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UZBEKISTAN: Seven Protestants in self-financed detention, imam sentenced

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Seven members of a Tashkent-based Pentecostal church are due to complete 15-day prison sentences on 25 October, imposed to punish them for attending a prayer gathering in a private home, Protestants told Forum 18 News Service. The seven have to pay for their own detention. Five other church members were fined. The judge refused to tell Forum 18 why the twelve had been punished for peaceful religious activity and why she had ordered Bibles and other Christian literature confiscated from them to be destroyed. Meanwhile, the judge who sentenced Abdurakhmon-eshon, the imam of the Sulton Uways-bobo mosque in Beruni District of Karakalpakstan, for embezzlement refused to tell Forum 18 what punishment he had handed down. However, he said the imam is appealing to Karakalpakstan's Supreme Court. It remains unclear whether he and other arrested imams in Karakalpakstan are innocent or guilty of the accusations. No officials have been prepared to discuss the other reported arrests of Muslims.

Courts in Uzbekistan continue to fine and jail members of religious communities, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Seven members of a Pentecostal church in the capital Tashkent were imprisoned for 15 days on 10 October for their peaceful religious activity and are due to be freed on 25 October. Five others were fined, according to court documents seen by Forum 18. Meanwhile, it remains unclear whether imams who were earlier arrested in the north-western region of Karakalpakstan are innocent or guilty of charges levelled against them. Judge Alym Atabaev of Kigili District Court of Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] told Forum 18 that Abdurakhmon-eshon, the imam of the Sulton Uways-bobo mosque in Beruni District, was tried for embezzlement. But the judge refused to say what the sentence was, though he said the imam has appealed to a higher court.

On 10 October Judge Inobat Sabirova of Mirabad District Criminal Court in Tashkent handed down fines and administrative arrests on members of an unregistered Pentecostal church in two separate hearings. All twelve were found guilty of violating Uzbekistan's Administrative Code's Article 202, which punishes "violating the order of holding demonstrations, street marches and meetings", and Article 240, which punishes "violating the Law on Religion".

The first Court decision, a copy of which Forum 18 has seen, reads that Aleksandr Kolesnikov and Yelena Kolesnikova "held an illegal meeting without registering in the appropriate agencies." The court decision said that Kolesnikov taught religious doctrines without "special religious education". Kolesnikov and Kolesnikova did not admit to violating the Law, as seen from the court decision, arguing that they had gathered friends in their home on 4 October for prayer and thanksgiving on the occasion of the death of a family member.

The court sentenced Kolesnikov to 15 days' administrative arrest and fined Kolesnikova 125,200 Soms (654 Norwegian Kroner, 73 Euros or 94 US Dollars).

Judge Sabirova ordered the destruction of the Bibles, song books titled "The Song of Revival" and books titled "Study of the Word of God" confiscated from the church. The decision is ambiguous since, at the same time, it says that based on the expert opinion of the government's Religious Affairs Committee given on 7 October those books could be used for the "internal activities" of registered communities.

Uzbek courts frequently order confiscated religious literature to be destroyed (see F18News 30 September 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1195>).

In the second case the same day, Judge Sabirova punished ten other members of the church with administrative arrests or fines. Aleksandr Bolshakov, Yuri Varkus, Sergei Derbushev, Yevgeni Starostin, Saidkarim Nosirov and Natik Abdullaev were each handed down 15 days' administrative arrest. While in detention, 15 per cent of the official minimal salary would be levied on them for the benefit of the Tashkent City Special Detention Centre for Administrative Penalties, and the term of sentence would be counted from 10 October, reads the court decision, which Forum 18 has seen.

Four other church members - Ruslan Zagidullin, Vitali Sharapov, Aleksandr Zhironkin and Igor Krivokhizhin - were each fined 125,200 Soms.

Judge Sabirova refused to discuss why the twelve Protestants had been punished for peaceful religious activity. "I will not give you information on the case over the phone," she told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 20 October. She also refused to explain why she ordered the confiscated books to be destroyed. "Talk to the bailiffs to find out whether or not they were destroyed," she said.

A source from Tashkent who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18 on 21 October that all seven church members given administrative arrest were taken the same day from the court room to the detention centre, which is situated in the city's Khamza district. "The believers were told they would be freed on the morning of 25 October after their accommodation in the detention centre was paid for," the source reported.

Those held in the cells in the centre sleep on bare boards and are not given blankets, pillows or mattresses, the source complained. "The cells are not heated and there is no water or toilet. In the mornings and evenings one and a half litres of water in plastic bottles is given to each cell. They also give the same kind of empty plastic bottles for urinating. Those who want to go out during the day are taken to work, for which no one gets paid."

