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UZBEKISTAN: "Leave only one spoon, one mug and one mattress for each"

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

Uzbekistan continues to raid private homes, confiscating religious literature and halting meetings for worship, Forum 18 News Service notes. Fines of up to 50 times the minimum wage have then been imposed on those subjected to raids. In one case court bailiffs illegally confiscated basic household goods such as a refrigerator, washing machine and dining table from a Baptist family, and have threatened to confiscate more household items as they will not pay an unjust fine they cannot afford. This has been taken place alongside state media attacks on the same people. State-controlled television has stated that people should buy and read only state-authorised religious books, warning of those who allegedly "misuse people's interest in reading books". It also claimed that only two publishers were allowed to publish religious books - but did not name the publishers or state which beliefs the publishers cover. A state Religious Affairs Committee official did not know the names of the two publishers.

Police in Uzbekistan have continued to raid private homes, confiscating religious literature, and have raided a meeting for worship as it was not conducted in the location the religious community was officially registered. Courts then fined those who were subjected to raids. In one case court bailiffs confiscated items such as a refrigerator, washing machine and dining table from a Baptist family, and have threatened to confiscate more household items as they will not pay an unjust fine. This has been taken place alongside state media attacks on the same people.

State-controlled television has also told its viewers to buy and read only state-authorised religious books, warning of those who allegedly "misuse people's interest in reading books". It also claimed that only two publishers were allowed to publish religious books - but did not name the publishers or state which beliefs the publishers cover.

"Leave only one spoon, one mug and one mattress for each"

Three Navoi Regional Court Bailiffs on 11 September confiscated from husband and wife Artur and Irina Alpayev their dining table, refrigerator, piano and DVD disk player. The couple are members of a local unregistered Baptist Church, and have refused to pay a fine imposed on them on 9 June by Judge Oltinbek Mansurov of Navoi City Criminal Court for "illegally" keeping Christian books in their private flat.

The three Bailiffs with two other colleagues had already taken away the family's washing machine on 8 August, Alpayev complained to Forum 18 on 13 September. The couple have five children.

The order for the confiscation came from Senior Bailiff Laziz Isayev, who instructed his subordinates to "leave only one spoon, one mug and one mattress for each member of the family," Alpayev told Forum 18.

Bailiff Isyaev's order also instructed the Bailiffs to make an inventory of the property of Nikolai and Larissa Serin, another couple from the same Church who were also handed large fines at the same time. During the 8 August inspection, the Bailiffs placed a restraining order on - but did not remove - their couch, two armchairs, and refrigerator (the Serins have two children). On 11 September the Bailiffs returned to take away the Serins' property. However, they were unsuccessful since the family is away from the city on a visit, explained Alpayev.

Both the Alpayev and Serin families were told by the Bailiffs that the arrested property will not cover the June administrative fine, so they "may come back later and make a more detailed inventory of all that is left".

Raid, confiscation, fines

Trouble began for the Alpayev and Serin families on 22 April, when the Alpayev's home was raided. Navoi Police came under the guise passport-regime check-up, and confiscated Christian literature, including a personal Bible, Children's Bible and Christian song-book. Alpayev told Forum 18 that the Police took the names of the Serin couple who were visiting them, and on the same day raided their home, also confiscating Christian books.

On 9 June, about a month later, Judge Mansurov fined them for possession of the literature under the Code of Administrative Offences' Article 184-2 (see below). Each of the men were fined 50 times the minimum monthly wage, or 3,146,000 Soms (about 9,176,950 Norwegian Kroner, 1,230 Euros, or 1,600 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). Mansurov also fined their wives each 40 times the minimum monthly wage, or 2,516,800 Soms (about 7,335 Norwegian Kroner, 980 Euros, or 1,280 US Dollars). Judge Mansurov also ordered that the confiscated literature be transferred to the state Religious Affairs Committee for "expert examination".

Alpayev said that after its "expert examination" of the books, the Religious Affairs Committee decided to retain the books as the books "are only for use inside a registered religious community". "Even the personal Bibles were not returned," Alpayev lamented.

Alleged "expert analyses" are routinely used as an excuse to confiscate any book the authorities decide to confiscate (see eg. F18News 20 May 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1298>). Courts routinely order the confiscation and destruction of religious literature, including the Bible (see eg. F18News 17 September 2012 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1743>) and Islamic texts (see eg. F18News 16 March 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1679>).

