened." The complaint was sent to President Karimov, the Religious Affairs Committee, and law-enforcement agencies.

Two Protestant former prisoners of conscience threatened

Two Protestant former prisoners of conscience, Azamat Rajapov and Abdusattor Kurbonov, have had to leave their homes in Termez, in the southern southern Surkhandarya Region, because of pressure on them by the police, a local Protestant told Forum 18 on 3 June. "They both saw unidentified persons in plain clothes around their homes often, and they were followed when they were on the street," the Protestant complained.

"In one instance one of them was told by a police officer that they will always breathe down their necks, as long as they continue their Christian activity," Forum 18 was told. Several times since the Protestants' release, copies of newspaper articles attacking them by name have been anonymously sent to them. Local Protestants strongly suspect that this is an attempt by the authorities to intimidate the two former prisoners of conscience.

Uzbekistan frequently uses the mass media to encourage intolerance of religious minorities and freedom of religion or belief, and has used this tactic against the two former prisoners of conscience specifically.

The two Protestants were each sentenced on to jail terms on 23 April after Uzbekistan resumed short-term jailings of members of religious minorities.

Large raid and almost immediate trial starts against registered church

By Felix Corley,

Forum 18 (17.05.2010) / HRWF (19.05.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Uzbekistan's police, National Security Service (NSS) secret police, Tax Inspectorate, Fire Brigade, and Sanitary-Epidemiological Service raided one of the biggest Protestant churches in the capital Tashkent during its Sunday morning worship service yesterday (16 May), Protestants who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals have told Forum 18 News Service. Eight members of the Church of Christ, a Russian-language Full Gospel congregation, were arrested including Assistant Pastor Artur Avanesyan.

The eight were held for 24 hours at Tashkent's Mirzo-Ulugbek District Police Station until being released at 5 pm on 17 May. A District Court trial began shortly afterwards. "Although conditions were not good, they were not maltreated at the police station as we had feared," one Protestant told Forum 18. The trial of all eight has begun and is due to continue tomorrow (18 May). Church members and relatives were denied access to the initial hearing. Only the defendants' lawyer was allowed into the Court.

Pastor Avanesyan is facing the most numerous charges under five Articles of the Code of Administrative Offences, Protestants told Forum 18 as the initial hearing concluded. The Court has refused to publicly disclose what articles Pastor Avanesyan and the other defendants are being charged under. The Prosecution claims to have a letter from a father accusing the church of forcing his children to change their faith.

Officials refuse to discuss raid

During the 16 May raid, officials confiscated Christian books, offertory money and computers. "It turns out that they found Christian books during the search! How terrible! Christian books! In a registered Christian church!" one local Protestant told Forum 18 sarcastically. "It seems Christian books should only be found at the [government's] Religious Affairs Committee."

Severe censorship is enforced against all religious literature of any description.

Early today (17 May) the duty officer at Mirzo-Ulugbek District Police denied that officers had raided the Church of Christ, and that the eight church members were being held at the police station. "We don't have any Artur Avanesyan here," the officer – who would not give his name – claimed to Forum 18. Calls later in the day were cut off as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself.

A duty officer at the NSS secret police in Tashkent refused to discuss the raid. "What's it got to do with you?" the NSS officer told Forum 18 on 17 May. "It's an internal issue for our country." He then put Forum 18 through to his superior, whom he did not name. However, the superior claimed not to be able to hear Forum 18's questions about this and other raids on religious communities, and then put the phone down.

The NSS press officer, reached the same day, who would not give his name, told Forum 18 categorically: "The National Security Service has never violated the rights of religious believers." Told that believers of a range of faiths have repeatedly informed Forum 18 of the NSS secret police's role in suppressing freedom of religion or belief, the press officer put the phone down.

The official who answered the telephone on 17 May of Begzot Kadyrov, the official at the state Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent who controls Christian communities, told Forum 18 that he was away on a work trip. The official refused to answer any questions, claiming (as is their usual practice) that he is a student at an institute undergoing a practical assignment at the Committee.

Regular NSS secret police church raiders

Among officers raiding the Church of Christ were Timur Daminov and Rustam Tajihanov, who tell Protestant churches they are raiding that they work for the ordinary police. However, Protestants have told Forum 18 they believe the two work for the NSS secret police.

Daminov and Tajihanov led an August 2009 raid on Sunday worship at Donam Evangelical Christian Saints Church, in Tashkent's Yunusabad District. In the wake of the raid, the pastor and three other church leaders were each sentenced to 15 days' imprisonment.

The raid on the Church of Christ is the latest in a series of similar raids on Protestant congregations. On 10 April, police raided a Protestant church's youth conference, held in the village of Baraj in Bostanlyk District of Tashkent Region.

Following that raid, three church members – Denis Shirkov, Janna Kim (the owner of the property where they were meeting) and Ravil Gaifullin – were found guilty on 27 April of violating Article 202 of the Code of Administrative Offences ("creating the conditions for conducting unsanctioned gatherings, meetings, street processions and demonstrations"). According to the verdict seen by Forum 18, Judge I. Obidov of Bostanlyk District Court

fined each of them ten times the minimum monthly wage, 376,800 Soms (1,410 Norwegian Kroner, 183 Euros or 225 US Dollars at the inflated official rate).

On 12 April, police, tax inspectors and local officials raided Eternal Life Protestant Church in Tashkent's Yakkasarai District.

Forum 18 has learnt that on 14 April, a Methodist congregation in Tashkent was also raided by police, accompanied by the Tax Inspectorate and the Fire Brigade. Daminov and Tajihanov took part in that raid also, Protestants told Forum 18.

Raids part of wider harassment

The raids on Protestant churches come amid a continuing crackdown on religious activity across Uzbekistan. Many religious believers of a variety of faiths have been given long prison sentences over recent years to punish them for their religious activity, including Muslims, Protestant Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Baptist prisoner of conscience Tohar Haydarov was given a ten-year jail term on drugs charges in Guliston in March. Church members insisted to Forum 18 that the charges were fabricated to punish him for his faith. The trial of Muslim journalist Hairulla Hamidov and 18 others began in Yangiyul near Tashkent on 29 April. More readers of the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi were arrested in late April in Fergana [Farghona] Region of eastern Uzbekistan and are expected to be put on trial.

Five-hour raid

Officers of Tashkent's Mirzo-Ulugbek District Police and the NSS secret police in uniform and in civilian clothes arrived at the centrally-located Church of Christ at about 11 am, an hour after the morning service had begun, Protestants told Forum 18. The officers began filming those present, including children at a separate children's service in the church building, despite protests by church members. Outside the church building, the police wrote down the registration numbers of all the cars. However, officers did not stop the worship service.

Once the service was over, officers blocked the exits, trying to get the names and identity details of as many of the several hundred church members present as possible. They pressured as many church members as they could into writing statements.

Around 1 pm, officers summoned officials of the Fire Service, Tax Inspectorate and Sanitary-Epidemiological Service to the church building. "They were instructed to find some violations," one Protestant told Forum 18.

Officers searched the entire church building for over five hours. "They searched every room, every cupboard, every desk and every box," one Protestant told Forum 18. "They even emptied the offertory box and took the money." Officers were especially interested to find US Dollars in the box.

Six computers were confiscated and "many" Christian books, all in Russian. The officer who signed the confiscation record was E. Hairullaev of the Anti-Terrorism Police. The books have now been sent for an "expert analysis".

Among documents seized were some 390 permission forms signed by parents to allow their children to attend the church. Religious communities are required by law to have such written permission from parents. However, Protestants expressed concern that officials now know the names and addresses of all the parents who attend the church with their children.

In mid-afternoon, police took eight church members, including Assistant Pastor Avanesyan, and several others to the Mirzo-Ulugbek Police Station. Several were taken for refusing to write statements demanded by the police while two others were taken for trying to film the raid on a mobile phone.

As the church's leaders were in detention, the church cancelled its scheduled Sunday evening service, Protestants complained. "The church had no choice – it was forced to do this."

Are authorities seeking to close church?

Protestants expressed concern to Forum 18 that the authorities might be looking for an excuse to close the church. They point out that it has had state registration since August 1999. They say the Tashkent Justice Department conducted a routine check-up (as it does for all registered religious communities) in early March and found only a minor "violation". The church had not been sending records of its council meetings to the Justice Department. Although this is not required in law, church members have complied with this.

Protestants insisted to Forum 18 that the church has filed the regular quarterly reports to the Justice Department and the Religious Affairs Committee as required.

No one at the Tashkent Justice Department was prepared to talk to Forum 18 on 17 May.

A recent high-profile court case, which has been used by the authorities to incite intolerance of freedom of religion and belief, was also used to remove the country's registered Baptist leadership. Baptists have repeatedly insisted that the charges made by the authorities were false.

As part of the routine fines of people for having "illegal" religious literature, one such case has featured an alleged "expert analysis" stating that the New Testament is a book banned for import into and distribution in Uzbekistan (see forthcoming F18News article).

Two 15-day jail sentences for prisoners of conscience

Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (29.04.2010) / HRWF (04.05.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Two Protestant Christians in southern Uzbekistan have been given 15 day jail terms, local sources have told Forum 18 News Service. Azamat Rajapov and Abdusattor Kurbonov were apparently sentenced for unregistered religious activity and began their jail terms on 23 April. No notice was given of the trial and the first the prisoners' families and friends knew was a brief telephone call from one informing them the two were in jail for 15 days. The cases mark a resumption of the policy of using 5 to 15-day jail sentences against selected Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. In a separate case the head of the police in Almalyk, near the capital Tashkent, has continued sending letters threatening religious believers with criminal charges. In incidents unrelated to these two cases Forum 18 continues to be made aware of cases of torture, and of women (and sometimes men) detained for their religious activity being targeted by male officials with overt or implied threats of sexual violence. Forum 18 notes that it is highly unusual for victims to want to document their experiences publicly.

Two members of the Full Gospel Church in Termez, in southern Uzbekistan close to the border with Afghanistan, were each sentenced to 15 days in jail on 23 April, Protestant

sources have told Forum 18 News Service. Azamat Rajapov and Abdusattor Kurbonov were found guilty of breaking Administrative Code Articles 240 ("violation of the law on religious organisations") and 241 ("teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately"), for which 15 days' imprisonment is the maximum penalty.

In 2009, 21 Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses are known to have been given jail sentences of between 5 and 15 days for their religious activity. The short-term jailings appear to have abruptly stopped in late August 2009, but have now re-started. Much longer jail terms are given to Muslims the authorities prosecute for religious activity.

Where are the prisoners of conscience being held?

Local Protestants have also complained to Forum 18 that court verdicts have so far not been given in writing to the victims' families.

A local Protestant, who did not want to be identified for fear of state reprisals, said that family members were not told either where their relatives were being detained or tried, despite asking two different courts and Termez Police. The two Protestants were – the families were finally told – tried by Judge Kurbon Tangirov of Uchkyzyl District Criminal Court in Termez City Court, the Protestant told Forum 18 on 28 April. It is not clear why the two church members were tried in Termez by a judge from a nearby district, and not by a Termez judge.

The court would not give any details except a telephone number for Judge Tangirov, and asked the family to call him, the Protestant said. "However, no one has answered the telephone, which the family have tried to call for the last two days."

Forum 18's calls to the number also were not answered on 28 and 29 April.

Eventually, after repeated enquiries to Termez Police, the families were told that the police were holding the two prisoners. Khayrullo Sodikov, Termez Deputy Police Chief, confirmed to Forum 18 that Rajapov and Kurbonov were being imprisoned by the police in Termez. "We will be free them after one day," he claimed to Forum 18 on 29 April.

