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UZBEKISTAN: 74-year-old woman among latest police raid victims

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

A 74-year-old disabled Protestant from Tashkent Region, Nina Chashina, may face administrative prosecution after police raided her home, seized religious literature and beat her neighbour. Police refused to allow doctors to take the neighbour to hospital after she suffered an epileptic fit, Protestants complained to Forum 18 News Service. Others across Uzbekistan have faced fines for religious activity, including the father of a family punished for singing Christian songs in his own home with his wife, children and a friend. In another recent case, the same judge in Khorezm Region who punished a Jehovah's Witness fined two Protestants five days later. He also ordered a Bible and New Testament destroyed after an "expert analysis" by an official of the local Muslim Board, even though the government's Religious Affairs Committee is the only body authorised to conduct such analyses.

As raids, threats, beatings, literature seizures and fines for religious activity continue across Uzbekistan, one of the latest victims is a 74-year-old disabled Protestant from Tashkent Region, Forum 18 News Service notes. Police raided her home and seized Christian literature and she may face prosecution, while her neighbour was beaten. In other cases, fines have been as high as 40 times the minimum monthly wage. Many court verdicts seen by Forum 18 order that confiscated religious literature be destroyed. In Khorezm Region, a Judge ordered a Bible and New Testament destroyed after an "expert analysis" by an official of the local Muslim Board, even though the government's Religious Affairs Committee is the only body authorised to conduct such analyses.

This summer has seen what appears to be an upsurge in such attacks on individuals exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief, with many facing punishment under the Code of Administrative Offences (see F18News 11 September 2012 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1740>).

After a husband and wife in Navoi refused to pay administrative fines imposed to punish them for their religious activity, court bailiffs seized the family's washing machine and other property (see F18News 18 September 2012 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1744>).

Cases have also been brought under the Criminal Code to punish individuals for their religious activity (see forthcoming F18News article).

Almalyk raid and beating

On 4 September, police in Almalyk in Tashkent Region raided the home of Nina Chashina, a 74-year-old Protestant who is disabled. Seven officials, three of whom were in police uniforms, broke into her flat in Almalyk, another Protestant, who knows her and who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 11 September. Officials confiscated 25 Christian books, including seven Bibles and three New Testaments in Russian, three Bible commentary books, 100 brochures, 25 DVD disks as well as 20 audio-cassette tapes.

The Protestant told Forum 18 that the same officials then broke into the private flat of one of her neighbours in the same block, Gulya (shortened version of the name - the full name was not given). "Officials handcuffed her and then dragged her into the police car while several officials hit her." The Protestant added that Gulya is registered at a local psycho-neurological clinic, and is registered as a disabled person.

Police then brought both Chashina and Gulya to Almalyk City Police's Criminal Investigation Department, where Gulya had "an epileptic attack, and fell unconscious". After medical help, doctors wanted to take her to the local clinic "but the police refused". Police officers "using Gulya's helpless condition forced her to write a dictated statement that Chashina is engaged in distributing DVDs of Christian films among Muslims". The police then released the two.

The Protestant told Forum 18 that Chashina is preparing to complain against the "unlawful" police actions.

Farhod Aripov, Deputy Chief of Almalyk Police in charge of criminal investigations, refused to say why the two women's homes were raided. He told Forum 18 on 14 September that an administrative case may be opened, but refused to specify against whom and under what exact charges.

Aripov adamantly denied that Gulya, whose full name he did not give, had been handcuffed or beaten. When Forum 18 insisted that witnesses saw it happen, he declined to comment further. "Please write to us or come to our Department, and we will give you more information," he said.

Bostanlyk fine

On 28 August, Tashkent Region's Bostanlyk District Criminal Court fined four members of Tashkent's officially registered Baptist Church. In a decision, a copy of which Forum 18 has seen, Judge Ikrom Obidov found all four guilty under Administrative Code Article 201 (violation of the order of organisation, conducting of meetings, gatherings, street marches or demonstrations) and Article 240, Part 1 (violation of the Religion Law).

Timofei Peychev and Igor Kuliada were each fined eight times the minimum monthly wage or 578,840 Soms (1,700 Norwegian Kroner, 230 Euros or 300 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). Pavel Peychev and Sergey Zakharov were each fined five times the minimum monthly wage or 361,775 Soms.

Summer camp raided

Trouble for the four Baptists began with a police raid on 9 August on the Apple Orchard camp in the village of Yangikurgan in Bostanlyk District. The four were among their families and other Church members having a summer holiday there, Baptists who wished to remain unnamed told Forum 18.

