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UZBEKISTAN: Two Protestants receive ten-day prison terms

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Hudoer Pardaev and Igor Kim, members of God's Love Pentecostal Church, spent ten days in prison in June after being found guilty of violating laws on religion and "illegal" religious teaching, Protestant sources told Forum 18 News Service. In a separate case, Baptist Sharofat Allamova was held for four days in mid-June after a late-night check on a bus taking her back to her home town of Urgench revealed she had Christian books and films in her bag. Now back at home, Allamova faces criminal prosecution for violating the laws on religion with a maximum sentence if convicted of three years' imprisonment. All three Protestants had Christian literature confiscated. In the past, courts have ordered that confiscated Muslim, Christian and Hare Krishna literature be destroyed. No official at the government's Committee for Religious Affairs in Tashkent was prepared to explain to Forum 18 why religious communities face mounting pressure.

Two Protestants from Jizzakh Region of central Uzbekistan each spent ten days in prison in June in punishment for their religious activity, Protestant sources who preferred not to be identified for fear of reprisals told Forum 18 News Service. The two men - Hudoer Pardaev and Igor Kim, both in their mid-thirties - also had Christian literature confiscated from them. In a separate case, 28-year-old Baptist Sharofat Allamova was detained for four days in mid-June after Christian books and films were found in her bag on a late-night bus from the central city of Samarkand [Samarqand] to her home town of Urgench [Urganch]. She now faces criminal prosecution on charges of "violating the law on religious organisations". She is currently at home awaiting further action against her.

Pardaev and Kim, who are from God's Love Church, an unregistered Pentecostal congregation, were sentenced on 12 June by the Yangiabad District Criminal Court. They were given the ten-day prison terms under two articles of the Code of Administrative Offences: Article 240, which punishes "violating the laws on religious organisations", and Article 241, which punishes "violating the procedure for teaching religion". Sixteen Christian books and 8 CDs were confiscated from them.

Local Protestants complained to Forum 18 that the accusations were brought against Pardaev and Kim "illegally". They report that the two have lodged official complaints with various state agencies.

Forum 18 tried to find out from officials why detentions and imprisonment of believers for peaceful religious activity are increasing in Uzbekistan. No official at the government's Committee for Religious Affairs in the capital Tashkent was prepared to talk to Forum 18 on 4 July. When Forum 18 introduced itself on each of the Committee's numbers, the line was cut.

Meanwhile, Protestant sources who preferred not to be identified for fear of reprisals told Forum 18 that Allamova was detained after the bus she was returning home on to Urgench was stopped for an inspection at 11 pm on 10 June at a control post near the small town of Gijduvan [Gizhduvan] near Bukhara [Bukhoro]. Eleven books, eleven films on disc and other Christian material were confiscated. The books included four copies of the New Testament and three copies of the Book of Proverbs in Uzbek, while the discs contained the Jesus film and other Christian productions. She was held by Gijduvan police for four days with no arrest warrant or other documentation.

The Bukhara Regional Internal Affairs Directorate then launched a case against her under Article 216-2 of the Criminal Code, which punishes a second offence of "violation of the law on religious organisations" with a sentence of up to three years' imprisonment. The material in the case was drawn up by an official of the anti-terrorist department of the Criminal Investigation Directorate, Nusrat Jahonov.

On 14 June Jahonov led a raid on Allamova's home in Urgench which Protestants have told Forum 18 was "illegal" as it was conducted without a warrant. Joining Jahonov in the raid was a colleague from the Khorezm regional Anti-Terrorist Department of the Criminal Investigation Directorate, Suhrob (last name unknown). A total of 51 Christian books were confiscated, as well as four copies of the Baptist children's magazine Tropinka, 25 audiotapes, three videotapes and six CDs. A list of the confiscated material was handed over. Protestants have insisted to Forum 18 that all the books had been imported into Uzbekistan legally.

Forum 18 reached Jahonov and Suhrob on 4 July, but neither was prepared to explain why Allamova had been singled out for such harsh treatment merely for carrying Christian books in her bag while travelling.

Allamova has already faced pressure from the authorities in Urgench for her involvement in church activity. In June 2004 she was summoned by the Khorezm Regional National Security Service (NSS) secret police, where she was interrogated and threatened. One officer jeered at her for maintaining her Christian faith (see F18News 7 July 2004 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=356>).

This year has seen increased harassment particularly of Protestant Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses. Several Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses have been given harsh prison or corrective labour sentences in recent months in punishment for their religious activity (see F18News 27 June 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=982>). At the same time, raids on religious worship services, fines, confiscation of religious literature and deportation of foreign citizens engaged in peaceful religious activity have also intensified (see F18News 26 June 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=980>).

The authorities take particularly harsh measures against religious literature they do not like. Officials often believe it will be used for proselytism, which is a crime in Uzbekistan. Censorship of religious literature was tightened in June 2006 with increased penalties for unauthorised publication or distribution of it (see F18News 29 June 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=805>).

Courts have often ordered that confiscated Muslim, Christian or Hare Krishna literature be destroyed. Material confiscated from Pentecostal pastor Dmitry Shestakov was ordered destroyed in March after Andijan [Andijon] Regional Criminal Court declared it was "banned" literature (see F18News 27 March 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936>).

However, Protestants have reported some success in attempts to have "illegal" prosecutions withdrawn. Back in March prosecutors tried to bring a case under Article 240 and Article 241 of the Code of Administrative Offences against Vyacheslav Tskhe, youth leader of the registered Grace Pentecostal Church in the Mirzo-Ulugbek District of Tashkent. However, Protestant sources in Tashkent told Forum 18 that Tskhe protested to several state agencies about the actions of police officer E. Ismailov and how the case had been presented. "We received an official response on 3 July that the violations of the law Ismailov had committed were discussed at an operational meeting and he was severely reprimanded," one Protestant told Forum 18. The case against Tskhe was withdrawn.

Forum 18 has learnt of several other instances where court officials involved in cases against Protestants have been warned over mistakes they have committed. (END)

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

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

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

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

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at <<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>>

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