Deputy Police Chief Sodikov refused to state why the Protestants were arrested, but said that they were not under 15-day arrest. He then refused to speak further to Forum 18.

Termez City Court officials initially refused to speak to Forum 18 on 28 April. Eventually a court official referred Forum 18 to Judge Oktam Khalikov, the Court's Chair. The official who answered that phone said that he was Judge Khalikov. But when Forum 18 asked about the case, the official then claimed: "I am actually Judge Khalikov's assistant and I do not know about the case." Asked what the families of the arrested Protestants should do, the official said, "I do not know what to say." He then hung up the phone.

Rajapov was among local church members fined 50 times the minimum monthly wage, for exercising their freedom of religion or belief in October 2007.

No warning arrests and jailings

The arrest and jailing of the two Protestants came as a surprise for the members of the Full Gospel Church, and the prisoners of conscience's families and friends.

A local Protestant told Forum 18 on 28 April that the arrest and imprisonment of Rajapov and Kurbonov was unexpected, as there was no prior warning or summons to a court. Both men left home by car on the morning of 23 April. The first news of their

imprisonment was when one of the two men had a very short conversation with his wife, after 5 pm, saying they were both imprisoned for 15 days and asking for his car to be collected from Termez Police Station.

Pressure on other church members

Members of the Full Gospel Church in nearby Sherabad and Jarkurgan are known to have been put under strong police pressure to write statements against Rajapov, a local Protestant confirmed to Forum 18.

Media attack

On 24 March, one month prior to the imprisonments, the government-sponsored Press-uz.info news agency published an article entitled "Like pastor, like flock" attacking Rajapov and the Full Gospel Church. "Chori Eshmurodov", the author of the article, claims that he is a former church member. Media articles have been used before by the authorities to attack people exercising their freedom of religion or belief.

Rajapov is said to have "enticed" the author by "promising him material help and happiness," which he ultimately did not get. "They [Rajapov's family] have two cars, a house in Termez and are building a shop in Termez. I also heard that they have bought two houses in a central area in Tashkent, in one of which his parents and brother Anvar are living. Anvar also has a car, and like his brother he is a leader in a large Pentecostal community. He receives large financial support for winning young students into the ranks of his church. I thought that I also would soon become rich like them, but it never happened."

The author alleges that "Azamat [Rajapov] receives tens of thousands of US dollars for spreading his faith in the region and for helping out new Uzbek converts. I talked to many new converts who denied to me that they, just like me, have ever received any money from Azamat. I understood that he is not only deceiving me and others, but also his sponsors by appropriating money given by foreigners," the article claims. It then goes on to attack other named members of the Church for "unregistered activity" and claims that "I decided to publish my confession because I want people to read this and not believe crooks like Rajapov".

Local Protestants strongly reject the article's allegations. One Protestant described the claim of Rajapov receiving huge funds from abroad as "a ridiculous lie." Another Protestant denounced the article as "a lie against Azamat".

Neither Protestant had ever heard of "Chori Eshmurodov", the author named by Press-uz.info. "No-one in our Church knows any such person of this name or like the author of the article," one told Forum 18.

Press-uz news agency would not speak to Forum 18 on 29 April, asking Forum 18 to ring back in one hour. When Forum 18 called again, nobody answered the telephone. The Uzbek mass media is often used by the authorities to encourage intolerance of minority religious communities and freedom of religion and belief.

Torture threats against women

Women (and occasionally men) detained to punish them for their religious activity by the police or National Security Service (NSS) secret police can be targeted by male officials with overt or implied threats of sexual violence. Forum 18 notes that it is very unusual for male and female victims to want to document their experiences publicly, for fear of state reprisals, because of the traumatic nature of their experiences, and because of strong social pressures against women in particular speaking out about male violence. In

addition, cultural traditions of "honour" can destroy a woman's good name if she is known to or thought to have been the victim of sexual violence or even if she has been alone – for example overnight - with male police officers who are unrelated to her.

In a not untypical incident in 2010 in a part of Uzbekistan not indicated in this or recent Forum 18 articles - the month, location, belief involved and details of which are confidential - female religious believers detained during a police raid were threatened with having their clothes forcibly removed, being tortured with electricity, and then pictures of them being raped by male criminals being made public.

The UN Committee Against Torture found in November 2007 that the use of torture by state officials is "routine" in Uzbekistan. Torture and threats of its use continues against people of all faiths.

Criminal charges threatened again

In yet another incident, Colonel A. Sirojiddinov, head of the police in Almalyk [Olmalik] near the capital Tashkent, has continued to threaten religious believers by letter with criminal prosecution for their religious activity.

In a letter dated 16 March but received on 25 April, a letter Forum 18 has seen, Colonel Sirojiddinov threatened Sergei Zarubin, a member of an unregistered Protestant Church in Almalyk. "If you repeat the same violation [unregistered religious activity] in future, I warn you that you will be brought criminal charges against under Uzbekistan's Criminal Code's article 244 part 3," the letter declares.

As in his earlier letter dated 13 March to a local Baptist, as Article 244 part 3 does not exist it appears that Police Colonel Sirojiddinov may mean Article 244-3 ("illegal production, storage, import or distribution of religious literature"). Zarubin, along with six others, was in September 2009 convicted for unregistered religious activity.

Attempts to reach Colonel Sirojiddinov and his Deputy Hikmatov on 29 April were not successful, as their telephones went unanswered.

Police Colonel Sirojiddinov's letter is – like his earlier letter - "confusing", a human rights defender, who for fear of state reprisals wished to remain unnamed, told Forum 18 on 29 April. "Article 244 has only one part and punishes mass riots," he noted. However, the human rights defender stated, Article 244-3 – which the Colonel may mean - punishes "illegal production, storage, import or distribution of religious literature" with fines of between 100 and 250 times the monthly minimum salary, or correctional labour for up to three years.

Raids, fines, more raids, more fines

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (23.04.2010) / HRWF (26.03.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Protestant Christians in Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] in north-western Uzbekistan have complained to Forum 18 News Service of mounting raids, threats, fines, literature confiscations and court-ordered destruction of religious literature. In two recent cases in the region, police demanded that Protestants sign statements that they will not associate with other Christians or have any Christian books in their homes. Students in the region and elsewhere in the country have also been put under pressure to be vigilant against, among other things, what the authorities describe as "alien for us religious and extremist influences and the impact of inferior 'mass culture' ".

The raids, threats, fines and literature confiscations in Karakalpakstan and other regions of Uzbekistan mirror similar recent incidents in the capital Tashkent and the surrounding Region.

The latest raids, fines, threats and literature confiscations come as religious believers of a variety of faiths – including Muslims, Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses – have faced or face criminal trials to punish them for peaceful religious activity (see forthcoming F18News article).

Akhmat Ismailov, Deputy Director of the government-sponsored National Human Rights Centre of Uzbekistan, and officials of the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent refused to discuss this harassment of religious communities with Forum 18 on 21 April.

Threat of renewed imprisonment

On 8 April, police officers in Karakalpakstan's capital Nukus summoned for interrogation Aimurat Khayburahmanov, a Protestant who has previously been prosecuted for his faith. Officers demanded that he sign a statement that he will not associate with other Christians, or have any Christian books in his home. "These demands were illegal," one local Protestant complained to Forum 18.

Khayburahmanov refused to sign any statement, and asked why this was being demanded. In response, the police told him that all Christians are recorded on file and especially he, given that he has already been prosecuted for his faith. Khayburahmanov refused to answer any of their further questions, despite police threats that they would have him imprisoned again if he refused to give weekly statements pledging not to meet with other Christians. He was freed after three hours, but was told he would have to return to the police station.

Khayburahmanov was amnestied in September 2008, after being held for three months for teaching religion without official permission and alleged religious extremism.

Karakalpakstan's tight state-imposed restrictions

State-imposed restrictions on all faiths are particularly tight in Karakalpakstan, and all non-Russian Orthodox and non-state-controlled Muslim activity is banned and a criminal offence. Students engaging in religious activity in the region have long been a focus of official hostility, and risk being expelled from their courses.

Officials have continued their attempts to counter what they regard as illegal "missionary activity" among Karakalpakstan's students. Young people from the Region were summoned to a meeting at Academic Lycee No. 2 attached to Karakalpakstan State University also attended by mahalla (urban district) leaders and officers of the police (and possibly also the National Security Service (NSS) secret police), the official government Uza news agency reported on 16 April. The students were warned to be vigilant against a number of unclearly defined issues, including "religious extremism". A film attacking "religious extremism and missionary activity" was also shown.

"Attracting believers of one confession to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity" is illegal under Article 240 part 2 of the Administrative Code, a law which clearly breaks international human rights standards Uzbekistan has signed.

Parents whose children attend religious "sects" and mosques, as well as the children themselves, have been the targets of official bullying elsewhere the country. The

authorities nationally also use films to encourage intolerance of religious minorities, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Presbyterians and Methodists.

Similar lectures to the one at Lycee No. 2 have been held in other parts of Uzbekistan. One meeting in Fergana [Farghona] in eastern Uzbekistan, UZA reported on 30 March, specifically criticised "missionary activity". These meetings are part of a government programme for 2010, designated "The Year for the Harmonious Development of the Generation".

The decree approving this programme, signed by President Islam Karimov on 27 January, ordered a series of measures to counter topics including "alien for us religious and extremist influences and the impact of inferior 'mass culture' ", "drug addiction", and "alcoholism". It did not specify which beliefs are considered "alien" or why they should be countered. The Religious Affairs Committee is among the government agencies supposed to take part in the programme.

Forum 18 has been unable to find out why restrictions on religious practice in Karakalpakstan are so tight. The telephone of Nurula Jamolov, Karakalpakstan's senior religious affairs official, went unanswered each time Forum 18 rang between 20 and 22 April.

Karakalpakstan Protestants fined

The threat to reimprison Khayburahmanov is the latest incident of what local Protestants have told Forum 18 is increasing harassment of church members in Karakalpakstan. They said that by mid-April, five Protestants had been fined under the Code of Administrative Offences since January 2010.

In one recent case, of which Forum 18 has seen the verdict, Judge M. Berdimuratov of Nukus Criminal Court heard a case under Administrative Code Article 241 ("illegal religious teaching") on 1 March against Svetlana Amanjanova. Although she was not fined, merely being warned, the judge ruled that four confiscated religious books (including a full Bible and a New Testament) and CDs be destroyed. However, the Prosecutor complained about the judgment to the Karakalpakstan Supreme Court and at a new trial she was fined five months' minimum wage, or 188,400 Soms (720 Norwegian Kroner, 90 Euros or 120 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rates).

Uzbek courts regularly order that religious literature confiscated from religious believers be destroyed, as happened in Nukus in February.

Further Karakalpakstan raids and threats

In addition, local Karakalpakstan Protestants say 15 church members have been warned by the Prosecutor's Office not to meet with other Christians or keep Christian literature in their homes. Forum 18 has seen four written warnings by the Nukus District Prosecutor's Office from 9 and 10 March that individuals risked being prosecuted under Article 244-3 of the Criminal Code ("illegal production, storage, import or distribution of religious literature"), which carries a maximum penalty for repeat offenders of three years in jail.

Local Protestants complained that police officers "burst into church members' homes without any reason" to conduct searches. "When they find any Christian literature they immediately draw up a record of a violation," they told Forum 18. "In several cases, police planted Christian literature on church members and then accused them of possessing and distributing religious books." They added that summonses to the Prosecutor's Office to sign statements not to meet with other Christians or hold Christian literature are increasing.

