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UZBEKISTAN: Worsening anti-Protestant crackdown in north-west

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

As part of the worsening anti-Protestant crackdown in north-west Uzbekistan, Forum 18 News Service has learnt that a Protestant farmer, Murat Abatov, has been publicly pressured to renounce his faith, with threats to confiscate his land, and schoolteachers have begun bullying his sister Zulfiya, and telling children to avoid her. The authorities seem to have started using the new tactics of trying to turn people against Protestants, so that officials can claim to be doing the people's will, and also summoning individual believers in to the ordinary police, the NSS secret police, and the public prosecutor's office, in order to pressure believers to renounce their faith one by one. Amongst several other incidents, Bakhadyr Prembetov has had his flat in the regional capital Nukus raided by police, and has had threats from the head of the housing block administration that "if the Protestants did not stop visiting me, he would collect signatures from the residents and get me turned out of the apartment."

A Protestant in a state farm in the Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] region of north-western Uzbekistan has been publicly pressured to renounce his faith, Forum 18 News Service has learnt, and his sister is being officially ostracised in school. Meanwhile in the regional capital, Nukus, more Protestants have been summoned to the National Security Service (NSS) secret police and the ordinary police, where they have been pressured to write statements admitting that they are members of a "religious sect". This is part of the continuing crackdown on Protestants in Karakalpakstan (see F18News 21 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=303).

In mid-April a residents' meeting was called at the Ornek state farm in a village 30 kilometres north of Nukus, at which the farm administration, claiming to act on behalf of the residents, ordered Protestant Murat Abatov to renounce his faith. When he refused to do this, the director of the state farm Sapai Khalzanov threatened to seize the land that Abatov had rented from the state farm. The akskaly (elders) of the village called on their fellow-residents not to have anything to do with Abatov, or even to greet him, because he was a so-called "Wahhabi"

At the village school in Ornek, teachers have started to bully Abatov's sister Zulfiya, and to tell other pupils not to associate with this "Wahhabi".

"Wahhabi" is a term widely and very loosely used in Central Asia to denote Islamic fundamentalists, and Forum 18 knows of term also being used for Jehovah's Witnesses (see F18News 14 April http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=299).

When Forum 18 visited Ornek on 29 April, divisional police officer Mukhtar Aidbekov was at Murat Abatov's house and told Forum 18 that "under the Uzbek constitution any person has the right to profess any faith, but he may not engage in proselytism - converting people from one faith to another is forbidden," Aidbekov also said that "I asked Abatov to show me his religious literature and I have established that he does not own anything illegal. I do not see anything unlawful in Murat's actions."

For his part, Abatov was equally conciliatory. "I don't have anything against Aidbekov - he is acting in accordance with the law," he told Forum 18. "But someone is deliberately spreading extraordinary rumours about me and turning the village residents against me. For example, I am being called a Wahhabi, even though as we all know Protestants are not Muslims."

The director of the state farm Sapai Khalzanov refused to speak at length to Forum 18, saying he was late for a meeting, but insisted he had threatened to seize Abatov's land "in the heat of the moment". "I do not intend to take the land from him, or to get involved in this situation," he told Forum 18.

The director of Ornek's village school Gulpara Akimova denied that the teachers were turning the pupils against Zulfiya Abatova. "We were simply concerned at the fact that an underage girl was attending meetings of a religious sect," she told Forum 18. "We would like to speak to the girl's parents and make sure that they do not object to their daughter visiting a sect."

A Nukus Protestant who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 that he was sure that in fact the campaign against the Ornek Protestants had been initiated by the authorities. "Lately the authorities have started to adopt a new tactic: to turn people against Protestants and so appear to be doing the will of the people."

The crackdown is also continuing in Nukus. At the end of February, police officers came to the apartment of local Protestant Bakhadyr Prembetov with a search warrant. The officers openly admitted that they had received reports from Prembetov's neighbours that "members of a sect" were meeting in his apartment. "I get on very well with my immediate neighbours and they have no objection to the fact that I have visitors, but the police officers insisted that they were carrying out 'the will of the people'," Prembetov told Forum 18 on 29 April in Nukus.

He added that, from then on, the head of the housing block administration started to turn the residents against him. "The head of the housing block administration threatened that if the Protestants did not stop visiting me, he would collect signatures from the residents and get me turned out of the apartment."

Protestants in Karakalpakstan believe that their situation has deteriorated since the terrorist attacks in Uzbekistan in late March and early April. On 5 April four police officers entered the home of Protestant Valeri Adamiya in the town of Takhiatash, 15 kilometres (10 miles) south of Nukus, telling him that they had to search his home as a preventative measure following the attacks. When they found no "forbidden" literature, the police officers asked him to give them any religious books because they "had to confiscate something for the record". Finally, the police took four Protestant hymn books from him.

Karakalpakstan's Protestants believe the authorities have adopted new tactics to suppress unregistered Protestant communities. The police and the NSS secret police used to try to catch believers unawares during religious meetings, but believers are now being called in one by one by the NSS, the police and the public prosecutor's office and are being told to sign statements admitting that they are members of a "religious sect". Eleven Protestants were called in to the public prosecutor's office and the NSS of Karakalpakstan and were told to sign documents admitting that they had broken Article 240 (participation in unlawful meetings) and Article 241 (teaching religious doctrines) of Uzbekistan's code of administrative offences (see F18News 21 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=303)

At the beginning of April, people who had watched a Kazakh-language film about Jesus Christ in private apartments were called in by the police in the town of Karauzyak, 100 kilometres (60 miles) north of Nukus, and the nearby town of Takhtakupir. The police took statements from the people and threatened them with detention and imprisonment. "How the police found out about the viewing of the film is completely incomprehensible," a Nukus Protestant who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 on 30 April. "The videos of the film had been brought by Nukus Protestants to their relatives in Karauzyak and Takhtakupir [Takhtakupyr]. In both cases the film was watched at home by the family."

The source said that since Forum 18 reported the interrogations in Nukus on 21 April, at least six Protestants in Karakalpakstan have been called in for questioning at the NSS secret police, with at least a further six called in by the ordinary police.

These incidents are the latest in a continuing series of attacks on Protestants across Uzbekistan (eg. see F18News 4 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=267) and take place in the context of the current post-terrorist bombing crackdown against people of all faiths (see F18 News 13 April http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=298).

For more background, see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>

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