Of the 15 officials who raided the camp, three were in police uniforms, the Baptists said. The officials "illegally in the absence of witnesses" searched the cars parked at the resort, as well as the personal belongings of the holiday makers, who at that time were "absent and swimming". The officials then "without making official records" confiscated Christian song-books, personal notebooks and diaries.

Pavel Peychev - former veteran General Secretary of Uzbekistan's Baptist Union - was among three prominent members of the Union given heavy fines in October 2009 and ordered to pay unpaid back taxes the Union allegedly owed. The appeal court overturned the fines in December 2009, but upheld the back taxes, as well as a three-year ban on their holding office in the Union (see F18News 7 December 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1384>).

No comment

Asked on 18 September why the Baptist camp had been raided, Bostanlyk Police officials refused to comment. They referred Forum 18 to Laziz Nurimov, Chief of the Department (name of the Department not given) which oversees the activity of religious organisations.

Asked why the Baptists cannot enjoy their summer holiday undisturbed, and why the police confiscated Christian songbooks and personal notebooks as well as diaries, Nurimov took the questions down and asked Forum 18 to call back ten minutes later. "I am busy with people here," he claimed. All Forum 18's subsequent calls to him that day went unanswered.

Also refusing to comment was Judge Obidov of Bostanlyk Court. On 17 September he took down Forum 18's question as to why he fined the Baptists, whose only "crime" appears to have been to have their Christian songbooks and personal notebooks with them while on their summer holiday. However, he put the phone down without answering. Subsequent calls to him on the same day went unanswered.

Shahrisabz fine

On 3 July a court in Shahrisabz in Kashkadarya Region fined ten members of a small unregistered Baptist congregation. Judge Botyrali Diyorov of Shahrisabz City Criminal Court found the ten guilty under Administrative Code Article 240, Part 1, according to the verdict seen by Forum 18.

Vakhop Babayev, Ziyadulla Rahmonov, Valizhon Boboyev, Khomid Rahmonov, Farhod Kosimov, Utkir Choriyev and Ibrahim Khomidov were each fined 40 times the minimum monthly wage or 2,516,800 Soms (7,400 Norwegian Kroner, 1,000 Euros or 1,280 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). Rafik Murodov, Mukhabbat Ahmedova and Gavkhar Kholikova were each fined 30 times the minimum monthly wage or 1,887,600 Soms.

Judge Diyorov also ordered five Christian books, five calendars, five DVD disks, one personal datebook, and one wall map confiscated during the raid to be destroyed.

The fines on the ten Baptists followed a 4 May raid on the small, unregistered congregation. Police arrived "before the service even began," the Baptists complained to Forum 18. Officers "immediately began filming the people present, and without the sanction

from prosecutors conducted a search and took away not only the books in the private home but also the Bible verses on paper which were on the walls." The Baptists added that the police photographed everyone in side-view and full face, then left without giving a copy of the records of confiscation.

Procedural violations

Baptists, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, complained to Forum 18 that some of those fined were absent at the hearing since they had not been notified of it. They also complained that Judge Diyorov - among other procedural violations - did not indicate in the verdict that nine of those fined are deaf. Nor had the police indicated in the official records the correct address where the raid was conducted and where the Baptists had gathered for worship.

The Baptists also complained they received the copy of the verdict only on 13 August, 41 days after the hearing. Administrative Code Article 311, Part 2 requires the Court to hand it over within three days of the final hearing.

Asked why he fined the Baptists, Judge Diyorov told Forum 18 on 14 September that it is "not the first time they violate the Religion Law". Asked why religious believers cannot pray or worship in their private homes, he responded: "They can but they need to do it in accordance with the Law."

Told that nine of the fined Baptists are deaf people who are unemployed and cannot afford to pay the fines, and asked what measures the authorities will take, if they do not pay the fines or are found "violating" the Religion Law again, Judge Diyorov responded: "I cannot say anything on that." He added that the Baptists already filed an appeal, which will be heard in the Regional Criminal Court.

Judge Diyorov declined to comment on why he ordered the confiscated Christian books and other items to be destroyed. Forum 18 was unable to find out why the written verdict had been issued so late, as he refused to discuss the case further with Forum 18.

Hazorasp fine and literature destruction

Judge Sadarbek Toganov of north-western Khorezm Region's Hazorasp District Criminal Court, on 30 July fined two local Protestants under Administrative Code Article 241 ("Teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately").

According to the verdict seen by Forum 18, Alisher Madaminov was fined one month's minimum wage or 62,920 Soms. Kausar Islamova was fined half a month's minimum wage or 31,460 Soms.