On 1 February, police burst into the home of a Protestant woman whose brother had just died. According to local Protestants, officers insulted those present, accusing them of "betraying" their faith, searched the house and confiscated New Testaments in Karakalpak and Russian that had belonged to the deceased man. The woman tried to lodge an official complaint the following day, but the police refused to accept it.

In March, Prosecutor's Office official I. Kurbanbaev summoned several church members who live in the Kyz-ketken district of Nukus, Protestants told Forum 18. They too were ordered to write such statements. Kurbanbaev threatened that any of them who would not renounce their Christian faith would be imprisoned. "The religion of our country is only Islam," he was quoted as telling them.

Officials at Nukus City Prosecutor's Office declined on 22 April to put Forum 18 through to Kurbanbaev. They insisted that they could not answer Forum 18's question as to why he had demanded that individuals renounce their faith. "We are an official state body and can only answer written questions."

Kuvasai Baptists fined

Meanwhile, in Kuvasai in Fergana Region of eastern Uzbekistan three Council of Churches Baptists failed in their attempt to have punishments overturned for "illegal preparation, storage, import or distribution of religious literature" under Article 184-2 of the Code of Administrative Offences.

The three – Nikolai Savinov, Galina Tolstosheeva and Olga Rustamova – were originally fined by Judge Sh. Hashimov of Kuvasai Court on 2 February. Savinov was fined 50 times the minimum monthly wage, 1,884,000 Soms (7,192 Norwegian Kroner, 905 Euros or 1,218 US Dollars). The two women were each fined 20 times the minimum monthly wage, 753,600 Soms (2,850 Norwegian Kroner, 360 Euros, or 480 US Dollars). As in many other cases, the verdict ordered the destruction of Bibles and other confiscated religious literature.

On 16 March, in a decision seen by Forum 18, Judge A. Chorakulov of Fergana Regional Appeal Court rejected their appeal.

The decision notes Savinov's earlier prosecutions for religious activity, most recently in August 2009, when he was fined three times the minimum monthly wage under Administrative Code Article 241 ("teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately").

Late notice of punishment

In Karshi [Qarshi] in central Uzbekistan, Protestant Christian Obid Abdullaev only received a written verdict fining him for owning religious literature on 13 April, two months after the court hearing, Protestants have told Forum 18. Abdullaev, a member of the local Council of Churches Baptist congregation, was found guilty on 9 February by Shahrizabz District Court of Kashkadarya Region of violating Article 240 Part 2 of the Code of Administrative Offences ("attracting believers of one confession to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity"). Judge A. Rasulov fined him 113,040 Soms (431 Norwegian Kroner, 54 Euros or 73 US Dollars at the inflated official rate), arguing that Abdullaev's circumstances (he is an invalid) meant there was reason to give a fine lower than the maximum. The judge ordered two Bibles and four other Christian books to be destroyed.

Abdullaev argues that the punishment is illegal, and has complained to various state agencies.

Religious literature seizures continue

Uzbekistan also regularly seizes what it claims is "prohibited" religious literature. During several customs checks in various regions, the Customs Service seized 1,374 religious books and six discs, the country's Milliy Tiklanish newspaper reported on 17 March. It said most of the seized material related to the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Officials at the State Customs Committee in Tashkent, which oversees the Customs Service, declined on 22 April to answer by telephone any of Forum 18's questions about how and why it seizes religious literature, and whether such literature is destroyed.

Internet censorship continues

By Felix Corley and Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (16.03.2010) / HRWF (26.03.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Uzbekistan's internet censorship was immediately evident on 9 March, when internet users in the country were blocked from viewing a Russian-language news article on Lenta.ru (reposted from the website Uznews.net) about the difficulties a Muslim in Samarkand [Samarqand] encountered in getting a passport while wearing a beard. Uznews.net itself has long been blocked in Uzbekistan. The Russian news website Ferghana.ru – which reported the blocking – is one of a number of Russian-based news websites which Forum 18 News Service notes are blocked by the Uzbek government within the country. Also blocked are three prominent Russian-based religious news websites, Portal-credo.ru, Religion.ng.ru and I-r-p.ru.

Internet users in Uzbekistan are not a large percentage of the population, although the numbers are growing. Possibly around 2 million people out of a population of over 28 million use the internet, if the official statistics are to be believed. The costs of internet access in the county mean that many users are from the more economically privileged part of the population, which is not where most targets of the state's human rights abuses - such as violations of freedom of religion or belief - are to be found.

Blocking of websites is done at the instigation of the National Security Service (NSS) secret police. Internet service providers blame the blocking of sites on Uznet, owned by the state provider Uzbektelecom and through which all ISPs have to connect to the internet. Uznet insists that sites are already blocked by the NSS. "We don't block websites – this is done by the NSS secret police. The NSS open the connections for us – they have all the equipment there," an Uznet employee told Forum 18. Uzbekistan has long barred access to more websites than any other Central Asian country

NSS reaction to attempts to visit banned websites can be swift. An example of this occurred in 2006 in a mahalla (district) of the capital Tashkent. A near neighbour of a source Forum 18 spoke to tried to log on at home to a political opposition website. Within fifteen minutes the NSS secret police had arrived at his home to warn him not to access such sites. Internet cafes have long displayed notices warning users not to access "religious or pornographic sites". In these cafes staff have long been under instructions to monitor sites visited by customers, and to report visits to banned sites.

Sources who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18 that the NSS secret police also uses the internet to hunt for political activists and religious believers within Uzbekistan conducting activity it does not like. Sources told Forum 18 of a case several years ago when some South Koreans working for a non-governmental organisation in Uzbekistan had posted information about their religious activity while in the country on a Korean-

language website. The NSS had discovered what had been published and took action against the individuals.

Extensive internet censorship

Despite relatively low numbers of internet users, Uzbekistan operates the most extensive website blocking of all the former Soviet republics. Independent news sites in Uzbek and Russian based abroad are routinely blocked, including Uznews.net, Ferghana.ru, Centrasia.ru and the Rferl.org Radio Free Europe website. Forum 18's own website Forum18.org has also been blocked, although today (16 March) one source in the country was able to view the website without problems. Many of these websites include news of violations of religious freedom in Uzbekistan as part of their coverage. Political opposition sites as well as radical Islamic sites – such as those of the Hizb-ut Tahrir movement - are likewise blocked.

Asked why these websites are blocked, Elbek Dalimov, Head of the Press Service of Uzbekistan's State Agency of Communications and Information, told Forum 18 on 16 March that he is not familiar with these sites.

Dalimov went on to claim that his agency does not block any websites. Asked whether the State Agency did not implement any rules or regulations over the internet, Dalimov said that "we in licensing agreements with internet providers agree that they will not, for example, open access to pornographic or terrorist sites."

Three prominent Russian religious news websites blocked are Portal-credo.ru, which publishes its own articles and republishes many others from a wide variety of news sources; the religion supplement of Russian newspaper Nezavisimaya Gazeta Religion.ng.ru, an influential fortnightly supplement with a range of news and commentary on religious issues; and the website of the Moscow-based Institute of Religion and Policy I-r-p.ru, which covers issues related to Islam and politics. The Institute is headed by Aleksandr Ignatenko, a researcher at Moscow State University and a member of the Russian President's Council for Cooperation with Religious Organisations, and has several prominent members of the Russian parliament on its board.

None of the three websites particularly focuses on religion in Uzbekistan or Central Asia, though all give the topic some coverage.

Portal-credo.ru has long been blocked in Uzbekistan. Forum 18's tests in Tashkent in recent months have shown that Portal-credo.ru remained blocked on almost every occasion when it was tested, while religion.ng.ru and i-r-p.ru have been blocked every time.

Uzbek censorship does not stop at the internet. All religious literature – even works such as the Bible and the Koran – is nationwide under extremely tight censorship.

Samarkand Muslim article blocked

On 9 March, Uznews.net reported on the Russian-language part of its site the case of a 25-year-old Samarkand resident whose passport had expired. When he went to renew it he was told that in order to allow a photograph of him wearing a beard to be used in his new passport, he would require a written statement from the regional Muslim Board that he was allowed to wear a beard.

An official of the regional Muslim Board said that only the regional imam, who he said was not present at the time, could give such a statement. The official wrote down the young man's details, including his address, place of work and telephone number. The

young man sought the advice of a lawyer, who said such an official demand for a statement was a violation of the Constitution. The young man's own imam at the city's Bahadur mosque told him that he himself did not have a beard, to avoid being listed by the NSS secret police as a radical. The imam declined to help the young man get a certificate, for fear of getting into trouble himself.

When the young man returned to the Muslim Board, it became clear that one of the men who had been present earlier before was the regional imam. The regional imam then printed out from the computer a pre-prepared form, and then filled it in to declare that the young man was not a religious extremist and that wearing a beard was part of the sunna (teaching and practice) of the Prophet Muhammed.

Armed with the statement, the young man returned to the passport office. Officials there expressed surprise that he had obtained the statement, which they said applicants were only rarely able to receive.

Shortly after its publication on Uznews.net, the article was reproduced on the Russian news website Lenta.ru. However, that page was then blocked. "On attempting to open this page of the website, the user is then 'thrown back' to the website's main page," Ferghana.ru noted later on 9 March. It said this was the first time in several months that Lenta.ru had been blocked.

Blocked websites on 16 March

One source in Tashkent on condition of anonymity told Forum 18 today (16 March) that the Russian-language sites Portal-credo.ru, Ferghana.ru, and Uznews.uz are blocked. Centrasia.ru and Lenta.ru are not blocked, but articles critical of Uzbekistan in these websites cannot be opened. "Five to ten minutes after a critical article on Uzbekistan is published on Centrasia.ru one cannot open the article. The website throws the browser back to the main page," the source said.

Another source in Tashkent, also on condition of anonymity, told Forum 18 on 16 March that these sites can be opened through proxy servers. But Religion.ng.ru cannot be opened in this way.

Sites within Uzbekistan closed down

Websites within Uzbekistan can be forced to close. The Justice Ministry forced the Full Gospel Protestant Union to close down its website <http://www.church.uz> in 2009 (. It is possible that this may be related to the site publishing a letter strongly criticising state encouragement of religious intolerance.

A more recent closure was the website of Muslim journalist Hairulla Hamidov, who has been detained since January.

Baptists fined 100 times minimum monthly salary

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (19.03.2010) / HRWF (23.03.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Uzbekistan has fined 13 members of an unregistered Baptist church 100 times the minimum monthly salary, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Judge Islam Noyobov of Almalyk [Olmalyq] Criminal Court, near the capital Tashkent, fined the Baptists under Article 240 part 2 ("proselytism") of the Administrative Code on 23 February. The prosecutor was Almalyk City official T. Tukhtayev. In the verdict, which Forum 18 has

seen, Sergei, Olga and Yekaterina Brislavsky (father, mother and daughter), Rita Struchayeva, Lyubov Abdalova, Yuri Zakharchenko, Tatyana and Stanislav Shopov, Azamat Nazarov, Anna Yermolayeva, Olesya Saidaliyeva, Omon Tadjibayev, Yelena Gusova and Valentina Fidayeva were each fined 3,768,000 Soms (14,500 Norwegian Kroner, 1,810 Euros, or 2,490 US Dollars).

The court verdict states that Tashkent Regional and Almalyk City Police on 24 January found the Baptists conducting "illegal teaching of religious doctrines without a special authorisation from a central religious organisation" and ordered that 30 copies of religious literature in Russian and Uzbek be confiscated, including 6 Bibles in Russian and one New Testament and Psalms in Uzbek. The literature and materials were ordered to be sent to the State Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent for "religious expert" examination. Such "expert examination" is often ordered for confiscated literature, even for the works of authors such as Sir Walter Scott and Ivan Turgenev.

