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UZBEKISTAN: Short-term jailings, fines and harassment

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 News Service

Doniyor Akhmedov - a Baptist - was one of three Protestants in Uzbekistan known to have been imprisoned for between seven and 15 days in March and April. He was held after offering a religious leaflet to a passer-by on the street. For the last part of his 15-day imprisonment, Akhmedov "was held in a small cell with more than 10 people, where they were squeezed in and there was barely space to sleep on the floor", fellow Baptists complained to Forum 18 News Service. After he was freed he was summoned to court and fined more than three years' official minimum wage. Laziz Kurbonov, Deputy Chief of Ahangaran Police, refused to discuss Akhmedov's case with Forum 18. "I have hundreds of cases, I don't want to talk about this over the phone." Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses are frequently fined and occasionally given short-term prison sentences, but Muslims who exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief often face much harsher penalties, including long prison terms.

Three Protestants are known to have been jailed in different parts of Uzbekistan in March and April for between seven and 15 days to punish them for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief, local Protestants have told Forum 18 News Service. A Tashkent Region court also fined one of the prisoners of conscience - Council of Churches Baptist Doniyor Akhmedov - more than three years' official minimum wage after his release from 15 days in jail.

The two other prisoners of conscience known to have jailed for short periods in March and April for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief were: a Protestant in Bukhara who received seven days' imprisonment for "illegal" religious activity; and another Protestant elsewhere in Uzbekistan who received 10 days' imprisonment for "teaching religion illegally", fellow Protestants who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. They declined to reveal the identity of those short-term prisoners for fear they might suffer further state reprisals.

Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses are frequently fined and occasionally given short-term prison sentences, but Muslims who exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief often face much harsher penalties, including long prison terms. Although six known Muslim prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising their freedom of religion or belief were freed under amnesty in February after "repenting", many more remain imprisoned (see F18News 4 March 2015 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2045>).

Raids, fines, literature censorship

Another Protestant from Namangan, Murodjon Rakhimov, was summoned on 17 April by the City Police and compelled to write a statement against his Church. He was released the same day but officers are thought to be preparing administrative charges against him for violating the Religion Law, local Protestants told Forum 18 (see below).

Raids and fines on members of various religious communities continue. Three courts across Uzbekistan between February and March punished nine members of three different families, who are members of various Protestant Churches. All were fined under Administrative Code Article 184-2 for "illegally storing" Christian literature and materials in their flats. All three families' homes were raided by police and various Christian books and DVD and CD disks were confiscated from them, members of those Churches told Forum 18 (see below).

Fines under Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons") are between 20 and 100 times the minimum monthly wage for individuals not holding official positions. But courts have in some cases have given much smaller fines, applying other Administrative Code Articles for mitigating factors.

Uzbekistan, against its international human rights obligations, imposes strict censorship on all religious publications and all aspects of their distribution (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862>).

Detained for 15 days - but under what law?

On 16 March Akhmedov set off very early from his home in Almalyk in Tashkent Region by bicycle on the 175 km (110 mile)

journey to Namangan Region's Pap District. Police stopped him in Ahangaran District, just north of Almalyk, after he gave a Christian leaflet to a passer-by, Baptists told Forum 18 on 20 April. Akhmedov's relatives found out about this only on 17 March. Only after several enquiries by relatives and Church members did Ahangaran Police claim to them on 19 March that Akhmedov was being held in custody for "illegal missionary activity".

Police Inspector Batyr (last name not known) of Ahangaran Police told church members that Akhmedov "illegally" gave a leaflet to a passer-by on the street. "When the Inspector was asked whether there was a court order for his arrest, Inspector Batyr claimed that Doniyor had not obeyed police orders, and that is why he was detained." The Baptists told Forum 18 that while in detention Akhmedov did "not sign any statements or reports, which police prepared and asked him to sign."

Akhmedov was held at Ahangaran Police Station for 10 days. On 26 March, he was moved to a Detention Centre in Tashkent Region, where he was held for an additional five days, Baptists told Forum 18. Akhmedov was "slapped on the face and pushed around a few times the very first day" after his 16 March detention. However, police "left Doniyor in peace, and did not beat or verbally abuse him later," they added. He was fed normally three times a day at the Police Station, and slept on a hard couch.

However, conditions in the Detention Centre were worse, church members complained. "He was held in a small cell with more than 10 people, where they were squeezed in and there was barely space to sleep on the floor." Akhmedov was freed on 31 March.

Fined over three years' official minimum wage after release

On 1 April, the day after his release from custody, Ahangaran Police summoned Akhmedov and brought him before Ahangaran District Criminal Court. Judge Akmal Pirnazarov fined him 40 times the minimum monthly wage, under Administrative Code Article 184-2. "It is unjust that our brother was deprived of his liberty for 15 days and then given a huge fine, simply for giving out a leaflet on the street," Baptists complained to Forum 18.

