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UZBEKISTAN: Hare Krishna devotees expelled and correspondent threatened

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

Urgench State University has, because of their beliefs, expelled three Hare Krishna devotees, under the pretext of low marks in exams, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. This follows NSS secret police closely monitoring the unregistered Hare Krishnas. In Uzbekistan, contrary to human rights agreements the country has signed, unregistered religious communities are forbidden. The university authorities have also attacked Hare Krishnas, the natural science faculty's dean, Ruzumbay Eschanov, making unsubstantiated allegations, including claiming that Hare Krishna devotees are planning a coup d'etat or putsch. Hare Krishna devotees Forum 18 has spoken to have been told by the NSS that Forum 18's correspondent will be expelled, but the NSS has refused to discuss this with Forum 18. Khorezm is one of Uzbekistan's most difficult regions for religious minorities, with only one open Christian church left and the NSS admitting that "we are the ones who closed down the Baptists' church".

Three female Hare Krishna students have been expelled from the natural science department of the Urgench [Urganch] State University because of their religious beliefs, the head of the local independent human rights organisation Najot, Khaitboy Yakubov, told Forum 18 News Service on 19 July in Urgench, the regional centre of Khorezm region in north-western Uzbekistan.

"In fact, the students were simply given low grades in one of their exams. As they are all final-year students, that means they will not receive their diplomas. Because they were fee-paying students, the university administration had no right to expel them, but they were able to take revenge on the students for their religious beliefs, working within the limits of the possibilities available to them," a Krishna devotee and translator of Hindu literature Razumbai Khasanov told Forum 18 in Urgench on 1 July.

Khasanov also said that the National Security Service (NSS) secret police in Khorezm region is keeping him under surveillance because he is the leader of the local Hare Krishna community. "Preventative" talks are held with him virtually every week. "They have taken a great interest in Forum 18, among other things, and have asked in detail about what you and I talked about in March this year," Khasanov told Forum 18. Forum 18's correspondent visited Urgench in March.

Khasanov also stressed that NSS officials have virtually forbidden him to receive visitors at his home. "Rovshan Amerdinov, who works for the NSS in Khorezm region, has often warned me that it is unwise for people to visit me at home, but on 1 July an official from the republican NSS headquarters in Tashkent came specially to Urgench to see me, and told me frankly that because the Hare Krishna community is unregistered in Urgench, they would see any of my visitors as participants in an unlawful religious gathering being held under my leadership," Khasanov told Forum 18. Under Uzbek religion law, and against the human rights agreements Uzbekistan has signed, unregistered religious communities are forbidden.

Under Article 240 of Uzbekistan's code of administrative offences (breaking the law on religious organisations) unlawful religious activity is punishable by a fine of between 5 and 10 times the minimum wage (the minimum wage in Uzbekistan is 5,400 sums (around 37 Norwegian kroner, 4 Euros or 5 US dollars) or up to 15 days' administrative detention. Theoretically, Article 216 (unlawful organisation of public associations of religious organisations) and 216 (2) (breaking the law on religious organisations) may also be used against religious believers, which could lead to a punishment of up to five years' imprisonment. However, in practice these articles of the criminal code are hardly ever applied, and if the authorities decide to put believers in prison, they tend to bring accusations against them under articles 159 (undermining the constitutional order of the republic of Uzbekistan), 242 (establishing a criminal community), or 244 part 2 (creating, leading or participating in separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations) of Uzbekistan's criminal code of offences.

The Hare Krishnas' problems began last autumn. At a general meeting of students and teachers at Urgench university in November 2003, the dean of the natural sciences faculty Ruzumbay Eschanov claimed without any evidence that Hare Krishna devotees had attempted to mount a coup d'etat or putsch in Russia and that they were trying to do the same thing in Uzbekistan, amongst other unfounded allegations. Eschanov then said that he would expel all Hare Krishna students. His speech had the full support of the university leadership. Following Eschanov's speech, many female student devotees began to experience problems in their private lives. Since Eschanov's speech, rumours have been spread that female Krishna devotees are prostitutes, causing several planned weddings to be cancelled. A lecturer in the natural sciences faculty forced a student Krishna devotee, against their religion, to eat

meat and drink vodka, and Krishna devotees have been monitored by either university staff or the NSS. (See F18News 8 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=270)

Speaking to Forum 18 on 19 July, Ruzumbay Eschanov claimed that no-one at the university was persecuting the student Krishna devotees. "It's simply not an issue. The Hare Krishnas no longer preach on university grounds, and we in our turn do not stop them from professing their faith. Among the students there is just one Krishna female devotee who received a low grade in her exam, and of course she received an unsatisfactory grade because of her knowledge, not because of her religious convictions," Ischanov told Forum 18.

By a strange coincidence, about an hour after Forum 18's correspondent had left Urgench university, an NSS official Rovshan Amerdinov telephoned Krishna devotee Razumbai Khasanov. "Amerdinov ordered me to write a statement about my conversation with you. He also told me that you are working in Uzbekistan without accreditation and that you are going to be deported very soon," Khasanov told Forum 18. Other people who had spoken to Forum 18 were also called in for interview by the Khorezm regional NSS office and informed of the correspondent's impending deportation (see also F18News 7 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=356).

On 19 July, Forum 18 telephoned Rovshan Amerdinov and asked to meet him in order to establish on what grounds he was to be deported. Amerdinov declined to meet Forum 18, but demonstrated a thorough knowledge of Forum 18's articles in the course of the telephone conversation. For example, Amerdinov referred to a Forum 18 article about the work of the NSS in the republic (see F18 News 18 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=257) and another on the closure of a Baptist church (see F18 News 4 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=267). Significantly, Amerdinov admitted that the NSS had banned Khasanov from having visitors. "Khasanov is holding illegal religious meetings in his apartment. We questioned his visitors and they told us this was the case. Moreover, Khasanov gives religious literature to his student visitors, and they distribute it at university. Naturally, we cannot allow this and we have advised him not to receive visitors," Amerdinov told Forum 18.

Khorezm is one of Uzbekistan's most difficult regions for religious minorities. Today there is just one registered Christian community left in Khorezm region - the Korean Protestant church. In February this year the Khorezm justice administration rescinded the registration of the Evangelical Christian Baptists. It appears that the main instigator for the repressive policy against believers is the NSS for Khorezm region. Interestingly, an Urgench resident who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 that during an interrogation at the NSS office, staff from this organisation told him openly: "We are the ones who closed down the Baptists' church". Since the Baptist church's closure, its parishioners have been subjected to threats and even beatings by NSS officials (see F18 News 4 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=267 and 7 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=356).

For more background information 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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