The prosecution followed a police raid on the Brislavskys' home. congregation belongs to the Council of Churches Baptists which on principle refuses to seek state registration, fearing this would lead to interference by the state.

Judge Noyobov in 2009 fined Baptists from the same church – in some cases the same people - 50 times the minimum monthly salary, six of which were reduced on appeal.

Noyobov's assistant, who did not give his name, told Forum 18 on 10 March that Noyobov was not available to talk. "The Baptists have a lawyer, let him speak to us," he stated. "You do not need to speak for them." Asked why the court kept punishing the Baptists, he said, "I will answer if you write an official letter or come to the court." He then hung up the phone.

Uzbekistan continues to punish people for exercising their freedom of religion or belief, recently jailing a Protestant Christian for 10 years and arresting around 40 associates of a group of readers of the works of Muslim theologian Said Nursi.

Police violence goes unpunished

The Baptists also complained that the court did not take action against police who acted illegally or used violence. In a protest letter to Judge Noyobov and Almalyk Prosecutor's Office, the Baptists claim that over 60 violations of Uzbek law were committed by police. These include claims that police "used excessive force and abused their power" and "falsified the case files," thus making the charges against the Baptists invalid.

Attempts between 8 and 11 March to discuss with Prosecutor Gayrat Mukhammedov, or other officials from Almalyk Prosecutor's Office, whether any action against the police would be taken were unsuccessful. The Assistant to Prosecutor Mukhammedov asked Forum 18 to call back numerous times on those days, each time giving different excuses why the officials were not available to talk.

The letter of complaint – which Forum 18 has seen – states that police officers did not show their identification documents or a warrant, which would authorize the search of the home and detention of church members. "Police used physical force against women and children without defence who were in the home during the raid. They were dragged, beaten and forced into the police car without a chance to put on their coats, shoes, and were not allowed to take with them warm clothes or their personal belongings," the letter reads.

Police did not allow church members to inform relatives of their detention or ask for a lawyer, the protest letter continues. The letter claims that the detainees were

psychologically pressured and that one Baptist was told that people like them should be put to death.

The letter continues that the Baptists were not allowed to familiarize with the case files or testify. Some of the defendants did not sign any statements. "The Baptists were not shown the record of administrative violation made by the police."

The protest letter states that amongst the Criminal Code articles violated by Almalyk Police were articles 156 ("Incitement of Ethnic, Racial or Religious Hatred"), 205 ("Abuse of Power or Office"), 206 ("Excess of Power or Office") and 277 ("Hooliganism"). These articles are reproduced at the end of this article.

Repeated raids

The Almalyk unregistered Baptist congregation has repeatedly faced official raids and detentions as it meets for worship. s members have repeatedly met together for worship, as is their right under international human rights agreements Uzbekistan has signed, despite some facing repeated fines and harassment.

Bibles must be registered or "they will be destroyed once found"

Three Protestants in the north-western region of Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] – where all Protestant activity is banned – have been fined for their religious activity, a source from the region who wished to be unnamed for the fear of the authorities told Forum 18. Judge Makset Berdimuratov of Nukus City Criminal Court on 19 February fined Medetbay Abdilbekov, Alfiya Atanazarova and Gulnaz Mambetnazarova, members of a local unregistered Full Gospel Christian Church. They were fined under the Administrative Code's articles 184-2 ("illegal production, storage, import and distribution of religious materials") and 241 ("teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately"). Abdilbekov was fined 753,600 Soms (2,900 Norwegian Kroner, 365 Euros, or 500 US Dollars), and Atanazarova and Mambetnazarova were each fined 188,400 Soms (730 Norwegian Kroner, 90 Euros, or 125 US Dollars).

All religious activity that is not either state-controlled Islamic or within the Russian Orthodox parish in Karakalpakstan's capital Nukus is banned in the region. This ban also applies to Russian Orthodox activity outside Nukus and independent Islamic activity.

With the same decision Judge Berdimuratov gave an order to destroy 29 Christian books and magazines, among which were 2 Bibles and one New Testament in Uzbek language, a photo album, a photograph in frame, 23 CD and DVD disks, 2 videotapes and 1 audiotape confiscated from the Protestants. Uzbek courts frequently order confiscated religious literature to be destroyed.

Judge Berdimuratov told Forum 18 on 11 March that he fined the Protestants "because they continued their religious activity even though their church's registration was stripped away by an earlier court decision." He added that the confiscated materials had been destroyed.

"They were not registered with the state Religious Affairs Committee," Judge Berdimuratov responded when asked why he ordered the Bibles and New Testament be destroyed. When Forum 18 asked why Christians believers cannot keep copies of Bibles in their homes, the Judge – in a very calm voice – stated that Bibles "must also be registered with the State Committee, and if they are not they will be destroyed once found."

Nurulla Zhamolov, Karakalpakstan's senior religious affairs official, previously in 2009 "banned for import, distribution or use in teaching on the territory of the Republic of Karakalpakstan" the Bible, a hymn book, a Bible Encyclopaedia, a Bible dictionary, a children's Bible, and the 2004 film "The Passion of the Christ" by Mel Gibson, although this has legally been shown in cinemas in the capital Tashkent. This ban does not however appear to include the Russian-language Synodal version, a nineteenth-century translation widely used not only among Russian-speaking Protestants but by the Russian Orthodox for private reading outside church services (which are in Church Slavonic).

Zhamolov's ban did not mark a more intensive attempt to search for banned Christian literature or material in the region. It is unclear whether the latest prosecution and Judge Berdimuratov's comments presage any harshening of the existing repressive policy. All religious literature in Uzbekistan – even works such as the Bible and the Koran – is nationwide under extremely tight censorship.

Asked what punishment would be given to the three Protestants if they are found to have violated the Religion Law again, Judge Berdimuratov said that the question should be addressed to other State authorities. He declined to speak further to Forum 18.

Unregistered Protestant activity punished

Elsewhere in the eastern Andijan [Andijon] region, Judge Shavkat Shadmanov of Kurganteppa District Criminal Court on 26 February in an administrative case fined each Dilrabo Alimzhanova and Madina Turdiyeva, members of a local unregistered Protestant church, 263,760 Soms (1,020 Norwegian Kroner, 125 Euros, or 175 US Dollars) under the Administrative Code's article 240 part 2 ("proselytism"), sources told Forum 18.

Several attempts of Forum 18 between 8 and 10 March to reach Judge Shadmanov was unsuccessful. The court officials twice gave wrong numbers, and twice just hung up the phone after listening to Forum 18's question about the case.

Does Criminal Code apply to officials?

Religious believers of all faiths often state – either on the public record or confidentially - that they are physically attacked if arrested or detained by officials. Some of these statements have been substantiated by forensic-medical examinations, as in the case of the Almalyk Baptists. Similar statements of the use of violence by officials are also made in relation to prisoners who have been sentenced.

Under Uzbek law, violence and discrimination against someone for their religion or belief by officials are on paper serious offences. But in practice Uzbek officials act as if there is no possibility that they will be prosecuted for their actions if credible accusations are made, and as if the rule of law did not exist.

Ten year sentence for "honest Christian"

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (11.03.2010) / HRWF (20.03.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Seven weeks after his arrest on drugs charges, 27-year-old Tohar Haydarov was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment on 9 March, Guliston City Criminal Court and local church members have told Forum 18 News Service from Uzbekistan. Members of his Baptist church insist to Forum 18 the case was fabricated to punish him for his religious affiliation. "The case has now been referred to the Regional Court," an official of the City Court, who refused to give his name, told Forum 18 from Guliston on

11 March, "since Haydarov has appealed." He declined to discuss the case further. Haydarov remains in detention and no date has yet been set for his appeal.

Judge Gofur Kholmatov of Guliston City Criminal Court in Syrdarya Region found Haydarov guilty under Criminal Code Article 25 ("preparation of a crime or attempted crime") and Article 273 Part 5 ("illegal sale of narcotic or psychotropic substances in large quantities").

Attempts to reach Judge Kholmatov were unsuccessful. Kholmatov's Assistant (he did not give his name) kept asking Forum 18 to call back several times on 11 March. He finally said the Judge was not available to talk.

Haydarov is a new convert to a Council of Churches Baptist church, whose churches reject state registration in all the former Soviet republics where they operate.

The Baptists are adamant the case has been fabricated, insisting Haydarov is "a man with a pure conscience and an honest Christian". Forum 18 spoke to several Baptists in Syrdarya and Tashkent who strongly support Haydarov. One Baptist from Tashkent told Forum 18 on 11 March that "not only the church" but also Haydarov's neighbours and acquaintances support him. The Baptist said some neighbours even gave the authorities written statements to back him up in this case. One statement church members provided to Forum 18 is dated 21 January (three days after Haydarov's arrest) and is signed by seven people who say they are his neighbours. The statement describes him as a "conscientious, honest and orderly person". "We were very surprised when we learnt he had been arrested."

Why such a harsh sentence?

It is unclear why Haydarov was charged with such a serious offence, and why he has been given such a harsh sentence. The only known current Christian prisoner of conscience, Pentecostal Pastor Dmitry Shestakov, is serving a four year sentence. The three current Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience were also given sentences of between three and a half and four years for "illegal" religious activity. The three are: Abdubannob Ahmedov, Sergei Ivanov, and Olim Turaev.

Much longer sentences were given to the at least 47 known Muslim Nursi reader prisoners of conscience jailed in 2009. They have been given sentences of typically between eight and 12 years, the total jail terms given amounting to around 380 years.

Short sentences of between five and 15 days are known to have been given to 21 Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestants between February and August 2009. Detentions of people for some hours, for interrogations after raids continue to be very common. But there have been no known five to 15 day sentences since August 2009.

Severe pressure on religious communities

The Uzbek state authorities have long imposed harsh restrictions on all religious activity. Unregistered religious activity is a criminal offence, as are activities such as sharing one's beliefs, unapproved religious publishing and religious meetings in private homes.

Some 40 associates of people imprisoned already in Bukhara [Bukhoro] for reading the works of Muslim theologian Said Nursi have themselves been arrested and are awaiting trial. A total of 25 soldiers alleged to be Nursi readers are also reported to have been detained. Among others under arrest awaiting trial is Muslim journalist, Hairulla Hamidov.

Police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police frequently raid religious communities and heavy fines are often handed down to punish them for worship services.

Arrested after refusing to renounce his faith

On 18 January Haydarov was taken to the local Police station in the 3rd Microdistrict of his home town of Guliston. There he was pressured by officer Sardor to renounce his faith. When Haydarov refused to do so, the Baptists say the Police planted a matchbox with drugs in his coat pocket, and arrested him.

The Baptist from Tashkent told Forum 18 that the trial of Haydarov began on 4 March, and that the court phoned a local Baptist in Guliston the same day to come and participate. "Well, she is an elderly woman, and can hardly walk so a group of us from Tashkent immediately decided to go and participate," the Tashkent Baptist recounted. "When we arrived the court had ended the hearing and made a decision to resume the process on 9 March."

On 9 March the Baptists were not allowed into the courtroom until the moment when the Judge asked the Prosecutor to present the final arguments. "We were not even allowed to testify on behalf of Tohar," the Baptist complained. "There were no other witnesses, and even the lawyer we had hired for Tohar was not allowed into the courtroom."

The Baptist argued that the only apparent reason why the church members were invited to the trial is that they were filmed once in the courtroom. "The authorities will probably use the film somewhere to tell the public that the Baptists use drugs under the guise of worshipping God."

Uzbek television frequently shows programmes attacking religious minorities. On 11 February, members of the Baptist Union in Tashkent were accused of turning people into zombies and encouraging people to sell their homes and give the money to the Church. One church member described the programme to Forum 18 as containing "outrageous lies". State-disfavoured Muslims, Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Methodists and Baha'is have been attacked in earlier broadcasts.