The court decision gives no details of what exactly the two did to violate the Law or what pre-trial investigation by Police or other state organs was carried out. It merely states that it was "discovered" that the two "taught religion to others on 28 July without having a licence from a central religious organisation". Judge Toganov also alleges in the verdict that the two "voluntarily admitted their guilt".

Hazorasp District Court officials refused to comment on the fines on 17 September, referring Forum 18 to Judge Toganov. However, officials answering Judge Toganov's phones on 17 and 18 September refused to put Forum 18 through to him, saying that he was busy and did not wish to talk to Forum 18.

Hazorasp police were accused of torturing a local Jehovah's Witness, Gulchehra Abdullayeva, in July by asphyxiating her with a gas mask. She was then fined by the same Judge Toganov five days before he fined the two Protestants (see F18News 14 August 2012 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1732>).

Muslim expertise of Christian books

In his verdict on the two Protestants, Judge Toganov also ordered that the Bible in Russian confiscated from one and the New Testament in Uzbek confiscated from the other be destroyed. The Judge ordered the destruction based on the expertise No. 339 from 27 July by D. Abdukodirov of Khorezm Regional Department of Uzbekistan's state-sponsored Muslim Board. The verdict does not explain why the expertise is dated a day before the alleged "religious teaching" took place.

"This is like asking a Jewish rabbi to give an expertise on the Koran," local Protestants - who know the two and who wished not to be named for fear of state reprisals - complained to Forum 18. They pointed out that this expertise violates the 23 April 2004 Decree of the Cabinet of Ministers that only the government's Religious Affairs Committee is competent to give expert analysis of religious books.

Abdukodirov (who did not give his first name) of Khorezm Department of the Muslim Board denied to Forum 18 on 19 September that he had provided the expertise since he "has respect" for the books of other religions. He claimed that he had only referred the Court for expertise to the State Religious Affairs Committee. However, he said that he warned the Court that the two Protestants belong to an unregistered "sect which carries out missionary activity". "We do not want those kinds of sects in Khorezm," he

insisted.

Kuvasai fine

A Baptist in Kuvasai in Fergana Region of eastern Uzbekistan, Viktor Kotov, has been fined after police launched an "anti-terror" operation to raid his home on a Sunday morning, when he and his family and a friend were singing Christian songs, his fellow-believers, who did not want to be named for the fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 in early September.

On 26 July, Judge Tohirjon Vakhobov of Fergana City Criminal Court in a case he heard in Kuvasai City Criminal Court, found Kotov guilty under Administrative Code Article 240, Part 1. Kotov was fined five times the minimum monthly wage or 314,600 Soms.

The Baptists complained to Forum 18 that no one from the Baptist Church, even Kotov's wife, was allowed into the courtroom. After the "short" hearing, Kotov told his fellow-believers that Judge Vakhobov only "read out" the verdict to him, which said that on 8 July Kuvasai City Police "in the framework of a Tozalash-anti-terror operation discovered that Kotov was engaged in illegal religious activity." The Police report noted that Kotov had gathered his family together to sing religious songs.

Adyl Ismaylov, Head of Kuvasai Court's Chancellery, told Forum 18 on 18 September that he knows of the case, but cannot comment on it since he does not have the court files. Judge Tohir Vakhobov of Fergana City Criminal Court heard the case, since "back in July Kuvasai Court did not have enough Judges," he said. Ismaylov referred Forum 18 to Judge Vakhobov in Fergana. However, officials who answered Judge Vakhobov's phone on 17 and 18 September refused to put Forum 18 through to him or answer the questions.

Family gathering raided

The case against Kotov was launched after 15 plain-clothed officers led by the local police officer raided the Kotovs' family home on Sunday morning, 8 July. "When the officials broke in, he, his wife and children and an elderly woman who is a friend of the family were simply singing Christian songs," local Baptists complained to Forum 18. The officials "interrupted the singing and without showing their documents began questioning them." The officials then made official records and left.

"This case shows once again that Uzbekistan's authorities are resolute in leading a struggle against the country's Christians," Baptists complained to Forum 18.

Captain Bakhtiyor Tashmatov of Kuvasai Police's Struggle with Terrorism and Extremism Department, confirmed the raid to Forum 18 on 17 September. However, asked why the Kotovs' privacy was invaded, the inviolability of their private home violated, and why the police are pressuring Kotov, Captain Tashmatov took down Forum 18's name and put the phone down without answering. All subsequent calls to him on the same day went unanswered. (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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