Illegal confiscation of property

Bailiff Murtuzayev had already visited the Alpayevs' home as early as 3 August to demand illegally that they "urgently" pay the fine, Alpayev complained to Forum 18. He told the Bailiff that the Navoi City Court decision was not final, and that they had filed an appeal. However, the Bailiffs came on 8 August and took away the property before the latest appeal hearing in the Regional Court on 10 August.

An official of the Navoi Regional Bailiffs Department (who did not give his name), who answered the Department Chair's telephone, declined to comment on the confiscations on 13 September, but referred Forum 18 to Bailiff Isayev. Numerous calls to Bailiff Isayev's phone the same day went unanswered. When Forum 18 called back the Chair's number, the same official told Forum 18 that it was the wrong number.

"Did they really take away all that?"

Judge Mansurov's Assistant, Shokhida Artykova, refused on 13 September to put Forum 18 through to him saying that he will not give any comments on the fines and confiscations. When Forum 18 asked her the question, she said that "their property was confiscated because they did not pay the fines".

Asked why the Bailiffs confiscated the Alpayevs' property on 8 August, two days before the appeal hearing, as well as why they took away basic household items on 11 September, Artykova seemed surprised. "Did they really take away all that?"

She also said that the 8 August confiscation was "illegal", but refused to say more. "I don't know what to say," she added and referred Forum 18 to Farhod Khalilov, Head of the Court's Chancellery. Khalilov's phone went unanswered on 13 September.

Appeals fail

Alpayev told Forum 18 that as well as the "huge" fines being beyond the families' means to pay, they refused to pay the fines on principle. The Alpayevs and Serins belong to the Council of Churches Baptists, which refuses to register with the State as they fear this will lead to unwarranted state interference in their community's internal affairs and religious life.

The four Baptists' appeals to the Navoi Regional and Uzbekistan's Supreme Court were unsuccessful. Judge Z. Toshbekov of the Regional Court on 3 July upheld the fines, and the Supreme Court referred their appeal back to the same Court. Judge Nasreddin Daminov, Chair of the Regional Court, on 10 August upheld the previous court decisions.

Appeals against state violations of freedom of religion or belief are routinely rejected in Uzbekistan. In a recent case, Vladimir Shinkin appealed to numerous state agencies right up to President Islam Karimov in his bid to have his son (an atheist) and daughter-in-law exonerated on charges of holding religious meetings he says they never held, for which they received fines totalling 110 times the minimum monthly wage. He is also seeking the return of confiscated Christian literature (see F18News 17 September 2012 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1743>).

Media targeting and slander

Judge Mansurov, for reasons the Baptists do not know, described them as Jehovah's Witnesses, and the literature found in their home as Jehovah's Witness books. Alpayev said that on 21 June, 12 days after Judge Mansurov's verdict, Ferganskaya Pravda (Fergana Truth), a Fergana regional newspaper, published a "slandorous" article titled "They paid for breaking the Law". The Baptists were falsely called Jehovah's Witnesses, adding that the activity of this organisation is "illegal" in Navoi Region.

Judge Mansurov earlier fined another Baptist Roman Nizamutdinov for "illegal" missionary activity. Following that verdict, he had published an attack on him - who the Judge also described as a Jehovah's Witness - in the 17 July issue of a local Uzbek-language newspaper Dustlik Bayrogi (see F18News 6 August 2012 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1729>).

Mansurov also published a similar article in the 17 August issue of Znamya Druzhby (Banner of Friendship), the Russian-language version of the same Navoi paper. Entitled "Entrapped by missionaries", Mansurov repeated many of his earlier attacks, including wrongly identifying Nizamutdinov as a Jehovah's Witness, as well as publishing his home address and the name of the factory where Nizamutdinov worked. "He had a good report at work until it was discovered by police officers conducting a passport check in his flat that he reads Jehovah's Witness literature banned in Uzbekistan", the Judge claimed.

In the article Judge Mansurov also claims that Jehovah's Witness literature was found in the private flat of another Navoi resident, Dinaida Achkasova (her private address was also published). He reveals that he also fined her. He does not specify the amount of the fine and the date of the hearing, but it may be that it was in July, since this case was mentioned in his previous article.