Father's death

Sari Haydarov, Tohar Haydarov's 72-year-old father, was intending to attend the court session on 9 March to support his son, a Baptist who saw the father after the initial court session on 4 March said. "Sari was not a Christian but he loved his son since Tohar looked after him," the Baptist told Forum 18.

However, Sari Haydarov was found dead the following day in the garage where he lived, which belonged to the family. The death certificate, a copy of which Forum 18 has seen, states that he died on 5 March of electrocution. Asked why Sari Haydarov lived in a garage, the Baptist said that he had left the family flat after arguments with other family members and made a home there.

The Baptist said that no criminal investigation of the death was undertaken. The Police's conclusion was that "he died a natural death by accidentally falling onto an open electric bar heater," the Baptist stated.

Police refuse to discuss case

Regional and city police refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 11 March.

Rakhym Khudoyberdiyev, Chief of Guliston City Police, said that he is aware both of the criminal case against Haydarov and his father's death. "I am not competent to answer you on these cases," he said and referred Forum 18 to Ali Abdullayev, the Deputy Chief of Syrdarya Regional Police. "He has been appointed to answer the press on these cases."

Abdullayev was equally reluctant to talk to Forum 18 and referred it to an officer of the Regional Police, whose last name he did not remember. "Please talk to Tolkun Karimovich, may be he will answer you, I am only dealing with personnel issues," he replied. The phone number he gave went unanswered on 11 March.

Muslims and Jehovah's Witness tried, praying prisoner "committed suicide"

By Felix Corley,

Forum 18 (09.03.2010) / HRWF (20.03.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Around 40 associates of a group of readers of the works of the late Muslim theologian Said Nursi were arrested by police in the central Uzbek city of Bukhara [Bukhoro] on about 20 January, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Sources who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisal told Forum 18 that "these were not necessarily participants in reading Nursi's works, but were witnesses in the earlier case, neighbours and friends," one source stated. An officer at Bukhara's Interior Ministry investigation prison confirmed to Forum 18 that those arrested are being held there, and insisted that they are being well treated. A total of 25 alleged Nursi readers serving in the army in the capital Tashkent have been arrested, with 12 due to face a military tribunal, a human rights defender told Forum 18. Arrests of five Nursi readers have also been reported in Fergana [Farghona] Region of eastern Uzbekistan.

However, a Jehovah's Witness in Andijan [Andijon] convicted under the Criminal Code for teaching religion illegally in November 2009 was amnestied in the court room.

Amongst many others recently arrested for peaceful religious activity are a Muslim journalist, Hairulla Hamidov.

Bukhara Nursi arrests

The around 40 associates of Nursi readers arrested in Bukhara in January are still under investigation and are expected to face criminal prosecution. They are being held in the investigation prison of the Interior Ministry in Bukhara. It is believed a lawyer has been appointed in their case.

The Bukhara prison guard who answered the phone on 9 March at Bukhara Interior Ministry investigation prison - who refused to give his name - told Forum 18 that he did not know how long those arrested would be held in the prison. However, he insisted: "We are keeping them in excellent conditions." He refused to answer any further questions.

The arrests are related to the arrests in December 2008 and subsequent sentences of between nine and five and a half years' imprisonment handed down to nine Nursi readers in Bukhara. The nine had their appeals against their harsh jail terms rejected in June 2009.

Fergana Nursi arrests

Arrests of alleged readers of Nursi's works also began in Fergana Region in early February, the Moscow-based ferghana.ru news website reported on 1 March. It said five residents of Rishton, Kuva and Kuvasai districts were arrested and are believed to be held in Fergana's Interior Ministry investigation prison. It said they face charges under Criminal Code Article 159 ("attempts to change the constitutional order") and 244-2 ("establishment, direction of or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations"). It identified the investigator in the case as Otabek Habibullaev of the Fergana Region Internal Affairs Department. Ferghana.ru said three other suspects managed to evade arrest.

The officer who answered the phone of Investigator Habibullaev on 9 March presented himself as Abduhabib Gaidnazarov (Forum 18 understands that the spelling of his last name may not be precise as it was not clearly heard over the phone), Head of the Investigation Department. When Forum 18 asked about the five Nursi readers, the officer said he was "actually not the Head of Department," and gave another number to call. The officer at the other number said neither Habibullaev nor the Head of the Department were available to talk.

Nursi arrests among soldiers

A member of the Khorezm-based human rights group Najot (Rescue) told Forum 18 on 9 March that one soldier from the region is among 12 soldiers reportedly facing charges in a military tribunal in Tashkent for alleged membership of the "Nurchilar" movement. Nursi readers insist that no such organised movement exists. The human rights defender said their trial before a military court has not yet begun. The defender added that 13 other soldiers also serving in Tashkent have been arrested on similar accusations.

Many Nursi trials throughout 2009

From late 2008, the Uzbek authorities have arrested a large number of Nursi readers. Forum 18 knows of 47 named individuals who received prison sentences in 2009 amounting to a combined total of around 380 years. However, many other Nursi-related cases appear to have gone unreported.

The fate of several other men put on trial in 2009 for following Nursi's approach to Islam still remains unknown, despite requests by Forum 18 to the relevant courts for information.

In its annual report on human rights abuses in the western Khorezm Region in 2009, published on 2 February 2010, the Najot human rights group noted the heavy sentences handed down on ten Nursi readers in Khorezm in July 2009.

Najot questions the Nursi convictions, insisting that, after its own analysis of various verdicts, no proof of guilt was established in court. It added that Nursi readers are being sentenced on charges of religious extremism "solely for practising their religion outside the framework of the traditional trend of Islam propagated and controlled by the state".

Najot points out that action against Nursi readers has been wider even than the trials that have taken place. "Najot's observations have shown that across the whole country in 2009 the police and secret police have conducted a 'purge' in a range of state bodies, organisations, enterprises and institutions, including higher education institutions and the armed forces, of suspected members of the Nurchilar religious group," the group's annual report declared.

Uzbekistan routinely targets all peaceful religious activity outside state control, from Muslims who read Nursi to Protestants. Non-state registered religious activity is – in defiance of international human rights standards – a criminal offence in Uzbekistan.

Jehovah's Witness sentenced and amnestied

On 13 November 2009, Judge Umidahon Imomova of Andijan City Criminal Court found 55-year-old Jehovah's Witness Lyudmila Nikolskaya guilty of illegally teaching her faith, the court verdict seen by Forum 18 reveals. It said that she was caught teaching her faith to four women in a private home in Andijan on 5 April 2009, thus violating violating Criminal Code Article 229-2 ("teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately").

Andijan City Prosecutor handed her the formal charge only on 16 October 2009, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. It remains unclear why she was charged more than six months after the alleged offence.

Nikolskaya insisted in court that when police broke into the private home, she and the other four women were drinking tea and talking. However, police confiscated her Bible and two brochures, "Organised to Do Jehovah's Will". The verdict does not reveal why the police decided to raid the private home while the women were talking. However, it says the confiscated books were subjected to a "judicial-psychological, philosophical and religious expert analysis".

Nikolskaya was found guilty of this "crime", and the verdict noted that she had previously received an Administrative Code punishment for a previous "offence" on 20 February 2009. However, the verdict goes on to state that as she "is a woman and has not previously been sentenced [under the Criminal Code] and that her actions do not figure among serious crimes", the court decided to amnesty her from any punishment under the August 2009 Cabinet of Ministers amnesty.

This means that Nikolskaya now has a criminal record, even if no term of imprisonment or fine was imposed. The court ordered that the two brochures be destroyed

Chirchik [Chirchiq], which is close to Tashkent, is the only place in Uzbekistan where the Jehovah's Witnesses have a legally registered community and place of worship. If they lose registration, Jehovah's Witnesses have feared that all their religious activities in Uzbekistan will be banned. The congregation there has long been under pressure.

Prisoners of conscience not freed under amnesty

Jehovah's Witnesses lamented that their three prisoners of conscience, who are serving sentences for "illegal" religious activity, were not freed under amnesty. The three are: Abdubannob Ahmedov, Sergei Ivanov, and Olim Turaev. Another prisoner of conscience, Pentecostal Pastor Dmitry Shestakov, is serving a four year sentence.

There are at least 47 Nursi readers who are prisoners of conscience, who were in 2009 given prison sentences totalling around 380 years.

None of these prisoners of conscience were freed under the amnesty.

Prisoner who wanted to pray "committed suicide"

Meanwhile, the Uzbek government has categorically denied to the United Nations (UN) that prisoners are punished for praying while imprisoned. On 9 September 2009, three UN Special Rapporteurs wrote to the government about reports they had received that two brothers, Nigmat and Sobit Zufarov, had been tortured separately in prison. The three Special Rapporteurs who jointly wrote were: Philip Alston, SR on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; Manfred Nowak, SR on torture and other cruel,

inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; and Asma Jahangir, SR on freedom of religion or belief.

The Special Rapporteurs (SRs) noted that in mid-May 2009, while in Labour Camp UYa-64/48 in Zarafshan, Nigmat Zufarov began a hunger strike demanding that he be allowed to pray. "After six days, he was force-fed by prison authorities, who also performed a forced enema on him, using pepper solution. The beatings allegedly continued after his hunger strike," The SRs state. He was found dead on 15 July 2009, with the authorities claiming he committed suicide. However, his family noted what the SRs told the Uzbek government were signs of torture on his body. Nigmat Zufarov had been sentenced back in April 2000.

The Special Rapporteurs also expressed concern for Sobit Zufarov's "physical and psychological integrity" after receiving reports that he "was being ill-treated in prison, including being placed in an isolation cell for up to six months as punishment for praying". Imprisoned since 2000, he was imprisoned in Tashkent Region before being transferred in February 2008 to labour camp UYa-64/46 in Navoi.

Prisoners continue to be denied their right to freedom of religion or belief – for example to pray visibly, to have religious literature, or to receive visits from religious clergy. These denials of religious freedom affect not only prisoners of conscience of all faiths, jailed or imprisoned in a labour camp for their religious activity, but also prisoners jailed for other reasons. Prison and labour camp conditions are harsh, and even the communities regarded as the main "traditional" faiths – the state-controlled Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church – appear to have only limited access to prisoners. Other faiths told Forum 18 they have almost no access. Prisoners are often punished for religious activity in jails or labour camps, religious believers and human rights defenders have told Forum 18, however officials insist that prisoners' religious freedom is respected.

In its 13 October 2009 response, posted on the website of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Uzbekistan Permanent Mission in Geneva rejects absolutely all the allegations of torture or maltreatment of the Zufarov brothers. It claimed that neither staff nor anyone else at the labour camp had ever used physical violence against Nigmat Zufarov. It denied that he had ever held a hunger strike and insisted he had committed suicide.

"In connection with the unfounded accusations in the complaint sent by the UN special procedures, it must be noted that in accordance with criminal implementation legislation, in all penal establishments all conditions have been created for those sentenced to carry out religious rituals," the response claims in Nigmat Zufarov's case. It maintains that prisoners are allowed to carry out religious rituals, and use religious objects and literature, provided they do not violate camp rules or violate other prisoners' rights.

"In UYa-64/48, as well as in all other penal institutions, no punishments are imposed on prisoners for conducting religious rituals, no torture is used on them and they are not sent to the disciplinary unit."

The Uzbek government response admitted that Sobit Zufarov had been disciplined while in camp, and had received an extra sentence in 2008, but insisted that he had been punished for refusing to take part in educational activity and to admit his guilt.