The north-western region of Karakalpakstan has seen a number of imams arrested in recent months. However, few Muslims or officials have been prepared to talk to Forum 18 about the arrests. It remains unclear whether the authorities' accusations of financial irregularity or drugs possession are true or an excuse to punish them for their religious activity. The region has about 50 officially-approved mosques under the government-controlled Muslim Board (see F18News 30 September 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1195>).

Reached on 21 October on his mobile phone, Nurulla Jamolov, the Chairman of Karakalpakstan's Religious Affairs Committee, did not want to talk to Forum 18. He insisted it was a wrong number and hung up the phone. Forum 18 was given the number by the Cabinet of Ministers in the regional capital Nukus, where Jamolov's office is situated, because he could not be reached at his office number. Jamolov's office number has gone unanswered each time Forum 18 has called since late September.

An official from Beruni District Court insisted to Forum 18 that no imams were tried by his court. "I have heard that imams were tried in other districts of Karakalpakstan," the official told Forum 18 on 22 October.

Judge Atabaev of Kigili District Court told Forum 18 that imam Abdurakhman-eshon was tried for embezzlement under Article 167 of the Criminal Code. "At the moment the imam is in the process of appealing to Karakalpakstan's Supreme Court," he told Forum 18 on 22 October. "And I am not going to tell you anything more."

A senior official of the Supreme Court of Karakalpakstan confirmed to Forum 18 on 22 October that imam Abdurakhmon-eshon had been tried by Kigili District Court led by Judge Atabaev. But the official also refused to give the date of the trial, the sentence handed down or when any appeal would take place.

Muhamad Sadik Muhammad Yusuf, Uzbekistan's former chief mufti and an independent Muslim scholar based in Tashkent, said that he had heard that three leaders of the Sultan Uways mosque had been arrested, but insisted this had been for "financial irregularities". "No one has been arrested for religious reasons," he told Forum 18 on 23 October.

Reports said over 50 Muslims were arrested in Turtkul District of Karakalpakstan during the summer on charges of extremism. It said they were accused of reading the books of Al-Bukhari, the compiler of what Sunni Muslims regard as one of the most authoritative collectors of the sayings of the Islamic prophet Mohammed, and also the books of Muhamad Yusuf (see F18News 30 September 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1195>). Asked about these reports, Muhamad Yusuf responded categorically: "No one has been arrested for reading Islamic literature." He pointed out that his books have been officially published in Uzbekistan.

Meanwhile in central Uzbekistan, a Baptist church in the town of Gulistan [Guliston] in Syrdarya [Sidare] Region was raided by 12 officials during a service on 10 October, a Protestant who asked not to be identified for fear of reprisals from the authorities told Forum 18. "The officials arrived at 11:15 a.m. immediately after the communion was over," the Protestant reported. Although the church was raided by officers from the secret services, and a representative from the Regional Justice Department, none of the officials, except Khurshid Khudoyberdiyev of the Justice Department, identified themselves. The Protestant said the church's pastor, Viktor Klimov, and 18 other members were forced to write statements.

The officials seized thirty commentary books on the Bible, six Children's Bibles in Russian, two Children's Bibles in Uzbek, a Bible in Greek, a book titled "How to Evangelise People Living in the CIS", "History of Missions", and eight other Christian books they found at the church during the raid. The Bible in Greek and Children's Bibles were bought by the church from the Uzbek Bible Society in Tashkent, a legally-registered organisation, Forum 18 was told.

Sources told Forum 18 that Gulistan town Police Department is collecting evidence to bring a law-suit against Pastor Klimov under Administrative Code Article 240 for "violating the Law on Religion" and Article 241 for "violating the order of teaching religious doctrines".

Khudoyberdiev of the Justice Department insisted that although the church operates under the umbrella of the Baptist Union it still needs to register individually as a branch. "They also do not follow proper procedures of registering their procurements in their bookkeeping system," he told Forum 18 from Gulistan on 20 October. "They buy or receive books as a present but do not register them in their accounting. We have warned them many times in the past about these violations, which they did not eliminate. And enough is enough."

Khudoyberdiev told Forum 18 that "personally Klimov has done nothing wrong" but as the pastor he must be held accountable for the violations. "Administrative charges will now be brought against Klimov." Asked what will happen to the books confiscated from the church, Khudoyberdiev said that the court would decide.

The Gulistan congregation is one of the many religious communities of a variety of faiths across the country that have been unable to gain state registration. Uzbekistan's Religion Law - in defiance of the country's international human rights commitments - bans all unregistered religious activity and "offences" lead to harsh penalties under the Criminal Code or the Code of Administrative Offences.

The Gulistan church has faced repeated raids, fines and vilification through the state-run media (see F18News 13 June 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1143>). (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=1170>.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief 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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f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY