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UZBEKISTAN: How many religious believers barred from travelling?

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

Natalya Kadyrova is one of several Protestant Christians known to Forum 18 News Service to have been denied the exit visas Uzbek citizens need before they can leave their own country, apparently as punishment for their religious activity. The wife of a pastor of a Tashkent Protestant church, Kadyrova has already been fined for her involvement with her church. Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 that their adherents have faced exit visa denials in the recent past. Human rights defenders are among others who face similar problems. However, Saken Kojahmetov, head of the Department of Entry and Exit at the Interior Ministry's Department of Entry, Exit and Legalisation of Citizenship in Tashkent, denied this to Forum 18. "We don't obstruct Uzbek citizens from travelling freely," he claimed. Asked why a number of religious believers cannot get exit visas, he responded: "If some people are saying this, let them come to me and raise their case and we will resolve it."

Challenging the Uzbek authorities' refusal to grant her the exit visa Uzbek citizens need before they can travel abroad is Natalya Kadyrova, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Kadyrova is the wife of the pastor of a Protestant congregation in the capital Tashkent and it appears that the exit visa denial is a punishment for her religious activity. Some citizens known by the authorities to be active in religious communities have faced problems gaining exit visas. Although apparently not a common punishment, it remains unclear how extensive the practice is. However, exit visa denials appear to be part of a pattern of isolating religious believers in Uzbekistan from their fellow-believers abroad.

Despite the denial to Kadyrova, an ethnic Russian Uzbek citizen, several religious believers have told Forum 18 that the authorities are generally reluctant to deny exit visas to ethnic Russians, though such denials have occurred. All the other current cases known to Forum 18 - all Protestant Christians - affect ethnic Uzbeks, Karakalpaks and Koreans.

Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses have complained that their adherents have faced similar problems in the recent past, though representatives Forum 18 spoke to know of no current exit visa denials affecting their adherents. A Jehovah's Witness - who asked not to be named - said they have had no cases in the last six months.

Denying that any obstructions exist for religious believers to gain exit visas is Saken Kojahmetov, head of the Department of Entry and Exit at the Interior Ministry's Department of Entry, Exit and Legalisation of Citizenship in Tashkent. "We don't obstruct Uzbek citizens from travelling freely," he claimed to Forum 18 on 4 March. He insisted that citizens are refused permission to travel abroad only if they have committed crimes on previous foreign visits. He refused to say why exit visas are still necessary when they have been abolished in every other former Soviet republic.

Asked to explain why a number of religious believers have been refused exit visas in recent years - including some at the moment - or have difficulty obtaining them Kojahmetov again rejected this. "If some people are saying this, let them come to me and raise their case and we will resolve it," he told Forum 18. He refused to explain why such individuals needed to travel to his office in Tashkent to resolve the problem.

Kadyrova, the Tashkent Protestant, lodged her application at the Department of Entry, Exit and Legalisation of Citizenship in the city's Chilanazar District on 19 December, Protestants told Forum 18. Although officials are required to respond within fifteen days they failed to do so.

In a subsequent complaint to Sayora Rashidova, the Uzbek Parliament's Human Rights Ombudsperson, Kadyrova insisted there is "no legal basis" for denying the exit visa and said no reason had been given. She pointed out that she has no criminal record and is not registered as a psychiatric patient or drug addict, or as suffering from tuberculosis or a venereal disease. Protestants confirmed to Forum 18 on 5 March that officials were still refusing to grant her exit visa.

Eskhol Full Gospel Church in Tashkent, led by Kadyrova's husband Serik Kadyrov, has been repeatedly denied legal status. Both she and her husband have been among church members fined under the Code of Administrative Offences for their religious activity (see F18News 8 August 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1169>).

Various Protestant communities in different parts of Uzbekistan have told Forum 18 of several other cases at present where their members have been denied exit visas. However, they asked that the names of individuals not be made public in the hope that the denial of exit visas can be overturned quietly. In some cases officials have told citizens that the National Security Service (NSS) secret police has informed the Department of Entry, Exit and Legalisation of Citizenship not to issue exit visas because of their religious activities. In other cases officials gave no reasons.

Human rights groups have noted that the Uzbek authorities have also long refused exit visas to human rights activists, representatives of the political opposition and journalists.

Uzbek citizens get their passports when they are 16 years old. Such passports need to be updated when they reach 25 and again 45. Those wishing to travel abroad (apart from to several other former Soviet republics) need to get an exit visa, which is valid for two years, from their local Department of Entry, Exit and Legalisation of Citizenship where they live. Citizens need to complete a two-page form with full details about themselves, their immediate family (whether alive or dead), where they have ever worked, what countries they have visited and why they wish to travel abroad. The form needs to be stamped by their employer or, for those without a job, the chair of their Mahalla (residential district) committee.

If the exit visa is granted, it is stuck into the passport and the citizen can travel to any country during the two-year period provided they get an entry visa, if required, for the foreign country.

The authorities have long used exit visa denials as a way to punish religious believers further. Among previous victims was Erkin Khabibov, a Jehovah's Witness from Bukhara [Bukhoro]. He was denied an exit visa in about 2002 after he was found guilty under the administrative code of preaching Jehovah's Witness beliefs (see F18News 28 January 2004 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=237>).

Several religious believers from different parts of Uzbekistan told Forum 18 that if a citizen is denied an exit visa it is possible to pressure officials to relent in some cases. "If you insist and threaten to make a fuss you can eventually get the decision overturned," one citizen from a city a long way from Tashkent told Forum 18. "I know of several fellow-believers who in the end managed to get their exit visas this way."

A Tashkent-based Protestant told Forum 18 that several years ago an ethnic Russian Protestant pastor in the city was denied an exit visa. "He told the head of the city district Department that he would write complaints and there would be an international scandal if they didn't give him the exit visa," the Protestant told Forum 18. "They immediately gave it to him."

Human rights activists have also occasionally been successful in having exit visa denials overturned, as Tashkent-based human rights defender Surat Ikramov told Forum 18 on 6 March.

Religious believers and human rights activists point out that corruption can also be a reason officials obstruct the granting of exit visas.

Uzbekistan is the only former Soviet republic that still has exit visas. Turkmenistan abolished its exit visa requirement in 2004, though some prominent religious believers remain unable to leave Turkmenistan because they remain on the exit blacklist (see F18News 19 November 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1219>).

Although in theory having an exit visa is sufficient to travel - unless an arrest warrant has been issued - religious believers are among those who have been prevented from crossing the border by the Uzbek authorities at the last minute.

Local residents who have travelled abroad for what the Uzbek authorities suspect are religious motives - especially to study their faith at a foreign college - are especially closely scrutinised on returning to the country, members of different religious communities told Forum 18. "Our students from Uzbekistan routinely face questioning about their studies and have all the course materials and books taken from them as they return home," a teacher in a religious college in another former Soviet republic told Forum 18.

Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and Baha'is have told Forum 18 of recent cases where their adherents have been questioned and searched when leaving Uzbekistan to take part in religious events or meetings abroad or when returning.

As well as obstructing some of its own citizens from leaving, Uzbekistan also has prevented known foreign religious activists from entering the country, members of various religious communities have told Forum 18. Would-be religious visitors can be denied visas at Uzbek consulates around the world or, even if they have visas, can be denied entry once they arrive in the country.

Long-term resident foreign citizens who were active in religious communities have also been expelled in recent years. Uzbekistan's Chief Rabbi, Abe David Gurevich, and his wife Malka Gurevich, who also worked for the Tashkent branch of the Hasidic World Lubavitch Movement, were forced to leave the country in June 2008 after the authorities refused to renew their accreditation (see F18News 14 July 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1158>). Several foreign Protestants were expelled in 2007

and 2008 (see F18News 1 May 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1124>). (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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