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UZBEKISTAN: Why can't school-age children attend worship meetings?

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 News Service

On the instruction of the authorities in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent, teachers and doctors were forced to help the police identify school-age boys attending worship in mosques in late August "and to prevent them from participating in prayers, especially Friday prayers," human rights defender Abdurakhmon Eshanov told Forum 18 News Service. Officials refused to discuss the ban with Forum 18. Deputy Chief Mufti Abdulaziz Mansurov claimed to Forum 18 that both Sharia law and the Religion Law ban children from attending prayers. He then added: "I wish the Law would allow it." After Anti-Terrorism Police raids in Namangan Region on Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses, state-sponsored media attacks noted that "even under-age children" had been present at both meetings. Although the Religion Law does not ban children from attending meetings for worship, officials frequently pressure parents and religious communities not to allow them to attend.

In the second half of August, teachers and doctors were forced to help the police identify school-age boys attending worship in mosques in at least some parts of Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent, Abdurakhmon Eshanov from Ezgulik (Goodness) human rights organisation told Forum 18 News Service from Tashkent on 4 September. Meanwhile, in eastern Namangan Region at the end of July, the Regional Anti-Terrorism Police raided religious meetings of the Baptist Church and Jehovah's Witnesses. State-sponsored media attacks pointed out that "even under-age children" had been present at both meetings. In Tashkent Region, police raided the Baptist Church's summer camp.

Uzbekistan imposes tight control on all exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief. All unregistered religious activity is banned, the state keeps all religious communities under surveillance and all religious literature is subject to compulsory prior censorship by the state's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent. Police and secret police frequently raid religious communities. Religious books are routinely seized during raids and often ordered destroyed by the courts.

Even though the Religion Law does not ban children from attending religious worship, communities and parents are frequently pressured not to allow children to attend meetings for worship (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862>).

Sharia or Religion Law ban?

Shovkat Khamdamov, Press Secretary of the Religious Affairs Committee, categorically refused to clarify whether the Religion Law bans school-age children from attending religious worship, including in mosques. "Only written questions sent by email," he insisted to Forum 18 on 5 September. He also refused to answer any other questions over the phone.

Asked why the authorities raided the mosques and prevented boys from attending prayers, Uzbekistan's Deputy Chief Mufti Abdulaziz Mansurov claimed to Forum 18 on 5 September: "Boys under 15 are not supposed to attend mosques according to Sharia Law, and Uzbekistan's Religion Law bans school-age children from attending religious organisations."

Asked why children cannot attend mosques even during their summer holidays or at other times outside school hours, Deputy Chief Mufti Mansurov told Forum 18, "I wish the Law would allow it."

Doctors and teachers forced to search mosques

Several teachers and doctors from various Districts of Tashkent complained that from mid-August until 1 September, on the instruction of the city authorities, teachers and doctors "helped the Police to identify school-aged children in the city's mosques in Chilanzar, Khamza [Yashnabod] and other Districts, and to prevent them from participating in prayers, especially Friday prayers," human rights defender Eshanov told Forum 18. Uzbek schools are on holiday during this period.

A doctor from Tashkent confirmed this to Forum 18 on 3 September, but declined to give more specific details of the raids on mosques for fear of the authorities.

The operation to try to stop schoolboys attending prayers in mosques appeared to come to an end after Uzbekistan marked Independence Day on 1 September, Eshanov told Forum 18. However, he noted that residents of different parts of the country have told him that the authorities in regions of Uzbekistan outside Tashkent also from time to time conduct such campaigns to prevent children from attending mosques.

In the run-up to Independence Day each year, the authorities impose security restrictions which also restrict individuals' right to exercise their freedom of religion or belief, including visiting mosques.

An unnamed teacher from Shaykhantaur District of Tashkent complained to Radio Free Europe's Uzbek Service on 18 August that "there are few male teachers in the schools, and we were loaded with this extra work." He added that his colleagues helped the Police in the hunt for children in mosques even during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which in 2014 fell from late June to late July.

No answers

Shukhrat Turdikulov, Deputy Head of Tashkent City Administration who oversees religious affairs, through his Specialist Agzom Abrorov, took Forum 18's question on 5 September on why the mosques were raided and boys prevented from entering. But without answering, he referred it to Abdularyz Ismayilbayev of the Administration's International Relations Department. Ismayilbayev's phone went unanswered on 5 September.

Officials at Chilanzar and Khamza District Administrations, where most the raids took place, refused to discuss them with Forum 18 on 5 September. The officials who answered the phones, who would not give their names, also refused to put Forum 18 through to Mukhayyo Saidikramova and Botyr Boboyev, Deputy Heads of Administration of Chilanzar and Khamza Districts respectively, who oversee religious affairs in their Districts.

Worship meeting raided

In the afternoon of 23 July, Namangan Regional and Pap District Anti-Terrorism Police raided the worship meeting of the District's officially registered Baptist Church. Eight officials, only one of whom was in Police uniform, broke into the private home in the District's Khalkabad village, of church member Valentina Razzakova, where the worship was held, a local Baptist, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, complained to Forum 18 on 22 August. The police claimed to be conducting a passport "check-up".

The raid was led by Major Murod Khakimov of Namangan Region Anti-Terrorism Police. Participating in the raid also were Major Rustam Dadabayev of Namangan Anti-Terrorism Police Major Anvar Ganiyev of Pap District Anti-Terrorism Police. Along with members of the Church who are from Khalkabad village and some of their under age children, some guests, Baptists from Fergana Region, were participating in the worship.