Recent media campaigns and court decisions have directly attacked by name people exercising freedom of religion or belief. Both have falsely identified Russian Orthodox and Protestant Christians as Jehovah's Witnesses, stating also (correctly) that Jehovah's Witnesses activity is not permitted in several regions of Uzbekistan (see F18News 11 September 2012 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1740>).

"Misusing people's interest in reading books"

Uzbekistan's state-controlled First TV Channel on 22 August warned its viewers to buy and read only state-authorised religious books, BBC Monitoring noted. "We recommend that you read religious books produced only by the two publishers authorised by the government," the programme stated.

"Some extremist forces are trying to misuse people's interest in reading books. Specifically, they are trying to put destructive ideology into religious books. That is why the publishing and sale of religious books have been brought under the government's control."

Only two publishing houses in the country are allowed to publish religious literature, the programme claimed - but did not name the publishers or state which beliefs the publishers cover. It may have meant solely Islamic works, as Uygun Gofurov, described as an Islam researcher, stated on the programme: "These measures have been taken to prevent various errors from being published in books and enrich the meanings of their contents". He also claimed that "some jihadist groups and extremist movements are attempting to reprint and circulate books with jihadist ideology".

Shovkat Hamdamov, Press Secretary of the state Religious Affairs Committee told Forum 18 on 18 September he did not know who exactly the two publishers are, and also declined to state why only two publishers were given the right to publish. "Please send us your questions in writing," he responded.

The TV programme also said that law enforcement agencies conducted inspections at several bookshops, publishing houses and border checkpoints to "crack down on the circulation of unauthorised extremist literature".

The report went on to show the basement of one of Tashkent's central mosques where the city's chief imam leads Friday prayers. It showed piles of reportedly unauthorised religious books being kept there. "There are forces that want to spread a conspiracy and turn people against the constitutional regime in the country," the programme concluded.

A very strict censorship regime is applied against religious literature and other material of all faiths (see F18News 1 July 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1153>).

Raid, fine, media attack

Also raided by police and subjected to state-sponsored media attack were Grace Protestant Church and its Pastor Sergei Rychagov. The Church, in the town of Dostabod in Tashkent Region's Kuyichirchik District, has had state registration and so legal permission to exist since 1999. Government-backed news agencies 12news.uz and 12.uz published identical articles on 23 and 24 August that Pastor Rychagov was fined in August (the exact date was not specified) for "systematic violation" of the Religion Law. The Pastor was accused in the article of conducting religious "assemblies" outside the area where the Church is officially registered.

A law-enforcement official (no names were given) told 12news.uz that on 11 August Pastor Rychagov organised "an illegal religious assembly" for residents of Istiklol village of the same District. In this assembly, 16 of Rychagov's "followers" of various ethnicities, as well as "five school children and preschoolers", participated, the information agencies claim. "During an inspection of the meeting place, the Police agents detected and confiscated more than 70 religious books, booklets, audio-cassette tapes, CD disks as well as miscellaneous religious items," the official was reported as saying.

The home in Istiklol where the Church met was given to Rychagov as a gift by his follower Dmitry Kim, who left Uzbekistan permanently in 2004 to live in Russia. "Not without the help of Rychagov, the home was transformed into a place of regular religious assemblies, in which between 20 and 50 local residents - followers of Grace Church - participated," the official told 12news.uz.

Raid defended

Bakhrom Kuzibayev, Deputy Chief of Kuyichirchik District Police, denied to Forum 18 that Rychagov had already been fined, but said an administrative case against him was opened by his Police Department. "We are waiting to see the results of the religious expert analysis of the books," he told Forum 18 on 5 September.

Asked why police raided the Grace Church during worship, Kuzibayev defended the raid. "He [Rychagov] violated the Law by holding religious meetings outside the area where his Church is officially registered." Forum 18 asked Kuzibayev who provided information to the news agencies, and why the Church's worship meetings were scornfully called assemblies. Kuzibayev responded: "We are not responsible for what these agencies write."

Kuzibayev claimed that the books "seized from the Church" will be returned after the Religious Affairs Committee has conducted an "expert analysis".

Administrative Code Article 184-2

Article 184-2 bans "Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan with a purpose to distribute or distribution of religious materials by physical persons".

Punishments are a fine of between 50 and 150 times the minimum monthly wage, "with confiscation of the religious materials and the relevant means of their production and distribution". (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all 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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351>.

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at <<http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Uzbekistan>>.

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