In a 5 June 2009 response to an earlier enquiry by three UN Special Rapporteurs, the Uzbek government likewise denied that another prisoner, Amangeldi Zulpakharov, had been beaten while being held in UYa-64/51 in Koson in Bukhara [Bukhoro] Region. The rapporteurs noted reports that he had been punished in March 2009 for praying the namaz.

The government's blanket denials of any punishments for prisoners who practise their faith – also echoing such denials to Forum 18 - is in stark contrast to the frequent reports of such punishments, especially for Muslims who try to pray the namaz in their cells.

Detainees under investigation who have not yet been formally jailed often describe the use of violence against them by state officials. The UN Committee Against Torture found in November 2007 that the use of torture by state officials is "routine" in Uzbekistan.

Threats, raids and violence against religious believers

Mushfig Bayram and Felix Corley

Forum 18 (24.02.2010) / HRWF (02.03.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Three members of the Greater Grace Protestant Church were given heavy fines on 2 February by Samarkand [Samarqand] City Court in central Uzbekistan, church members told Forum 18 News Service. The fines followed a police raid on a private home. Church members complained on 19 February that the National Security Service (NSS) secret police had been closely watching them in recent months and collecting information about them. "After the earlier raids and questionings of our pastor by police, we would only meet a few times a month and even then in a low-profile way. Now we have cancelled all our meetings and Bible classes."

Greater Grace Church has been seeking state registration since it first lodged an application for this in March 2000. However the authorities have refused to allow the church to register. Unregistered religious activity is – in defiance of international human rights standards - a criminal offence in Uzbekistan. Greater Grace Church members lament the long refusal of officials to grant them registration. "Many times in the past we applied to the Samarkand authorities to register us but we were refused," one church member complained to Forum 18. "We even went all the way in person to the state Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent in 2005, and they also refused us registration."

Police and the National Security Service (NSS) secret police raided the church in April 2009, after which church members became afraid to meet publicly.

Begzot Kodyrov of the government's Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent refused to discuss the latest harassment of religious communities with Forum 18 on 19 February.

Illegal interrogation of teenagers and children after raid

On 24 January, police raided the home of a mother and son, Pavel and Tatyana Posrednikov, who are both members of Samarkand's Greater Grace Church. Police took Pavel Posrednikov, who works with young people, together with five young adults aged between 19 and 22 as well as two boys and a girl aged between 12 and 15 to Samarkand City Police. All nine were held for five hours and forced to write statements, church members told Forum 18. Parents of the underage children were not present during their interrogation. "From the interrogation at the Police it became clear to us that the Police knew all the places where we gathered and those flats were under surveillance," a church member who wished to be anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18.

The teenagers were interrogated without their parents being present. "The fact the three juveniles were made to write statements in the absence of their parents is against the law," a church member told Forum 18. "Police made the children write down the names of those in the church who preached and taught the Bible."

Forum 18 was unable to find out why the children were questioned at the police station for up to five hours without parents, guardians or their teacher being present, and without parental permission. This appears to violate several articles of Uzbekistan's Criminal Procedure Code, legal experts told Forum 18.

Article 121, which covers "Special features of questioning minor witnesses or victims", requires parents, guardians or a teacher to be present during questioning of witnesses or victims who are not yet 16. In addition, Article 116 of the Code says that "close relatives" of suspects can be questioned as witnesses or victims only with their consent. "These Articles apply both in court and at a police station," one legal expert told Forum 18.

Church member threatened with jail

The following day, another church member, Tohir Bakaev, was questioned at the local Police Station by the local Police officer Orif Safarov and other police officers whose names are not known, church members told Forum 18. Officer Safarov and the other officers asked Bakaev: "You are [an ethnic] Tajik. Why did you convert to Christianity? Why do you teach others the Bible?" The officers tried to compel him to confess in writing that he taught the Bible to others. "Tohir was warned that if he did not confess then he would be put into prison," church members added.

Article 241 of the Administrative Code bans "teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately". A recent high-profile case, which has been used by the authorities to incite intolerance of freedom of religion and belief and of Baptists, as well as to remove the country's registered Baptist leadership, featured the use of this Article to impose a heavy fine for peaceful religious activity. Bakaev may have been pressured to confess this "offence" to allow the authorities to use this Article against him.

Safarov, the local Police officer, denied that he threatened Bakaev with prison. "I only accompanied the officers from the Anti-Terrorism Department of Samarkand Police while they questioned Bakaev," he told Forum 18 on 19 February. Asked why Anti-Terrorism Police should question peaceful Christians, Officer Safarov said, "Look, I don't know what is going on, and why the Anti-Terrorism Police do that." Asked if he was going to raid or check up on church members again, he responded: "I have no problem with them."

As a result of a previous police and NSS secret police raid on 1 April 2009 the church lost its place for holding Sunday worship services and Bible classes. In the aftermath of that raid, some church members became "afraid to meet in people's homes" one member told Forum 18 in June 2009.

Three church members fined

Judge Nizamiddin Ernazarov of Samarkand City Criminal Court on 2 February found Tohir Bakaev, Pavel Posrednikov and Tatyana Posrednikova guilty of breaking Criminal Code Article 241 ("teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately"). According to the verdict seen by Forum 18, Bakaev and Posrednikov were each fined eight times the minimum monthly wage or 301,440 Soms (1,154 Norwegian Kroner, 143 Euros or 195 US Dollars). Posrednikova was fined five times the minimum monthly wage or 188,400 Soms (721 Norwegian Kroner, 90 Euros or 122 US Dollars).

The verdict says that all three defendants had gathered eight persons on 24 January "in their home" to teach religion without official permission. However, church members insisted to Forum 18 that Bakaev had not been present that day.

The court verdict does not say in whose home the Protestants taught, who exactly taught, and who took note of the participants. The court decision does not give any names of officials who raided the meeting, merely stating that these three had an unauthorised meeting with eight people on 24 January.

The court also confiscated from the Posrednikovs fourteen Christian books in Russian and eleven in English, three Bibles, one Bible commentary, 117 CD discs, 67 audio-cassette tapes, 29 notebooks with notes, and one Compaq notebook computer. It ordered the confiscated items to be sent to the Committee for Religious Affairs in Tashkent to study the legality of the contents.

Dilshod (he did not give his last name), the Assistant to Judge Ernazarov, said Ernazarov was hearing a case, and was not available to talk. "He will not talk to you anyway since they are not allowed now to go public about court cases by new procedural regulations," he told Forum 18 on 19 February when he found out that Forum 18 was asking about the case of the three Greater Grace Church members.

The three appealed against the verdict. The case is due to be heard on 25 February in Samarkand Regional Criminal Court.

Two Protestants facing charges?

In another case, two Protestant women in the eastern Andijan [Andijon] Region are facing possible charges of "violating the law on religious organisations" under Article 240 of the Code of Administrative Offences, Protestants who asked not to be identified for fear of reprisals told Forum 18. The women – Dilrabo Hurmatova and Madina Turdieva – were detained on 9 February when five police officers – led by Daniyor Rahimov of the Karasu District Police Investigation Department – raided a private home in Karasu District.

At Karasu District Police Station, officers tried to force the women to write statements that they were conducting missionary activity. This activity is a criminal offence in Uzbekistan, despite the human rights standards the country has agreed to be bound by. Protestants told Forum 18 that police prevention officer Bahodir Tuhtarov, who had taken part in the raid, beat Turdieva when she refused to write a statement.

The UN Committee Against Torture found in November 2007 that the use of torture by state officials is "routine" in Uzbekistan.

On 17 February, after Turdieva felt worse, she sought treatment in a clinic in Andijan. The doctor who treated her declined to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 24 February, citing patient confidentiality.

Protestants say a case against the Hurmatova and Turdieva under Article 240 has been prepared and the documents have been handed to Karasu District Criminal Court.

However, reached on 24 February, police officer Rahimov denied absolutely that the two women had been detained. "Detention would have been a violation of their human rights," he told Forum 18. Asked why the two had been pressured to write statements and whether officer Tuhtarov had beaten Turdieva, he insisted neither was true. He also denied that any administrative case has been prepared against them.

Spies in religious communities

Meanwhile, the NSS secret police continue to use spies inside religious communities. NSS covert and overt surveillance of religious communities is very widespread. "The NSS especially tries to recruit among the leaders, trying to find out how what's going on within each community, who is going where, how much money each gets, where the community gets its money from," one source told Forum 18.

An Uzbek Muslim in his early 20s, who asked not to be identified, told a BBC Central Asia correspondent that he had fled Uzbekistan after being forced by the NSS to become an informer. Since arriving in Kazakhstan he has been registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as an asylum seeker and is currently living in the city of Almaty. He claims he was targeted by the NSS because of an Islamic education he received abroad.

"Under a false pretext they took me to their headquarters, they beat me and questioned me for many hours. They said that they would let me go if I agreed to serve my country," the BBC on 30 January quoted the man as saying. He added that he was told one of his tasks would be to provide a list of people who attended prayers at mosques. But when he received his first orders he decided to leave the country.

Sports journalist arrested for religious activity

Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (17.02.2010) / HRWF (02.03.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A thirty four-year old Muslim journalist who was a sports commentator, as well as the Assistant Editor of Uzbekistan's sports newspaper Champion, was arrested on 21 January and is being held at the Tashkent regional police detention centre. Hairulla Hamidov was apparently arrested for his religious activity and is charged with violating the Criminal Code's article 216 ("Illegal establishment of Public Associations or Religious Organisations"), Forum 18 has learned.

Hamidov, according to his closed-down website hamidov.uz, in 2004 founded a popular weekly religious radio programme called Kholislik Sari (towards Truth / Fairness) on Navruz radio. Before joining Champion, Hamidov founded in February 2007 a popular Islamic-inspired periodical, Odamlar Orasida (Among People), which was banned by the State Agency of Press and Information in July 2007.

Uzbek human rights organisation Ezgulik (Goodness) noted in February 2009 that there were parallels between the closure of Odamlar Orasida and more recent state actions – including harsh jail sentences – against those associated with Islamic-inspired periodicals closed down in 2009.

Hamidov's arrest is part of Uzbekistan's ongoing violations of freedom of religion or belief, in which the country has, for example: deported a Baha'i and a Protestant for their religious activity and continued a media campaign against religious minorities; apparently planted drugs on and beaten up Protestants; and repressed Muslims engaging in peaceful religious activity, recently arresting 57 on unknown charges.

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Miklos Haraszti, expressed concern about the arrest of Hamidov and several other journalists. "As recent developments show, arrests of journalists and other forms of harassment are still taking place in violation of OSCE media freedom commitments," he noted in a 1 February letter to Uzbek Foreign Minister Vladimir Norov. Haraszti said he would continue to monitor the fate of Hamidov and other recently detained journalists.

Why was Hamidov arrested?

Dilnoza Hamidova, the journalist's wife, told Forum 18 on 15 February that Hamidov is being detained for his religious activity, and that police on 21 January made a search for religious literature in their home while arresting Hamidov but "found nothing illegal". Babur Hamidov, head of Chilanzar Police's Investigation Department (no relation to the journalist), declined to talk about the case on 12 February. "It is not us who investigates this case," he told Forum 18 and hung up the phone.

The National Security Service (NSS) secret police's headquarters in Tashkent also declined to comment about the journalist's arrest on 12 February. "No comments on that case," an NSS officer who did not give his name told Forum 18. He then put the phone down.

Audio and video recordings Hamidov made on Islam are widely distributed on the internet and were posted on islom.uz, a site run by Uzbekistan's former Chief Mufti Muhammad Sadyk Muhammad Yusuf. In 2007 Hamidov was several times summoned to Tashkent Regional Police and NSS secret police, and strongly recommended not to speak on religious topics, Voice of Freedom stated on 27 January 2010.