The officials found and confiscated some Christian books, which included a Protestant study Bible and Commentary on the biblical book of Revelation.

The Baptists told Forum 18 that they heard that Pap District Police, "after getting an expert opinion on the confiscated books from Uzbekistan's State Religious Affairs Committee", will open a case against the Baptists under Administrative Code Article 240 (violation of the Religion Law).

As often happens when religious communities are raided, the Police raid on the Baptists was followed by a media attack. The state-sponsored 12news.uz news agency on 4 August reported that Pap District Police officials "exposed the illegal activity of Baptist Christians." It claimed that the Baptists "illegally taught the Baptist faith" to local residents as well as to eight underage children, and that the Police are preparing administrative penalties for the Baptists.

Baptists "violated the Law"

Major Khakimov, who led the raid on the Baptists, told Forum 18 categorically on 27 August that the Baptists "violated the Law, and I explained it to them. What is not clear to you?" When Forum 18 insisted, asking why peaceful and officially registered believers cannot meet for worship in their homes, and why the authorities confiscate their religious books, including Bibles, he refused to say. "You can come here, and we will explain to you," he claimed. He refused to say what punishments will be given to the Baptists.

Reached on 27 August, Lieutenant Colonel Boymyrza Usmanov, Deputy Chief of Pap District Police, took down Forum 18's details. But when asked why Razzakova's home was raided and why Baptists, who are an officially registered community, cannot meet for worship in their homes and cannot keep their Christian books in their homes, he responded: "Who gave you my number?" When Forum 18 insisted with the question, Usmanov asked to call back later since he is "busy at the moment." However, numerous

subsequent calls to his mobile phone and office numbers on the same day went unanswered.

Fines to follow Namangan raid?

In late July, officers of Namangan Regional Police raided the Jehovah's Witness community in Namangan, Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18. A total of 19 Jehovah's Witnesses were detained during the raid. Jehovah's Witnesses fear that at least some of those detained will face administrative charges, though no cases had been heard in court by 4 September.

Major Khakimov also refused to discuss with Forum 18 the raid on the Jehovah's Witnesses and possible punishments.

Like the Baptists raided in Namangan Region, the Jehovah's Witness community was also criticised through the local media.

Namangan Regional Police "exposed a group of Jehovah's Witnesses who illegally drew a number of local Muslims into their ranks, and conducted underground meetings", 12news.uz news agency reported on 1 August. The Police sent the religious print and electronic informational materials confiscated from the Jehovah's Witnesses to the state Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent, it added.

"All the identified members of the group turned out to be former Muslims, among which were even children of pre-school age," the agency said. "They will be given fines of up to a 100 times the minimum monthly wage."

The article also noted that the Jehovah's Witnesses were conducting religious meetings outside their registered legal address, which violates the Religion Law. Jehovah's Witnesses have only ever been able to register two religious communities in Uzbekistan - in Fergana and Chirchik. However, registration was stripped from the Fergana community in 2006 (see F18News 5 September 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=837>).

"This is already the second case this year," the news agency pointed out, referring to police detentions in Bukhara Region "of a group of Jehovah's Witnesses, who conducted illegal meetings for their members."

Seven Jehovah's Witnesses were fined in Bukhara Region in January. Two of them were subsequently pressured to leave their jobs as teachers, but resisted this pressure (see F18News 4 July 2014 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1974>).

Church summer camp raided

Authorities in Tashkent region on 30 July once again raided the summer camp of Tashkent City's officially registered Baptist Church, Baptists from Tashkent who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals complained to Forum 18 on 22 August. The Baptists were renting the officially registered Full Gospel Church's camp site in the village of Niyazbash of the Region's Yangiyul District. About 100 members of the Church and their children were having their summer holiday.

The Baptist Union had bought its own camp site in Bostanlyk in 2000. However, in September 2013, Tashkent City Economic Court ruled to expropriate the plot of land. Judge Malika Kalandarova upheld the claim of Tashkent Regional Department of Privatisation and Deregulation of Property (DPD), and ruled that the land is to be returned to its "lawful owner", in other words to the State. In 2009, 2011 and 2012 the camps had been raided and participants punished (see F18News 24 October 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1889>).

Fifteen officials of the law-enforcement agencies, five in Police uniforms from Yangiyul District Police, arrived at lunchtime on 30 July. "They climbed over the fence of the camp and broke into the territory," the Baptists complained. The Police took the names of 30 adults present and drew up a report. Officers confiscated one Baptist song book and another Christian book.

The Baptists said that they believe that Yangiyul Police are preparing an administrative case against the church's pastor, Arkady Belik, under Administrative Code Article 240.

Asked about the raid and possible prosecutions on 28 August, Yangiyul Police referred Forum 18 to Farkhod Kasimov, Chief of the Anti-Terrorism Police. Kasimov the same day denied to Forum 18 that he had been involved in the raid. "Please, talk to the Police Department, and they should tell you who led the case and other details."

Asked on 28 August the reasons of the raid and why the Baptists cannot enjoy a normal summer holiday like other people, and why Police must interrupt it so often, duty officer Ghulom Alimov refused to answer. He also refused to put Forum 18 through to any official in the Department. "Please send your questions in writing," he insisted. Alimov also refused to say whether any or what punishment awaited the Baptists whose names were recorded by the Police. (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 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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