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UZBEKISTAN: Police raiders claim there's "no need" for Christians

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

In the latest of several attacks on Protestants, Police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police have raided a prayer meeting of the Greater Grace church in Samarkand [Samarqand]. An official claimed to Forum 18 News Service that religious meetings in private homes are illegal. All unregistered religious activity is banned, and those involved face heavy penalties. Begzot Kadyrov, an official of the government's religious affairs committee, denied to Forum 18 that this violates the right to meet freely for worship with fellow believers, as guaranteed under international human rights agreements that Uzbekistan has signed. Several police officers in the raid identified themselves as Muslims, and told the Christians that there is "no need" for any Christians or members of other faiths in Uzbekistan. A Hungarian present, Jozsef Marian, who is married to an Uzbek, was pressured to write a statement, and threats were made that he would be forced to leave Samarkand. 2004 has seen an increase in raids and fines on those involved in unregistered religious activity, especially on Protestants.

About fifteen police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police officers raided a prayer meeting of the Greater Grace Protestant church being held in a private home in the city of Samarkand [Samarqand] on 22 September, local Protestants have told Forum 18 News Service. About twenty of those present were forced to write statements reportedly dictated by the police. The Greater Grace church has repeatedly tried to get registration over the past four years, but has been refused. But Begzot Kadyrov, an official of the government's religious affairs committee, blames the church for the lack of registration. "They're at fault," he told Forum 18 from the capital Tashkent on 30 September. "Their statute does not meet the requirements of the law."

Also taking part in the raid was Firdauz Halimov, the religious affairs official at the Samarkand regional hokimiat (administration) who has held up registration of the church. Forum 18 tried to reach him on 30 September to find out why the church cannot meet for worship in a private home and why it cannot gain registration despite having supplied all the relevant documentation required by law, but he was absent.

His assistant, Akhur Hakimov, told Forum 18 that he knew nothing about the raid. "Firdauz Halimov deals with everything himself and he is on leave until Monday," he declared. "I just deal with office affairs." But Hakimov insisted that any religious meetings in private homes are illegal. Under Uzbekistan's harsh religion law, all unregistered religious activity is banned and those involved in it can face heavy penalties, initially under the code of administrative offences and, subsequently, under the criminal code.

From Tashkent, Kadyrov also told Forum 18 that he had no information about the 22 September raid, although he said Halimov is the committee's representative for Samarkand region. He too insisted that any religious community that meets in private homes is committing a crime. "What if everyone met for worship with 100 people at a time in private flats?" Kadyrov asked. "People must have a place of worship to meet." He denied that this violated citizens' rights to meet freely for worship with fellow believers as guaranteed under international human rights agreements that Uzbekistan has signed.

The police burst into the private home in Samarkand at 6.30pm, when the prayer meeting had been underway for about half an hour. Greater Grace church members say the police had no warrant. They started filming all the church members present without seeking their permission. All Bibles and private notebooks were confiscated and, so far, have not been returned, despite police promises that they would be returned within two days.

Several police officers identified themselves to church members as Muslims, and told the Christians that there is "no need" for any Christian churches or other faiths in Uzbekistan.

One foreigner present at the prayer meeting, Jozsef Marian, a Hungarian married to a local Uzbek and who teaches at the university, was reportedly taken to the city visa and registration office and also pressured to write a statement. Some officers reportedly threatened that he would be forced to leave and never see Samarkand again.

Church members report that the authorities know perfectly well when the church meets and do not need to raid a prayer meeting as if it were a terrorist cell. They complain that the raid follows intermittent harassment of their congregation over the past few years which has included the repeated denial of registration on what church members say are "ridiculous" excuses (see F18News 18 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=281).

Kadyrov of the government's religious affairs committee maintained that the Greater Grace congregation has repeatedly failed to amend its statute to make it conform to the requirements of the law. "Twice we told them what corrections they needed to make and twice they submitted the same text," he told Forum 18. "They don't want to correct it."

He insisted that "of course" the church has the right to register and that nothing should prevent it from doing so. But he insisted it has to start from scratch if it wishes to apply again, holding another founders' meeting and submitting the documentation again. In the meantime, he declared, church members cannot meet for worship.

This year has seen an increase in raids and fines on those involved in unregistered religious activity, especially on Protestants.

Protestants who prefer not to be identified have told Forum 18 that on 26 May, Muzrabad district court in Surkhandarya region of southern Uzbekistan fined five members of a local independent Protestant church on charges of teaching their faith without permission. Yevgeny Kim, Vitaly Suvorov, Natalya Mustabaeva, Anatoliy Khvon and Maya Magay were each fined 27,000 sums (176 Norwegian kroner, 21 Euros or 26 US dollars) under article 241 of the administrative code, which punishes violating the procedure for giving religious instruction.

The Muzrabad district public prosecutor's office has continued to pursue two of the five, Suvorov and Kim. In July public prosecutors submitted to the court a case against them under article 229(2) of the criminal code (which also punishes violating the procedure for giving religious instruction). Protestant sources have told Forum 18 that although the case has not yet been heard, prosecutors have warned the two men to expect to be fined.

Meanwhile, on 7 August Sergei Lunkin, a member of an independent Protestant church in Urgench [Urganch], the administrative centre of Khorezm region in north-western Uzbekistan, was summoned to the regional NSS department. NSS officer Alisher Khasanov - who has been involved in earlier interrogations of religious believers - demanded that Lunkin should give evidence against three foreign charities working in the region. Khasanov alleged that the three organisations, which are registered with the authorities, are conducting "illegal work" there.

After Lunkin refused to give such information, Khasanov took him to the public prosecutor's office, where officials telephoned the District Department of Internal Affairs. On discovering that Lunkin was not registered to live in the area, the officers fined him 6,540 sums (43 Norwegian kroner, 5 Euros or 6 US dollars) under article 223 of the administrative code, which punishes violation of the rules on registration.

The Khorezm region is a difficult place for minority faiths to operate. A local Hare Krishna community has faced strong pressure from the NSS and three devotees were expelled from university during the summer for their faith (see F18News 22 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=368). NSS officers also told local people that it was they who had the local Baptist church stripped of its registration in February. Since then, several local Baptists have been summoned and threatened, and at least one has been beaten (see F18News 7 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=356).

Protestant sources have also told Forum 18 that Protestants in Nukus, the capital of the autonomous region of Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] in north-western Uzbekistan, continued to face summonses and interrogations throughout September. A local Protestant church has faced long-running pressure, including the expulsion of two students from a local college in early September (see F18News 16 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=412).

For more background information see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105

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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