Hamidov at times discussed "critical and unusual issues" in the radio show Kholislik Sari, such as the reasonableness of wearing the hijab (religious head-cover for women), Uznews reported on 10 February. He also allowed religious leaders who "later became enemies of the regime in Uzbekistan" to speak on his radio show.

Central Asian independent news agencies such as Uznews and Voice of Freedom have also reported that charges under Criminal Code Article 216 have been brought against Hamidov. Hamidov is being detained at Tashkent's Regional Detention Centre No.1, where he was transferred from the "cellar" of Uzbekistan's Interior Ministry, Uznews reported.

Family members banned from meeting Hamidov

Hamidova told Forum 18 that she has seen her husband only once since his 21 January arrest, for a short moment at the beginning of February when they were not allowed to talk. This was at Chilanzar Police Station, when she went there to find out why he was being detained. She said that no one else from Hamidov's family has seen him since his arrest.

"When I was in the premises [of Chilanzar Police], I saw him passing by accompanied by police officers," she explained. Hamidova said that they were not allowed to talk to each other. "I am not sure since I saw him for a short moment," Hamidova responded when asked whether she saw any signs of physical violence against Hamidov. "He just smiled at me and gave a nod trying to tell that he was fine, I guess."

Hamidova said that she was going to petition the authorities to be allowed to see and talk with her husband.

Hamidov's defence lawyer Alisher Zaynutdinov said that Hamidov's treatment in the detention was "bearable," Uznews reported on 10 February. Hamidov does not complain that he is being tortured or harassed, Zaynutdinov was reported as saying.

When will Hamidov be tried?

Both Hamidova and Lawyer Zaynutdinov told Forum 18 that they do not know when Hamidov will be tried. Zaynutdinov said that "no one knows that," when asked by Forum

18 on 12 February if it was known when Hamidov will be tried. He declined to answer further questions.

Hamidov's journalism

Before starting the Kholislik Sari radio programme in 2004, Hamidov, a graduate of Uzbekistan State University's Journalism School, began his journalistic activity in 1995 at the newspaper Turkiston. Between 1996 and 1999 he wrote on sports at two different newspapers, Sports and Uzbekistan Football. Hamidov co-hosted a football show at Halkaro TV channel of the National Television and Radio Company in 1998. He also hosted several other football shows on TV until 2006.

Why was Hamidov's website closed?

Hamidov's closed website hamidov.uz was run by Uzbekistan's Arsenal D web-hosting company. Davron Abdullayev, Head of Arsenal D, told Forum 18 on 17 February that they only registered Hamidov's website, and are not responsible for its closure. He referred Forum 18 to Uzinfocom, which is "technically responsible" for administering domain names in Uzbekistan.

Uzinfocom on 17 February referred Forum 18 back to Arsenal D. Evgeny Lapatin of Uzinfocom said that "if Arsenal D registered them then you need to ask them" why the site was shut down.

Another manager from Arsenal D – he did not give his name, when Forum 18 called the company the second time on 17 February, said, "It is a confidential information, and we cannot tell you why." He further refused to talk.

Blocking of websites is done at the instigation of the NSS secret police. Internet service providers blame the blocking of sites on Uznet, owned by the state provider Uzbektelecom and through which all ISPs have to connect to the internet. Uznet insists that sites are already blocked by the NSS. "We don't block websites – this is done by the NSS secret police. The NSS open the connections for us – they have all the equipment there," an Uznet employee told Forum 18. Uzbekistan has long barred access to more websites than any other Central Asian country.

Will Hamidov be released?

Former Chief Mufti Muhammad Yusuf was reported by Uznews as having written a petition for the release of Hamidov. Both Lawyer Zaynutdinov and family members of Hamidov have expressed the hope that Hamidov will be released as he is innocent, and has done nothing illegal.

More arrests related to Hamidov's arrest

Zaynutdinov stated that a few days after Hamidov's arrest six more persons were also arrested and charged under Criminal Code article 216 in Tashkent Region. The authorities had apparently watched these people since their presence at a ceremony for the birth of a child, at which Hamidov spoke.

Two more foreigners deported for religious activity

By Felix Corley,

Forum 18 (16.02.2010) / HRWF (22.02.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Two foreigners with legal residency in Uzbekistan were stripped of the right to live there and deported in late 2009 to punish them for their religious activity, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Sepehr Taheri, a Baha'i with British citizenship who had lived in the Uzbek capital Tashkent since 1990, is married to an Uzbek citizen and their children were all born there. In the wake of his deportation, a local news website accused Taheri of "propagandising Baha'i religious teaching" and increasing the number of "proselytes" in the country. The website's chief editor defended to Forum 18 its publication of the article, which was written by the same author who attacked the previous Baha'i to be expelled from Uzbekistan. Also deported in late 2009 was Russian Protestant Andrei Tsepurkin, who has now returned to the Russian city of Omsk.

The deportations are part of the Uzbek government's campaign to isolate religious believers in Uzbekistan from their fellow-believers abroad, which also includes visa and entry denials to foreign citizens wishing to visit for religious purposes.

The official who answered the phone at the department that registers religious organisations at the Tashkent City Justice Department refused to discuss the deportations with Forum 18 on 12 February. Nor was any official of the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent prepared to explain why foreign citizens legally resident in Uzbekistan cannot freely practice their faith with their fellow believers.

The Uzbek authorities deal especially harshly with local citizens who conduct religious activities they deem to be illegal. Among many recent cases, Muslim journalist Hairulla Hamidov was arrested in Tashkent on 21 January and is awaiting criminal trial.

Isolation campaign also includes entry denials

Forum 18 has learnt that the authorities at Tashkent airport denied entry to two foreign Protestants in November 2009. One was a citizen of another former Soviet republic who has visited Uzbekistan many times with no problems. Not needing a visa, the Protestant first knew of any problem when the border guard entered the personal details on the computer. "No explanation for the entry ban was given," the Protestant told Forum 18 on 15 February. "When I asked why, their only response was: You yourself will know."

The other foreign Protestant denied entry, who was not from a former Soviet republic, had obtained a valid visa. A former legal resident of Uzbekistan, the Protestant was intending to make a short return visit but was denied entry. No reason was given, the Protestant told Forum 18 on 3 February.

The Uzbek authorities also routinely deny visas to foreigners they suspect wish to visit the country to meet local religious communities. Forum 18 knows of one case in 2009 when a foreign Protestant was ready to receive a visa for a short visit from an Uzbek embassy elsewhere in Central Asia. However, just before placing the visa in the passport the consular officer noticed that the passport included a visa to Ukraine at the invitation of a Protestant church. The officer then refused to issue the visa to Uzbekistan.

Baha'i deported

According to a 5 February article by Abduvali Turaev on the Novosti Uzbekistana website, Taheri was working in Tashkent as an English language teacher. He was found guilty of violating the Code of Administrative Offences and, on 17 November 2009, was deported from Uzbekistan. The author did not say which Article of the Administrative Code Turaev was accused of violating, nor which court handed down the verdict. The Baha'i community confirmed Taheri's deportation to Forum 18 without giving details. No Uzbek official would tell Forum 18 which court had punished Taheri.

The deportation of Taheri is the latest in a series of government moves against the Baha'i community, which has been able to register its groups in Tashkent, Samarkand, Jizak, Bukhara and Navoi.

More than ten officers from the police and NSS secret police, together with an official of the City Justice Department and the head of the mahalla (city district) committee raided the Baha'i centre in Tashkent's Khamza District in July 2009. Two Baha'is were found guilty of resisting the police, charges they denied, and sentenced to fifteen days' imprisonment. After that one of the two was expelled to neighbouring Kazakhstan.

Russian Protestant deported

Also deported was Russian Protestant Tsepurkin, who had moved to Tashkent with his wife and their two children in January 2009 and had legal residency there. "The NSS secret police was behind all this," he told Forum 18 from Omsk on 4 February. "Their local officers in Tashkent accused me verbally of being a terrorist and subverting the internal policy of the country by being a missionary."

Tsepurkin said he was particularly involved with trying to bring local drug addicts off drugs (he and his wife are former drug users) and had some success. However, in late October he was summoned to the local police for a check-up on his residence documents. He said the head of the passport department, citing demands from the NSS, accused him of conducting "spiritual terrorism" and ordered him to leave the country within 24 hours. He was threatened that they would find a reason to imprison him if he failed to comply.

The officer took Tsepurkin's passport and told him it would be returned at the border. Another officer threatened that if he appealed to the Russian Embassy his problems would not end with his deportation.

Tsepurkin told Forum 18 he was allowed to arrange tickets for his wife and children to fly out of Uzbekistan before he was taken by train to the border with Kazakhstan on 31 October. His passport was returned to him just as he was deported. As seen by Forum 18, it was stamped in Uzbek and English "Was turned out of the country for breach of stay regulations in the Republic of Uzbekistan" and erroneously dated 30 October 2009 (the Kazakh entry stamp at Sary-Agash was correctly dated 31 October). Tsepurkin's residence permit for Tashkent was also stamped as annulled.

Media allegations

In the wake of both Baha'i expulsions, Russian-language media articles by Turaev in the local media appeared later. His article attacking the earlier expelled Baha'i was published by Gorizont.uz agency on 16 September 2009, more than five weeks after his expulsion. The 5 February 2010 article about Taheri appeared in Novosti Uzbekistana more than eleven weeks after his deportation. The delay was not explained.

Turaev's article, "Sower of Alien Ideas", claimed that Taheri had come to live in Uzbekistan in 1990 "for mercenary reasons" (which were not explained) and as a missionary. It claimed he married an Uzbek citizen "to legalise his presence in the country, to conceal his mercenary aims and to avoid being unmasked". The author alleged that "by concealing his real aims" he was able to set up nine Baha'i groups across Uzbekistan.

Turaev claimed Taheri had been arrested in August 2008 while "brainwashing" a local woman "with the aim of forcing her to change her religious views". But "on that occasion he was able to evade responsibility" (the author does not explain how). The author then claims that Taheri organised the participation of more than 200 people from Uzbekistan in an "unsanctioned" meeting of Baha'is from Central Asia in Almaty in Kazakhstan in

December 2008 (he did not explain why the conference was "unsanctioned"). The author claimed that most of those who went from Uzbekistan did not know they were going to a religious conference.

The author accused Taheri of organising "illegal meetings" in private homes in Tashkent in the first three months of 2009, as well as invitations to foreign Baha'is to visit communities in the country. "It is natural that his activities were recognised as contradicting the laws of Uzbekistan," Turaev declared.

Defending media slanders

Forum 18 was unable to reach Turaev either at Novosti Uzbekistana or at Gorizont. The man who answered the phone at Novosti Uzbekistana on 15 February told Forum 18 "we don't have anyone by that name here". Pyotr Yakovlev, chief editor at Novosti Uzbekistana, also refused to pass on Turaev's contact details, but denied that Turaev was anything other than a journalist. He refused to explain why he is known to have published only two articles under his own name, both attacking Baha'is.

Yakovlev vigorously denied that his publication was a mouthpiece for the state's anti-religious campaign. "We are a private, not a state-run publication and we are independent," he insisted to Forum 18 from Tashkent on 16 February. Asked why he allowed his publication to attack the Baha'i community, and Taheri in particular, without giving them the opportunity to give their view, he declared: "I am an Uzbek. I am 64 years old and I know the Baha'is. Why shouldn't I publish this material?"

Asked why he had allowed the journalist to make unverified accusations, Yakovlev responded: "Decisions were taken by the court, not by us. You should ask them." He then put the phone down.