Inspector Batyr (who refused to give his name) claimed to Forum 18 on 21 April that Akhmedov had been detained and fined for "illegal missionary activity". The same claim was made to relatives and fellow Church members. Told that Akhmedov was fined not for "missionary activity" but "illegal distribution" of religious literature, the Inspector paused before responding: "Anyway, he violated the law."

Inspector Batyr did not explain how police had discovered so quickly that Akhmedov had offered a religious leaflet to a passer-by.

Asked why Akhmedov had to be held in custody and why such harsh measures were taken against him, Inspector Batyr claimed: "It's all in accordance with the law." Asked what law and what exactly necessitated Akhmedov's arrest, the Inspector asked Forum 18 to come to Tashkent for more details of the case. He then put the phone down.

Laziz Kurbonov, Deputy Chief of Ahangaran Police, also refused to comment on 21 April on Akhmedov's detention. "You need to come to Ahangaran so we can discuss the case," he told Forum 18. When Forum 18 insisted and asked why Akhmedov was deprived of his liberty for 15 days as well as being given a huge fine for giving out a Christian leaflet on the street, he brushed it off. "I have hundreds of cases, I don't want to talk about this over the phone." He then put the phone down.

Judge Pirnazarov and other Court officials also refused to comment on the case to Forum 18 on 21 April. Judge Pirnazarov's Assistant (who did not give her name) took Forum 18's question why Akhmedov was given such a huge fine for giving out a leaflet on the street and why he was held in custody for 15 days. She asked Forum 18 to wait on the line, but a few minutes later she said that the "Judge cannot answer the question at the moment since he is hearing a case." She asked Forum 18 to call back half an hour later. Called back the same day, Judge Pirnazarov's number went unanswered. Other Court officials on 21 April (no names were given) also refused to comment on the case, referring Forum 18 to Judge Pirnazarov.

"Akhmedov is not intending to pay the fine since he does not consider that he violated the Law," Baptists told Forum 18. "He only exercised his fundamental human right." They added that he has already filed a complaint against the "illegal actions of the authorities and the fine".

Raids, fines

Police have continued raiding homes of various Protestants hunting for and seizing religious books and materials, with courts fining them for the confiscated religious materials. On 10 February a Tashkent court fined Ilmira Ishanova and her two sons, Vagiz and Rustam Ziganshin, for "illegally" storing Christian literature and materials in their flat. They were each fined 10 times the minimum monthly wage or 1,184,000 Soms. Tashkent City Criminal court in an appeal case on 20 March upheld the fines on the three.

On 2 March another Tashkent court fined four members of one family, Ibrohimjon and Yulduz Yusupov, a married couple, as well as their daughters Inobad and Inoyat Yusupova. They were fined up to five times the minimum monthly wage or 592,000 Soms for "illegally" storing Christian religious literature and materials in their home.

On 23 March a court in Navoi Region fined Dmitri and Svetlana Butov, a married couple who are members of the local officially registered Baptist Church, for "illegally storing" Christian literature in their private home. They were each fined one month's minimum wage or 118,400 Soms.

Police harassment of another Protestant

On the afternoon of 17 April, police in Namangan summoned Murodjon Rakhimov by phone to the local Mahalla Committee (local residential administration) for "urgent issues", local Protestants who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 20 April. Rakhimov is a member of a local unregistered Protestant Church.

Major Umidjon Jalilov and Lieutenant Madamin Siddikov from the Namangan Criminal Police were waiting for Rakhimov at the Mahalla Committee. "They demanded that Rakhimov write a statement explaining why he attends his Church, exactly what Christian books he is reading in the Church, and whether anyone forced him to become a Christian."

When Rakhimov refused to write a statement, police officers "twisted his left arm, and threatened that they will take him to the Police Station unless he cooperated," Protestants complained to Forum 18. Officers also threatened to open a criminal case against him and keep him in custody. Despite the threats and physical violence, Rakhimov refused to write a statement or sign the police reports.

The use of physical violence and torture, or threats of this, by the authorities is widespread in Uzbekistan. Most victims are, for extremely good reasons, unwilling to publicly discuss their experiences (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1862>).

"Seeing that the threats didn't work, Major Jalilov prepared summonses for Rakhimov and his wife Gulchohra Abdurakhmanova to appear before the police, and handed over the summonses to them," Protestants told Forum 18. They said that they think that the police are preparing a case against Rakhimov under Administrative Code Article 240.

Article 240 punishes "violation of the Religion Law", including by holding unregistered religious meetings or sharing one's faith with others. Punishments are arrest for up to 15 days or a fine of up to 100 times the minimum monthly wage.

Major Jalilov adamantly denied to Forum 18 on 21 April that he or Lieutenant Siddikov abused Rakhimov. asked why police are targeting Rakhimov for attending a church or becoming Christian, he responded: "We're not concerned with whether he should be Muslim or Christian, but that he obeys the Law." Asked why police summoned Rakhimov and what specific charges are being prepared, Jalilov did not say. He refused to talk to Forum 18 further. (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=1862>.

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 is 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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If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
RodelÄ, kka