In addition to Turaev's September 2009 article attacking the Baha'is, Gorizont has a history of publishing other material attacking religious communities. In summer 2009 it published two articles attacking the Union of Baptists of Uzbekistan for holding children's summer camps. The author made a number of allegations which Baptists categorically denied.

The Gorizont articles appeared not long before the prosecution of three senior Baptist leaders, including Pavel Peichev, head of the Union. The three were given heavy fines (subsequently overturned), ordered to pay large sums in "unpaid" taxes and banned from positions in the Union for three years.

Earlier Gorizont articles have attacked other Protestants, as well as Jehovah's Witnesses, while state-sponsored television broadcasts have also attacked religious communities.

Independent human rights defenders in Uzbekistan, who wished to remain anonymous, have told Forum 18 that the Gorizont agency is sponsored by the NSS secret police.

Daniyor Juraev, director of Gorizont, told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 16 February that he could not recall these articles attacking religious communities. "I'll have to remind myself of them." But he denied that his agency published anti-religious articles at the request of the NSS or other government agencies. "Such articles contain the views of those who wrote them," he insisted. "I'll find out why such slanderous articles were published and we'll discuss them. If someone should be punished they will be." He refused to identify the ultimate owner of his agency.

Juraev refused to say why the authors failed to seek and publish the responses of religious communities to the often serious charges levelled against them. Told that religious believers in Uzbekistan have repeatedly complained to Forum 18 of what they

regard as the state-sponsored media slanders against them, Juraev responded: "I'm not indifferent. If we were guilty of anything, we will apologise."

Earlier deportations

Over many years the Uzbek authorities have expelled foreign citizens who they suspected played an active role in local religious communities. Previous religious deportees have included Jehovah's Witness Irfon Khamidov. He was deported to his native Tajikistan in May 2009 the day after being freed at the end of a two year jail term for teaching religion. During the one night he had at home in Samarkand [Samarqand] after getting out of jail before being deported, he saw his two-year-old son for the first time.

After an April 2009 raid by nine officers of Tashkent City National Security Service (NSS) secret police and regular police on Protestants gathered for a meal in a private home, Rodion Sayfutdinov, a Kazakh citizen who lived in Tashkent city with official registration, was detained, taken to the State border with Kazakhstan, and "dumped" in Kazakh territory with no money.

In June 2008 the head of Uzbekistan's Jewish community, Chief Rabbi Abe David Gurevich, and his wife Malka were forced to leave the country after the Justice Ministry refused to renew their accreditation.

Crackdown on devout Muslims continues

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (27.01.2010) / HRWF (02.02.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Uzbekistan continues to arrest religious believers, primarily Muslims, throughout the country, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Around 57 Muslims are being held in the central Syrdarya [Sidare] region on unknown charges. In the south-western Kashkadarya region around Karshi [Qarshi] the son-in-law of a Muslim woman arrested in November 2009 was arrested on 16 January 2010. The fate of several men put on trial in 2009 for following the approach to Islam of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi still remains unknown, despite requests by Forum 18 to the relevant courts for information. These cases appear to be part of an ongoing crackdown on peaceful devout Muslims and followers of other faiths exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief independent of state control.

Written official denial to UN of prosecutions

Uzbekistan has, in a written statement of 4 December 2009, claimed to the United Nations Human Rights Committee (HRC) that: "Commentaries on the fact that activists of religious organisations continue to suffer judicial prosecution are without any foundation and are false". Uzbekistan's human rights record is due to be examined by the HRC on 11 and 12 March.

In 2009 at least 47 followers of Said Nursi's approach to Islam were given prison sentences totalling around 380 years, and the country used short-term jail sentences against 21 followers of other faiths exercising their freedom of religion or belief between February and August 2009. The state continues in 2010 to punish unregistered religious activity, in defiance of international human rights standards.

Why are 57 Muslims still held?

National Security Service (NSS) secret police between the end of September and beginning of October 2009 arrested around 100 Muslims, some of whom were later released. However, around 57 are still being held in Detention Centre No.13 in Khovos in Syrdarya region. It is not known why they were arrested and what charges are being prepared against them. A member of the Ezgulik (Goodness) human rights society told Forum 18 on 19 January that the authorities have accused those detained of being part of the so-called Al-Jihad organisation, a splinter group of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan terrorist group. The Ezgulik member wished to remain anonymous, for fear of state reprisals.

The officer, who answered the phone in Khovos Detention Centre on 20 January, confirmed the arrests, but said that he did not know how many were "actually" arrested. He did not want to discuss the cases further and asked Forum 18 to contact the warden later. Calls on the same day were not answered.

A regional NSS secret police officer (who would not give his name) who answered the phone said that they have been investigating the cases and they "may be" brought before a court at the beginning of February, but he was not sure. "By law we have half a year before concluding the pre-trial investigation," he told Forum on 22 January. The NSS officer did not say how many individuals were arrested, but said that "the figure 57 is exaggerated." He also would not say what the charges are. "Our investigator knows those details," he responded. However, he would not put Forum 18 through to the investigator.

Mammadali Karimov, Syrdarya Region's chief religious affairs official, refused to explain on 20 January why so many Muslims were arrested. "Why are you asking me, ask the law-enforcement agencies," he said with an angry voice before putting the phone down.

The Ezgulik human rights society member said that relatives of Avaz Soipov and Ravshan Makhmudov, two of the arrested Muslims have complained to them. Soipov is a resident of Gulistan [Guliston] and Makhmudov of Syrdarya Region's Yangiyer District. "It's been almost four months since these people were taken into custody," the human rights defender complained Forum 18 on 19 January.

Most of the arrested Muslims are young men of between 20 and 40, the Ezgulik member said. "No independent legal experts or even relatives have been allowed to meet the prisoners." They added that "even the lawyers are not being told anything of the developments with the investigation."

"I attend mosque only on Fridays but now I am afraid to continue"

The parents of one of the 57 detainees, who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, complained to Forum 18 the detainee had only once since his arrest in October 2009 been allowed to see one family member at a detention centre.

The detainee had told his relative on that one occasion that "he thought he would be given a lengthy prison term." The detainee did not state how he was being treated or in what conditions he was being held. They met in a room where the light "turned on and off" and talked to each other through "thick glass and iron bars". "I could only see his face and that not so clearly," the relative lamented in great distress.

The detainee had before his arrest regularly attended mosque, was "not involved" in anything illegal, and was described as an honest, modest and hard working man. Every day "he would attend the mosque for prayer a few times."

When the detainee was arrested in October 2009, police searched the family home and "found some leaflets they said were extremist religious literature." The family complained

that the leaflets did not belong to them and were "planted" by police. Many others friendly with the detainee who together attended mosque and were also arrested. "Many young men were arrested at the beginning of October," the relative said.

The relative told Forum 18 that "I attend mosque only on Fridays but now I am afraid to continue to do so."

The NSS secret police officer claimed to Forum 18 that those arrested "did not get arrested for just attending a mosque." Asked whether so many such arrests would not discourage people from attending a mosque, he said that "my personal opinion is that if a person is a real Muslim and he did not commit a crime then he should not be afraid."

The authorities have bullied and harassed schoolchildren who attend places of worship – including mosques and Christian churches – as well as their parents. The mass media has been used as part of this. Similarly, state TV has also been used by the authorities to encourage intolerance of freedom of religion and belief and to encourage religious hatred and intolerance.

Arrest of detainee's son-in-law, rape threats against women

The 25 year-old son-in-law of a detainee arrested in November 2009 for holding Muslim religious meetings in her home has also been arrested, human rights defender Surat Ikramov told Forum 18 on 20 January. Nurbek Kulturayev, son-in law of Mekhrinisso Hamdamova, was arrested on 16 January 2010. His mother-in-law was arrested on 5 November 2009 with many other members of her family.

Human rights defender Ikramov thought that Kulturayev was arrested because six out of eight Muslim women "forced to give testimonies" – under threat of being raped – against Hamdamova have disappeared. "They are thought to have run away from Uzbekistan, and the NSS secret police has not been able to find them," Ikramov said. He also thought that Kulturayev was arrested "as a witness" and is being "tortured in prison to confess" that he was involved with the disappearances.

A relative of Kulturayev told Forum 18 on 20 January that they themselves had been interrogated by the NSS secret police, but did not want to make further comments for fear of the authorities. The family member said that they were "afraid" that they will also be arrested.

Hamdamova's and Kulturayev's family do not know exactly when they will face a trial, or where they are currently being detained. Hamdamova's lawyer thinks the trial will be at the beginning of February.

At least 30 other people were detained around the time Hamdamova was arrested, about 15 of them being relatives and the others being people who had attended Muslim religious meetings she had held at the Kuk Gumbaz (Blue Dome) mosque. They were detained for about a week at a police detention centre in Karshi, where human rights defender Ikramov told Forum 18 that the eight women were threatened with rape if they did not testify against Hamdamova. Later all the thirty were released except Shahla Rahmonova, who along with Hamdamova had been human rights defenders in the region.

Mamatkul Rajabov, Kashkadarya Region's chief religious affairs official, on 18 January did not want to comment on the case. He claimed that Hamdamova "did not work as a government employee," and referred Forum 18 to Ismail Raykhanov, Head of the regional office of Uzbekistan's Spiritual Administration of Muslims, or Muftiate. Hamdamova was appointed by Kashkadarya regional authorities to be responsible for

work with youth and solving conflicts in mahallas (local residential areas). Her appointment was on the recommendation of Usman Alimov, Uzbekistan's Chief Mufti.

The official, who answered Raykhanov of the Muftiate's phone on 18 January, first said he was Raykhanov. But when Forum 18 asked about Hamdamova, he then said that he was Raykhanov's assistant and would convey Forum 18's questions to him. However, he did not return Forum 18's phone call. Later the same day when Forum 18 several times tried to reach Raykhanov, the phone was put down.

The regional department of the NSS secret police denied to Forum 18 that they had any involvement in the case. "We do not know Hamdamova or Kulturayev, and we are not investigating any case related to these persons," the NSS officer (he did not give his name) who answered the phone told Forum 18 on 20 January.

Result of some 2009 Nursi trials unknown

At least 47 followers of Said Nursi's approach to Islam were given prison sentences totalling around 380 years in 2009, but the results of some 2009 trials are still unknown.

An official, who did not give his name, of the Chancellery of the capital Tashkent's Criminal Court would give no information about a Nursi trial which began in April 2009. In April Ibrohim Khudoybergenov, Talat Pulatov, Jahongir Kurbonov, and another unknown man were tried in Tashkent. However the official refused on 25 January 2010 to tell Forum 18 anything about the outcome of the trials, or if prosecutions are continuing. He also would not put Forum 18 through to judges who tried the cases. "The judges are not allowed to talk to you," he said before putting the phone down.

Authorities in Namangan were equally intent on saying nothing about Shokir Koraboyev, a former sports official in the region, who in June 2009 with three other persons went on trial for following Nursi's approach to Islam. Israil Yusupov, the Press Secretary to Namangan Regional Hokimiyat, referred Forum 18 to the Regional Criminal Court. "I am sorry, it is a criminal case, and I cannot help with this," he told Forum 18 on 25 January. He then refused to talk further.

Irkin Nasyrbayev, Head of the Regional Court's Chancellery refused to give information on the case. "We will not give any information," he told Forum 18 on 25 January before hanging up the phone.

The official answering the phone of the Regional Court's Chair on 25 January said that he was the Chair's Assistant. When asked about the cases of Koraboyev and the other three men he said that "the Chair is not available at the moment." He asked Forum 18 to call back later. Called back the person answering the phone said it was "not the Court but a cotton refining factory." Subsequent calls went unanswered.
